

CHAPTER 7

Hitler's Commander General Heinz Guderian and the Evolution of German Armoured Forces

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The evolution of German armoured forces between the two World Wars is commonly seen as one of the big military success stories of the 20th Century. In the attacks on Poland in 1939 and on France in 1940, tanks played a decisive role. During the attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, the *Wehrmacht* would not have reached the gates of Moscow without their tank and their mechanized rifle divisions. Even during the later phase of the war, between 1942 and 1945, armoured forces remained the backbone of Germany's defense.

In the early campaigns of 1939/40, the German Army did not have *more* tanks than its enemies did; it did not even have *better* tanks. However, it used the weapon system in a so far untested, operational role.¹ Moreover, it was able to synchronize the technical potential of the weapon system with its traditional command culture. It is, therefore, not surprising that tankers count among the most prominent commanders in Hitler's armed forces. Erwin Rommel is one of them. Erich von Manstein, though he was not a tank man but a renowned expert in mobile warfare operations, was another important figure. However, the most prominent tank commander surely was Heinz Guderian. No story has been told as often as his has.² The popular version of this heroic story runs like this: During the Western Front battles of 1916-18, the young officer discovers the potential of the new weapon for the future. During the interwar years, Guderian fights for his vision, often against a conservative military elite. Finally, in 1935, his ideas are

¹ For the war on France Cf. カール・ハインツ・フリーザー『電撃戦という幻(上・下)』大木毅、安藤公一訳(中央公論新社、2003年) (Karl-Heinz Frieser, *Blitzkrieg-Legende. Der Westfeldzug 1940*, German edition 1995). I would like to thank Frank Käser for his support in the research for Japanese sources.

² The best English-language biography is Russell A. Hart, Guderian. Panzer Pioneer or Myth Maker? Washington D.C. 2006. Kenneth Macksey, Guderian. Creator of Blitzkrieg, London 1975, is dated but contains some original ideas by the author, himself a tank commander. A German-language biography of Guderian remains a desideratum.

accepted and turned into *Panzer* divisions. Guderian becomes the “creator”³ of Germany’s armoured forces. During the initial campaigns, this story continues; Guderian proves himself as a dashing and charismatic commander. Against his superiors, including the dictator Adolf Hitler, he is very outspoken. He looks down on the pencil pushers in the general staff. In the end, he has to witness the demolition of his instrument of victory through Hitler’s military incompetence. This story sounds well, indeed. The only problem is that this story is mainly based on Guderian’s own account.⁴ In addition, historians should rather be skeptical to rely too much on their protagonists’ autobiographies.

This article draws a sketch of Guderian’s military career between 1914 and 1945. It points out his professional achievements and deficits. It attempts to clarify his role in the build-up of Germany’s armoured forces after 1918 and his role as a leader of armoured forces in World War 2.

Military education and the experience of the First World War

Like all military biographies of this era, this story is deeply rooted in the experience of the Great War of 1914–18. However, it might be necessary to take a further step back, because whoever wants to understand Guderian in his times needs to study the world of the Imperial officer corps. Heinz Guderian was born into a family of small landowners in Kulm, in one of the agrarian, Eastern provinces of Prussia on 17 June 1888. His father opted for a military career and rose to the rank of general in the Prussian army. Due to the background of his family, Heinz Guderian chose his military career via the cadet corps. In 1908, he became an officer in the light infantry. As a junior officer, he was too young to receive enough monarchist imprints during the last peace years prior to 1914. The Kingdom of Prussia might have been his homeland but the traditional combination of the Prussian monarchy and the aristocratic vein of the officer corps was no longer his spiritual or ideological guidance. Guderian was a commoner and a technocrat. When he was in his second year at the war academy in 1914, the

³ The term “creator” [= 装甲兵器の発明者; *Schöpfer*] also holds a religious connotation in the German language.

