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## Preface

### Introduction: The German Way of War

Consider this scene from a well-known episode in German military history. It is November 1942. A great war is raging, and all the indicators have suddenly gone negative:



The general sat down at his desk, preparing to set pen to paper. It had been a bad day, and frankly, he was having a hard time concentrating. He was under a great deal of strain lately, and he knew it was beginning to tell on him. He had even developed a facial tic that he did his damndest to hide and that his staff officers tried not to notice.

“A rough day,” he thought. He wasn’t sure *rough* quite covered it. Once again, there was bad news from the front: the final breakdown of Operation Hubertus, the last assault in the city’s northern sector, and his last throw of the dice—and not much of a throw at that. He had spent the week before the attack trying, and failing, to scrounge up enough infantry to launch it. In the end, he’d relied mainly on combat engineers. They’d done all right, he supposed. They could blow things up. They were good at that. Fire and movement? Not so good. They’d gotten close to the riverbank—within a few hundred yards, in fact.

But not close enough. The general tried to concentrate. The failure of Hubertus was the least of his problems. That news from the front he could handle. It was what was happening in his rear. He wasn’t sure what to say about that. Had something like this ever even happened to a German army before?

He glanced at the situation map, hoping that it had somehow changed. But no. It was the same ugly story: huge red arrows north and south of the city, immense Soviet offensives, spearheaded by what his intelligence officers had sworn to him just a week ago were impossible numbers of tanks. The last few days, they had been driving deep into his flank and rear. Who was there to stop them? The general knew the answer to that one, and it wasn’t good.

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He had just now gotten the confirmation. The Soviet pincers had linked up far behind Stalingrad, at the town of Kalach, on the Don.

*Kesselschlacht*. Every German commander recognized the term: the battle of encirclement, the “cauldron.” He knew his history as well as anyone in the officer corps. It was a way of war that German armies had perfected over the centuries, at Leipzig, Königgrätz, Tannenberg, the Flanders offensive of 1940, the opening of Barbarossa. When it worked, you encircled entire enemy armies, and took hundreds of thousands of prisoners.

But now who was trapped? He was a thousand miles deep inside hostile territory, his army literally embedded in the city, having fought to a standstill. His tanks had been practically useless in a street fight. He had even sent away his horse transport—too many mouths to feed. What did he need transport for? He thought of another term: *Bewegungskrieg*, the “war of movement,” with rapid maneuver and bold attacks, always seeking the enemy’s flanks and rear. He shook his head. So much for that; his own army had barely moved an inch in the last month.

Anger welled up, as it had on and off for the past few days. For weeks he’d been telling anyone who would listen that his situation was growing impossible, with huge dangling flanks north and south of the city held by the Romanian armies. He didn’t have much use for his allies—undertrained, underarmed, underenthusiastic, sitting out there in an open plain, with no terrain protection at all. Well, he thought, at least no one needed to worry about the Romanians any more. That problem had been solved. They’d been obliterated in the opening moments of the Soviet offensive.

So it had all gone wrong. He could already hear them talking back at headquarters. Not everyone had been happy with his appointment to a field command—“No experience,” they’d said. “No drive.” And, some of them had added, “No family.” If von Reichenau were still alive, the general thought bitterly, then he’d be the one sitting here, staring at the same unforgiving map, facing the same hopeless situation. “I wonder if his family connections would be helping him now,” he muttered to himself.

He glanced down to the surface of his writing desk. Buried underneath today’s grim news was a telegram from the man who had put them all here. He had gotten it five days ago, but it seemed like five years. He pulled it out and read it once more. Its empty words exhorted the 6th Army to one more great effort in Stalingrad, calling on their energy, their “guts” (*Schneid*). What nonsense. He had had orders to read it to all the German commanders down to the regimental level.

He'd seen the reaction of some of them, the doubt. Others had swallowed it whole. "Even I did," he recalled. The general closed his eyes momentarily, trying to concentrate. Sometimes Hitler seemed . . . crazy. Unbalanced.

It was November 22, 1942, and General Friedrich Paulus was not a happy man. There was a dispatch to be written, however, and he was nothing if not a dutiful officer.

He drew a breath, and finally set pen to paper: "Armee eingeschlossen," he began. "The army is surrounded. . . ."<sup>1</sup>



For the German army, the Wehrmacht, the debacle at Stalingrad represented more than a simple defeat. It was the precise moment in which a traditional, centuries-old military culture, a "way of war," we might say, crashed into the realities of the industrialized warfare of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> This way of war had originated in the kingdom of Prussia nearly 300 years ago and was responsible for creating and sustaining the so-called Second Reich in the wars of unification and beyond. It had collapsed during World War I, only to be reborn better and more effective than ever in the interwar era and the early years of World War II. By the time General Paulus sat down to write his dispatch at Stalingrad, however, it had proven itself obsolete. Indeed, in the context of this great world war that Germany had first risked and then ignited, it had the faint whiff of nostalgia about it. It had almost become quaint.