⁴ Cf. ハインツ・グデーリアン『電撃戦—グデーリアン回想記（上・下）』, 本郷健訳（中央公論新社、1999年）(Heinz Guderian, *Erinnerungen eines Soldaten*, German edition 1952, English 1952).

First World War started and his general staff training was suspended. Guderian was finally transferred to the general staff officer corps by decree, not as a result of full examination, in 1918. During the war, he initially served as a radio communications officer, and from 1915 onwards, as an intelligence officer. In either assignment, Guderian experienced the horrors of war from a certain healthy distance. In this context, it is interesting to know that – in contrast to the allusion in his autobiography – he actually never personally experienced a tank attack during the First World War. In fact, his personal experience in 1914–18 was by no means a necessary precondition for his later interest in armoured warfare.⁵ With the exception of a brief liaison mission in Italy, he had spent four years on the Western Front. It was not before early 1919, that Guderian arrived on the Eastern theatre of war where he spent some weeks in the staff of a voluntary force that fought against the Bolsheviks in the Baltic.⁶

After the defeat of November 1918 and Germany's following disarmament, then captain Guderian was taken over into the small *Reichswehr*, the army of Germany's young democracy. This was not self-evident as the Imperial wartime mass army had to be demobilized and, due to the provisions of the peace treaty, had to be reduced to a number of 115,000 men (army and navy). An air force was not allowed. The same was true for the full range of modern weapon systems, including heavy artillery, chemical agents, battleships, submarines, and tanks. The fact that Guderian managed to continue his military career was proof of his professional abilities but it was also proof of his good personal networking, particularly during his last wartime assignment in the Baltic region in early 1919.⁷

Between the Wars

However, positions for staff officers in the small German army were very rare. When in 1922 Guderian received the offer to transfer to the new motor troop's branch, he accepted. During the coming decade, he worked in the field of troop

⁵ Cf. Markus Pöhlmann, *Der Panzer und die Mechanisierung des Krieges. Eine deutsche Geschichte 1890 bis 1945*, Paderborn 2016, pp. 187–188.

⁶ Macksey, Guderian, pp. 25–33.

⁷ Among his patrons during these months were officers like Hans von Seeckt, Wilhelm Heye, and Werner von Fritsch, who would all play imminent roles in the German Army between 1918 and 1938.

transportation and thereby developed a thorough understanding for the potential of mobile, motorized warfare.

It has to be remembered that the production, import, and maintenance of tanks and armoured vehicles was forbidden for Germany due to the provisions of the Peace Treaty (Article 177). This restriction not only caused an asymmetric situation with regard to the military arsenals of the German Republic and her neighbours. It also gave rise to an extraordinary interest in this new weapon system on behalf of the German military, which had been rather reluctant with regard to this technological innovation during the war. As a result, these “forbidden fruits” were dealt with secretly in the army’s transportation department from the mid-1920s onwards. The ways to circumvent the restrictions were manifold. Dummy tanks were used to symbolize the weapon system during maneuvers. The *Reichswehr* cooperated with the Soviet Union in establishing a secret training area where prototypes could be tested and German and Soviet personnel was trained. However, the most important lessons were drawn from studying the international literature on tanks. British authors like JFC Fuller might have been early prophets in this field, but as early as 1928 the German experts – among them Heinz Guderian – had learned enough and they started incorporating these new lessons into the traditions of German doctrine.

At the organizational core of German armoured warfare thinking stood the *Panzer* division. So far, most modern armies had experiences with a brigade structure, with the divisional structure debated but dismissed for a number of reasons. The German *Panzer* division was the result of a debate between 1929 and 1934 and therefore coincided with Germany’s plans for a general rearmament. A test division was set up during the winter of 1934/35, followed by its first maneuver in August 1935. On 15 October 1935, three divisions were formally established. In its original structure, the *Panzer* division consisted of one tank brigade, one motorized rifle brigade, one motorized artillery regiment, one reconnaissance battalion, one anti-tank battalion, one engineer battalion plus divisional support units. Its overall strength was nearly 12,000 men.⁸

⁸ For the evolution, structure, and doctrinal concept of the Panzer division until 1939 cf. Pöhlmann, *Panzer*, pp. 131-181.

The basic doctrinal idea was to grant the tank independence from its original role as a battering ram in the trench war scenario of 1916-18 and of providing support for the infantry. For this purpose, the tank elements were integrated into the combined-arms structure described above. Now, these new divisions were planned as spearhead formations that would break through the enemy front, disrupt the enemy's command and control structure, attack its rear area and thereby pave the way for the following main forces. An essential precondition for its success was the support by an air force that was able and willing to provide close air support.

The problems for the early armoured forces were manifold: Mass production had only started in the spring of 1934. The bulk of the early vehicles were of dubious quality with regard to firepower and armour, as a speedy build-up in terms of numbers was the priority of the day. The use of German tanks in the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39 would soon disclose these weaknesses.⁹ However, this engagement also worked as a last-minute opportunity to readjust ideas and mend forces before September 1939. The most pressing problem remained the enormous costs of armoured formations. An all-armoured formation remained a dream for the German planners during the years to come.

As chief of staff of the inspectorate of the motor troops from 1931 onwards, Guderian had transformed his staff into the brain pool for a future armoured force. However, he was never a solitary "creator" in this crucial period. In fact, he could rely on a team of very able subordinates, among them – and these men are much less known to the public – the later *Wehrmacht* generals Josef Harpe, Werner Kempf or Friedrich Paulus. Finally, without his superior, General Oswald Lutz, the inspector of motor troops, Guderian would have never reached so far.

His biggest personal asset in these years was his ability to promote the demands of his branch in the field of military publications. In 1937, Guderian published his first book "Achtung – Panzer!" which was an unconventional mix of historical accounts, an introduction into tank tactics, and a public relation publication for the armoured troops.¹⁰ The latter function was crucial, as from

⁹ Cf. Steven J. Zaloga, Spanish Civil War Tanks. The Proving Ground for Blitzkrieg, Botley 2010.

¹⁰ Cf. ハインツ・グデーリアン『戦車に注目せよ — グデーリアン著作集』大木毅編訳（作品社、2016年）(Heinz Guderian, Achtung – Panzer!, German edition 1937).

1933 onwards, the restrictions of the Peace Treaty were history and the armed forces found themselves in an extremely dynamic process of rearmament. In the course of this process, Guderian for the first time proved his ability as a public lobbyist for his own branch.

One of the more persistent legends, promoted by Guderian himself, was the assertion that his visionary ideas had been met with resistance by a conservative military leadership. In this narrative, Guderian's assumed chief opponent was the Chief of the Army General Staff, General Ludwig Beck. However, it needs to be stressed that the task of a CGS was to coordinate the build-up of the army as a whole and to harmonize the demands of the different branches and institutions. Tanks could not be his sole focus. Therefore, Beck had to tighten strings with this very impulsive character Guderian. Until 1935, no army in the world had tackled the concept of operational armoured warfare as consequently as the German army. This was also Beck's merit as it was his successor's, General Franz Halder. It was also the achievement of the dictator himself. Adolf Hitler was not a trained officer but had a strong yet rather intuitive grasp for the military instruments he needed to realize his ideological and military aims. Therefore, the National Socialist war of conquest and annihilation in Europe cannot be imagined without Guderian's tank force.

Panzer Commander 1939-41

There is no indication that Heinz Guderian had any doubts whatsoever about Hitler's decision to go to war. The year 1939 was the moment when the general finally left the office desk and became a commander in the field. For the upcoming *Blitzkrieg* campaigns, he appeared to have a natural talent. Guderian had initiative; he was leading from the front, and he was a bully against peers that happened to get into his way.