German officers described their method of making war as *Bewegungskrieg*, the war of movement on the operational level. Originating in the duchy of Brandenburg during the reign of Frederick William II, the Great Elector, brought to its first flowering during the reign of the Prussian king Frederick the Great (1740–1786), given a broad philosophical underpinning by Karl Gottlieb von Clausewitz, and brought to its second flowering by Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke during the wars of unification, *Bewegungskrieg* evolved as a way for a small, relatively impoverished kingdom to make its weight felt in international and military affairs. With their state crammed into a tight spot on the north German plain, lacking much in the way of defensible boundaries, ringed by enemies and potential enemies, it became an article of faith for Prussian–German planners and field commanders alike that they could not win a long, drawn-out war of attrition. The balance in numbers, resources, and factories would always tilt in favor of their enemies in such a contest. Fighting a war of attrition, therefore, was simply another name for "losing slowly." What Germany had to do was to fight

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brief, sharp wars—*kurtz und vives*, Frederick the Great called them, “short and lively”—featuring rapid and decisive campaigns that identified, fixed in place, and then smashed the enemy’s main body within weeks of the outbreak of the fighting.<sup>3</sup>

*Bewegungskrieg* was the solution to this strategic problem. Though styled the “war of movement” or “mobile war,” it had little to do with simple mobility or a faster march rate. Indeed, Prusso-German armies were often armed and equipped in markedly similar ways to the enemies they faced, so having any advantage in pure mobility would be difficult. Rather than mere tactical maneuverability, this was a way of war that stressed the maneuver of large (what we would today call “operational level”) formations: divisions, corps, and armies. The aim was to maneuver these large formations in such a way that they would strike the mass of the enemy army a powerful blow, perhaps even an annihilating one, early on in the fighting, perhaps within a few weeks.

The way to do that was not to gather them in a central location and launch a frontal assault to steamroll the enemy. Indeed, *Bewegungskrieg* was based on the notion that Germany could never afford such an expensive type of war. Instead, German commanders were expected to shape the campaign in such a way that they landed a heavy blow on the enemy’s flank, or both of them, or even, if possible, into the enemy’s rear. The aim of these maneuvers was not merely to surround the hostile army and then starve it into submission, but to allow German formations to subject it to “concentric operations”—simultaneous attacks from all points of the compass. The German term for such a scenario was *Kesselschlacht*, literally “cauldron battle,” but we might translate it more expansively as the battle of “encirclement and destruction.”

All this was easier said than done. Enemy armies rarely sit around and allow themselves to be encircled. The Germans had found over the centuries that prosecuting *Bewegungskrieg* brought with it certain corollary demands. The first was a flexible form of command that left a great deal of initiative in the hands of lower-ranking commanders. It has become customary in the west to speak of *Auftragstaktik* (mission tactics). The higher commander gave his subordinate commanders a general mission (*Auftrag*). It was to be brief, clear, and, if possible, delivered verbally rather than in writing. It might be something as simple as pointing at a terrain formation in the distance. That done, it was up to the subordinates themselves to devise the means and method of achieving the mission. As we study the historical record more carefully, however, we note that *Auftragstaktik* is a term that the Germans themselves seem to have used only rarely. Rather it is more correct to speak, as

they did, of the *Selbständigkeit der Unterführer*, the “independence of the subordinate commander,” in which the officer in the field was a virtual free agent in terms of his maneuver scheme and operational approach.<sup>4</sup>

The obvious objection that a modern analyst might make to such a scheme—that it could easily degenerate into an every-man-for-himself series of private wars rather than an integrated war-fighting plan—is a valid one, as far as it goes. The annals of Prussian–German military history feature some of the most skilled and successful commanders of all time, certainly—names like Georg von Derfflinger and Frederick the Great, Friedrich Wilhelm von Seydlitz and Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher, Moltke and Schlieffen, and Guderian and Manstein. But we must also be honest: they also include lesser lights like Eduard von Flies, who unwisely attacked a Hanoverian army twice his own size at the battle of Langensalza and essentially had his own command destroyed in the process, three days before the circumstances would have forced the Hanoverians to surrender anyway<sup>5</sup>; Karl von Steinmetz, whose rash moves in the opening days of the Franco-Prussian war nearly ruined Moltke’s carefully designed maneuver scheme altogether<sup>6</sup>; and, perhaps the classic example, Hermann von François, commander of the I Corps in the East Prussian campaign in 1914, who not only marched his corps directly into the path of the oncoming Russian 1st Army, but tipped off the Russians to a carefully laid army-strength ambush, and incidentally caused his commanding officer, General Max von Prittwitz of the 8th Army, to suffer something resembling a nervous breakdown.<sup>7</sup>