During the war against Poland in September/October 1939, Guderian commanded the motorized XIX Army Corps which was part of the Northern pincer movement. Against France, his corps managed an early and important breakthrough at Sedan in May 1940, followed by a speedy push toward the coast. This helped to cut off French and British forces. Here, Guderian's propensity

to insubordination became obvious for the first time. A temporary relief from command was revoked due to the tactical success of his action. At the end of the war in France, the idea of using *Panzer* divisions (later combined in *Panzer* corps and supported by a strong air force component) as spearhead formations had become an integral element of the new German doctrine.¹¹ The successes in Poland and France also gave Heinz Guderian the opportunity to promote his personal propaganda image. However, his drive and tactical independence had a dark side: Guderian did not care much about communications with his superiors. He was not a team player. He disobeyed orders. His unreined initiative only worked as long as the *Wehrmacht* had the factor surprise on its side and as long as it fought against inferior adversaries. However, this all came to an end on 22 June 1941.

The attack on the Soviet Union resulted in a severe crisis of Hitler's war plan.¹² From the outset, Heinz Guderian was in command of *Panzergruppe* 2. This temporary armoured formation consisted of four corps, and it led the attack of the German centre towards Moscow. At the end of August, Guderian's *Panzergruppe* 2 was diverted by the high command towards the South in order to support the attack on the Ukrainian capital of Kiev. This decision by Hitler, who had won over Guderian against his superiors' interests, severely crumbled Soviet defences in the South, but at the same time it weakened the spearhead attack on Moscow.¹³ After Kiev, Guderian resumed course against Moscow. However, the Red Army's dogged defence, the German's outrunning their own supply lines, and the advent of the winter thwarted the plan of attack on the capital. At the end of 1941, the *Wehrmacht* got stuck and a Soviet counter attack was imminent. In this situation, several front commanders recommended a tactical retreat in order to save their depleted forces, a proposal that was categorically rejected by Hitler. In this critical situation, Guderian was relieved from his duties for insubordination on

¹¹ Nominally, Panzer corps (*Panzerkorps*) were not established prior to summer 1942. From the end of May 1940, Guderian commanded the *Panzergruppe Guderian*, a temporary formation which consisted of two armoured corps.

¹² Cf. Horst Boog et al. (eds.), *Germany and the Second World War*. Vol. 4. The Attack on the Soviet Union, Oxford 1998; David Glantz, *Operation Barbarossa. Hitler's invasion of Russia 1941*, Cheltenham 2012; Christian Hartmann, *Operation Barbarossa. Nazi Germany's War in the East, 1941-1945*, Oxford 2012.

¹³ Cf. David Stahel, *Kiev 1941. Hitler's Battle for Supremacy in the East*, Cambridge 2012.

26 December 1941. It is highly symbolic that the timing of Guderian's career crisis coincided with the end of the early *Blitzkrieg* phase of the war. The strains of command had inflicted considerable health problems for him. Nevertheless, from hindsight, this involuntary time-out paid off very well for Guderian. It saved him from becoming involved in war crimes, as it had been the case with many of the German generals on the Eastern Front in 1942 and 1943. However, the short period from August to December 1941 had been enough to prove that Guderian was willing to execute any order given by the high command without hesitation. Like most of the generals, Guderian had followed and circulated a complex of "Criminal Orders" issued by the *Wehrmacht* high command in the run-up to the invasion. These directives practically suspended the rule of international law for the war against the Soviet Union, meaning sure death for political commissars, assumed partisans (a code often used for the members of the Jewish communities), and Soviet prisoners of war.¹⁴

Inspector General 1943-44

Following the disaster of Operation *Barbarossa*, the *Wehrmacht* planned to resume the offensive in 1942 with an attack on the industrial centres in Ukraine and a push for the oil fields in the Caucasus region.¹⁵ However, this attack did not gain the necessary momentum. The Red Army was pushed back, but not destroyed. With each day it became more apparent that the Germans had to replace bigger losses than their opponent. Furthermore, the Red Army had learned from its defeat in 1941, and it had learned from German armoured doctrine in particular. As a consequence, tank vs. tank engagements proved more and more costly for the *Wehrmacht*. Against the new Soviet types – the medium type T-34 and the heavy type KV-1 in particular – German guns often proved ineffective and

¹⁴ Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941-1945. German Troops and the Barbarization of Warfare*, New York 1986; and Felix Römer, *The Wehrmacht in the War of Ideologies. The Army and Hitler's Criminal Orders on the Eastern Front*, in: Alex J. Kay, Jeff Rutherford, David Stahel (eds.), *Nazi Policy on the Eastern Front, 1941. Total War, Genocide, and Radicalization*, Rochester 2012, pp. 73-100.