Thus there was no special inoculation against bad generalship in the Prussian–German tradition. There were, however, two factors that helped to prevent *Auftragstaktik* from breaking down into a free-for-all. The first was a shared tradition of aggressive behavior under any and all circumstances. It did not matter whether an officer was especially gifted or not; he was expected to march to the sound of the guns, and he usually did. In virtually all of Prussia’s and Germany’s wars, the operational approach was not all that complex: it involved locating the enemy, particularly his vulnerable flank or rear, and then launching a highly aggressive attack on him. Field commanders in the Prussian tradition took a great deal of pride in getting in their blow first, thus showing up not only the enemy but often their fellow officers. “The Prussian army always attacks,” Frederick the Great once said. As a general rule of military operations, it certainly has its shortcomings; it did add up to a reasonable synergy in what was otherwise a loose system of command, however.

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The second factor mitigating the chaotic implications of *Auftragstaktik* was a carefully articulated staff system, in which each operational level commander in the field (division on up) had a chief of the General Staff at his side as his principal military advisor. These were the intellectual elite of the army, its brain trust. They had come up through the same schools (especially the *Kriegsakademie*), they possessed the same outlook, and they tended to give remarkably similar advice when analyzing the same battlefield situation. The commander still bore ultimate responsibility for what transpired, but the better ones listened carefully to their chief of staff.

Aggression (the commander) tempered by intellect (the staff officer): it was the German formula for military success. Although we moderns tend to view the latter with a more positive eye, German officers themselves did not necessarily share our prejudices. The man who dared, who launched attacks no matter what the situation, who chafed at the leash of higher authority—far from being condemned, these commanders tended to win the approbation of their fellows. Military historians since 1914 have filled their books on Tannenberg with condemnations of General François's impetuosity; his contemporaries in the army did not. The same might be said for Steinmetz and Flies and all the others mentioned above. Launching frontal attacks at 1–2 odds is generally not a good idea. But Friedrich Karl, the Red Prince and commander of the Prussian 1st Army in July 1866, had done just that to kick off the battle of Königgrätz.<sup>8</sup> He had become a hero in the process, not by adding up the odds and doing the rational thing, but by ignoring the abacus and doing what his gut told him to do. The elder Moltke may have been the brains of that army—who can doubt it?—but the Red Prince was its heart, and in the eyes of many of his fellows, he was the true victor of Königgrätz. “You’ve never lost a battle if you don’t have the feeling you’re beaten,” he once wrote about a later battle in which he had gotten himself into a sticky situation. “And I didn’t have that feeling.”<sup>9</sup> For the Red Prince, and for so many of his fellow Prussian officers over the centuries, it was all a matter of will. When it came to a more rational calculus, reconciling ends and means, for example—that was someone else’s business.

### **The Problem: The Death of the Wehrmacht?**

It should be apparent to us—at a distance of so many years—that the defeat at Stalingrad (and the nearly simultaneous crushing defeat of

Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's German-Italian *Panzerarmee* at El Alamein) had taken an ax to every one of these bedrock German beliefs about the nature of war.<sup>10</sup> The war of movement? It had come to a screeching halt, in virtually simultaneous fashion, at three widely separated locations on the map. At Alamein, in the Caucasus, and at Stalingrad, *Bewegungskrieg* had given way to the static war of position (*Stellungskrieg*). It was a grinding attritional struggle, highly expensive in men and matériel, and just the sort of thing the Germans had historically tried to avoid. The virtue of aggressive field command? In the Alamein bottleneck, Rommel had fought himself down, quite literally, to the last man and tank, leaving him practically helpless against the offensive launched by General Bernard Law Montgomery's better-supplied 8th Army. General Paulus, too, had spent the entire fall of 1942 feeding one infantry division after another into the mill of urban combat at Stalingrad. By the end, he had no reserve left, no troops to spare for flank protection or liaison with neighboring armies, and no ability at all to respond to Operation Uranus, the well-planned Soviet counteroffensive north and south of the city. In the Caucasus, the Germans had made a last lunge in November for Ordzhonikidze, the gateway city to the Georgian Military Road and thus to the vast Soviet oil fields further south. They had come close—a single mile or so from the city itself, but in the process they too had fought themselves out. A Soviet counterattack drove them back, and the lead German units barely managed to break out of an encirclement.<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere in the Caucasus, two German armies, 1st Panzer in the east and 17th in the west, were stuck fast in the mountain, the victim of logistical difficulties, rough terrain, and a solidified Soviet defensive line, but above all the victim of an overly ambitious and aggressive operational plan.