¹⁵ For Operation *Blau* see Bernd Wegner, *The War against the Soviet Union 1942-1943*, in: Horst Boog et al. (eds.), *Germany and the Second World War. Vol. 6. The Global War*, Oxford 2001, pp. 843-1215; David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House, *To the Gates of Stalingrad. Soviet-German Combat Operations, April-August 1942*, Lawrence, KS 2009.

this caused a veritable tank shock.

The crisis on the Eastern Front forced Hitler to call back Guderian in March 1943. Hitler needed a tank expert who would tackle the technical and operational deadlock and he was well aware of Guderian's popularity among the soldiers. Again, Guderian's appointment as Inspector General of the Armoured Forces proved that he never stood against all odds but that he had supporters in influential positions, including Hitler himself. In the new position, Guderian was able to display his organizational abilities and he gave important impulses in the field of training. However, crucial decisions in armament and operational planning had already taken place before his return to the scene.¹⁶ This became obvious during the planning phase for the war's biggest land battle, Kursk (5-23 July 1943).¹⁷ Here, Heinz Guderian had no saying in the planning and conduct of the operation. Nevertheless, he focused on training and the introduction of the next generation of German tanks, namely *Panzerkampfwagen V (Panther)*, *Panzerkampfwagen VI (Tiger)*, and the tank destroyer *Ferdinand*. The production of these new types was in direct correlation with the planning for Kursk: More of these new types would mean a better chance to defeat the Red Army in this battle. However, the longer the *Wehrmacht* waited for more tanks leaving the factories, the better Soviet defensive positions became – a classic dilemma the German high command could not solve.¹⁸

Kursk and the following Soviet counter offensives demonstrated that the character of war on the Eastern front had changed during Guderian's temporary absence. The Red Army had continued their learning process, particularly with regard to combined arms and to deep operations. At the same time, the *Wehrmacht* had suffered severe losses – losses that it could no longer compensate. From now on, German tanks were forced to give up their operational role. Together with assault guns (much despised by Guderian for they were controlled by the artillery branch), they became tactical guardians of the infantry. Finally, the German air force had lost air superiority leaving the armoured forces vulnerable to Soviet

¹⁶ Pöhlmann, Panzer, pp. 395-399.

¹⁷ A well-researched primer on Kursk is Roman Toeppel, Kursk 1943. The Greatest Battle of the Second World War, Warwick 2018. See pp. 17-18 for the question of chronology.

¹⁸ Toeppel, Kursk, pp. 38-51.

ground-attack aircraft.

General Guderian's answer to this problem was a mantra for the build-up of an operational reserve of armoured forces. This was easily said, but impossible to be done. He was trying to win the war of 1944, but could not contribute to winning the war of 1943. In the end, the general was caught up in an outdated *Blitzkrieg* understanding of the war. This operational tunnel vision also became apparent during the defensive preparations for the invasion in France in June 1944. While the Allies' strategic intent was common knowledge, the actual timing and location of D-Day was hard to determine for the German high command. Consequently, the allocation of the armoured divisions as the reserve for a counter-attack was difficult to decide. After long debates, in which Guderian played a role among others, Hitler decided for a compromise. His decision was a mix of armoured forces lined up along the coast plus a more remote reserve. This plan did not work out. However, it is doubtful if the alternative – keeping the complete armoured forces back for a major counter-stroke after having identified the enemies' intent – would have made a difference.¹⁹ Armoured divisions would play a crucial part in keeping the British advance around Caen, but from now on, death for the *Panzers* came from the air. Allied air superiority paralyzed their freedom of maneuver and it impeded their logistics critically. The development of armoured warfare had reached its next level.²⁰

Chief of the Army General Staff 1944-45

On 20 July 1944, the military coup against Hitler involuntarily ended Guderian's work as Inspector General. A group of high-ranking officers and former, mostly conservative politicians had decided that only Hitler's death would save Germany from disaster. Colonel Claus Schenk Count Stauffenberg, chief of staff of the commander of the home forces, had volunteered to plant a bomb during a briefing

¹⁹ Pöhlmann, Panzer, pp. 440-448.

²⁰ For tank operations and the role of the air forces cf. James Jay Carafano, After D-Day. Operation Cobra and the Normandy Breakout, Boulder and London 2000; John Buckley, British Armour in the Normandy Campaign, London and New York 2004.

with Hitler at his headquarters at Rastenburg.²¹ Guderian's attitude toward military resistance remains ambiguous to date. His postwar judgements reveal a negative stance. This attitude was not necessarily motivated by his belief in the dictator as an ideological leader, but by the supreme commander's practical utility for Guderian. He was held in high esteem by Hitler. Furthermore, the general, like many of his peers, struggled with the idea of killing the dictator on whom he had taken an oath of allegiance. Guderian's refusal of getting involved in the coup was finally motivated by the fact that, meanwhile, retired General Ludwig Beck, his personal arch-enemy from prewar years, counted among the military leaders of the group. It appears probable that Guderian had been contacted confidentially in order to assure the prominent general's support for the coup. The course of events indicates that he had refused the approach; however, he had not disclosed the approach to the authorities.²² This left him a fallback-position in case the coup succeeded. The fact that Heinz Guderian inspected troops in a very remote place and spent the rest of the day at his estate – far from both Berlin and the headquarters at Rastenburg – supports the theory that he was aiming at keeping himself physically as far as possible from the repercussions 20 July would bring.

The assassination failed and one of the first decisions taken by the injured Hitler was to call back Guderian and order him to take over the position as acting Chief of the Army General Staff. The dictator was determined to seize the opportunity and eliminate the conservative military elite that – in Hitler's perception – had always looked down on him as a political parvenu and a military amateur. Guderian, whose disdain for the general staff corps was well known, was Hitler's ideal candidate for this purge of the military. He had no strategic ambition and he was politically obedient. The general's loyalty had already been ensured earlier by Hitler donating him a rural estate and some financial gratuities.²³

Now, as Chief of the Army General Staff, Guderian for the first time carried the full weight of responsibilities, like his disliked predecessors had done before him.

²¹ For the Stauffenberg-coup cf. Winfried Heinemann, Operation "Valkyrie." A Military History of the 20 July 1944 Plot, Berlin 2021; for the broader context Peter Hoffmann, The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945, Montreal 1996.

²² For Guderian during the July plot cf. Hart, Guderian, pp. 98-102.

²³ Cf. Gerd R. Ueberschär und Winfried Vogel, Dienen und Verdienen. Hitlers Geschenke an seine Eliten, Frankfurt/Main 1999, p. 110, 223.

Neither by training nor by experience was Heinz Guderian suited as the strategic adviser of the Commander-in-Chief. Paradoxically, this advice was no longer essential as the strategic situation was becoming desperate from the summer of 1944 onwards. The Western Allies had landed in Italy and France, and the Red Army was crushing the German centre in Belarus. At the same time, Germany's cities and the war industry were ravaged by the Allied bombing campaign. In October 1944, Americans and Soviets entered German territory for the first time.²⁴ At this point in time, strategic advice by general Guderian had become redundant anyway as the dictator no longer relied very much on the strategic council of others. What he needed was a technical executioner of his own military will.

Guderian's order to the general staff corps on 24 August 1944 demanded for an unconditional allegiance to Hitler: "No one believes more fanatically in victory or radiate that belief more than you. [...] Be an example to others in your unconditional obedience. There is no future for the *Reich* [empire] without National Socialism."²⁵ This document is often cited as inappropriate in both its content and tone. It is, however, also an indicator of the extreme situation in which Guderian found himself. Hitler's security apparatus was now running wild against assumed plotters and their families, and neither social class, nor military rank or political function provided protection.

In his new function, Guderian also took part in the military court which was responsible for ousting actual or assumed plotters from the army, so that these officers could be tried and convicted by the Nazi "People's Court." Guderian later explained his role in this committee as an attempt to avert worse consequences.²⁶ His military responsibility could also become a personal liability: Guderian's role as Chief of the Army General Staff in the crushing of the Warsaw insurrection of August 1944 would result in a Polish request for extradition after the war. This request was denied by US authorities who were interested in having Heinz Guderian available as a witness at the Nuremberg war crimes tribunal and as a

²⁴ Rolf-Dieter Müller (eds.), *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*. Vol. 10/1. Der Zusammenbruch des Deutschen Reiches, Munich 2008.

²⁵ Geoffrey P. Megargee, *Inside Hitler's High Command*, Lawrence KS 2000, p. 214.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 213-214.

source for American military intelligence.²⁷

In March 1945, Guderian had realized that his position – very close to the captain of a sinking ship – could become dangerous. He did what he had always been very good at: escalating a controversy. This time, he found himself in a heated debate with Hitler over an abortive counter offensive against the fortress Küstrin.²⁸ As a consequence, he was sacked (again) and thus found himself in the more remote and more secure position of retirement when the war in Europe came to an end in May 1945.

Hitler's Commander

Looking back on Heinz Guderian's career, lights and shadows appear and they do so more than in other military biographies. He was a gifted organizer and a motivator for his soldiers. Tactically, he was a sanguine gambler, not a tenacious fighter – an attacker, not a defender. He was a general officer who would perform best whenever he was operating within the limits of his branch. Heinz Guderian was a general staff officer who despised the general staff as a mentality.

In his autobiographical writings, he would later deliberately downplay the role of peers and subordinates during the build-up of the German armoured forces in order to position himself in the light. He was never a lonely visionary but he was an innovator who had, for most of his career, influential supporters, people who cleared the way for him and who protected him.

Guderian did not escape the gallows in Nuremberg or a Soviet labor camp because he had not thought or acted in accordance with the racist and criminal concept of Nazi warfare. In fact, the dismissals in 1941 and 1945 simply saved him from getting involved more intimately with the dark sides of war on the Eastern front. After 1945, Heinz Guderian did not spend much time on questioning the criminal character of the war or his individual role in it. Instead, in his writings

²⁷ Jens Brüggemann, *Männer von Ehre? Die Wehrmachtgeneralität im Nürnberger Prozess 1945/46. Zur Entstehung einer Legende*, Paderborn 2018, p. 56; cf. also Alaric Searle, *Wehrmacht Generals, West German Society, and the Debate on Rearmament 1949–1959*, Westport 2003.

²⁸ Cf. Macksey, Guderian, pp. 197–198, who insinuates that the furor in this controversy might have been fueled by a drink that Guderian had had with the Japanese military attaché, Ōshima Hiroshi, before the meeting with Hitler.

he demanded full sovereignty and a quick end to the prosecution of war criminals as a precondition for a German contribution to NATO.²⁹ Guderian was not an ideologically motivated national socialist officer; he was simply an opportunist. And within the group of Hitler's commanders he was one of the few who were able to influence their own image in history very profoundly.

²⁹ Cf. Heinz Guderian, *Kann Westeuropa verteidigt werden?* Göttingen 1950, p. 84; *ibid.*, *So geht es nicht! Ein Beitrag zur Frage der Haltung Westdeutschlands*, Heidelberg 1951, pp. 63-69.