Finally, the twin disasters had not been kind to that last hallmark of Prussian-German war making, whether we call it *Auftragstaktik* or “the independence of the subordinate commander.” Certainly, Nazi Germany would seem to be a highly unlikely place to generate freedom of thought or action on the part of the field commander. In the course of the 1942 campaign, Adolf Hitler took his share of scalps from the officer corps, micromanaging, harassing, and firing his commanders wholesale—the chief of staff since the outbreak of the war, General Franz Halder; the commander of Army Group A, Field Marshal Wilhelm List; the commander of the unfortunate XXXXVIII Panzer Corps, General Ferdinand Heim; and others.<sup>12</sup> The Führer had even taken over command of Army Group A himself at one point, with a predictable impact on its battlefield performance.

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We need to be cautious in our evaluation here, however. Blaming Hitler for everything that went wrong in the east in 1942 is one of the war's most enduring myths, and we rarely stop to consider what a convenient excuse he became for the officer corps after the war. The size and sprawl of the various fronts, as well as their distance from Germany, still allowed the field commander a great deal of freedom in the day-to-day conduct of operations. Hitler could and did intervene where he chose, however, and his interventions became all the more disturbing by their very unpredictability and capriciousness. He might have once had a certain beginner's luck earlier in the war, in the planning and conduct of the 1940 campaign, for example. At some point in 1942, however, the German official history is surely correct in asserting that his decision making passed from the realm of the fresh and the unconventional into that of the "unprofessional and defective."<sup>13</sup> The "dual campaign"—the decision to go for Stalingrad and the Caucasus at same time rather than sequentially—was the unfortunate result.<sup>14</sup>

In the end, 1942 had shown up the weaknesses in the traditional German way of war. Methods of war making that were born in a tiny duchy and matured in a small kingdom, that dealt with rapid campaigns over distances of 100–200 miles, that depended on a good road network and a relatively prosperous infrastructure had fallen apart when tasked with the conquest of the Suez Canal, the Volga, and the oil fields of Baku. It is not easy to determine the precise moment at which Germany lost World War II; the arguments over the turning point of the war have been going on for decades and will never stop. But certainly we can say that as a matter of objective reality, the German army had no real hope of winning the war through *Bewegungskrieg*—that is, through rapid and decisive offensive action—as the year 1943 dawned. In that sense, 1942 really did represent the death of the Wehrmacht.

Yes, we might say, but so what? War—and particularly the twentieth-century industrial version of it—is a contest of nations, political systems, and economic structures. It is not a mere abstract duel between military cultures. It is too complex a phenomenon to be treated in such a reductionist fashion, too chance ridden, too contingent on a thousand different factors that can change its course from moment to moment. With Germany's traditional military culture having come up short, a decisive victory for the Wehrmacht was no longer in the cards, if it ever had been. But in the short term, that abstract fact changed little. There was still a war to be fought.

Let us be even more specific. The introduction of "culture" as an arena for the military historian has opened up many questions and pen-



etrated many mysteries over the past decade. It can include discussions of separate national ways of war, military cultures that are said to determine how individual armies fight.<sup>15</sup> It can include institutional military culture, the way that a given military establishment sees itself, its history, and its relationship to the broader society. Finally, it can include analysis of national culture, the matrix out of which military institutions spring. In all of these cases, culture serves as the water in which the human actors swim, filled with unstated assumptions and default settings of which they may be only dimly aware. It is the envelope of possibilities and expectations in which they live. It is “the box,” and thinking outside of it is a great deal harder than it sounds.

For all the importance of these cultural preconditions, however, they do not add up to anything approaching historical inevitability. The historical actors may feel and assume certain attitudes, often unconsciously, but they still have lives to live, choices to make, and actions to undertake. To borrow several terms from the rich historiography of the Holocaust, military historians need to take into account both “intentionalism” (the role that humans themselves play in making their own history) and “structuralism” or “functionalism” (the degree to which preconditions, long-term causes, and systemic factors determine human history).<sup>16</sup>

We must keep this in mind as we look at the situation facing the Reich at the end of its horrible year. Those of us who study the war may find it difficult, even impossible, to conceive of a way that Nazi Germany could have staved off defeat after 1942. The strength of the Grand Alliance was only beginning to wax; the massive matériel and industrial resources of the United States, in particular, had barely begun to arrive in the theater of war. Potentially, the Allies could swat Germany like a fly. But “potential victory” and “actual victory” are very different things. Despite all that had gone awry, and despite the smashing of Germany’s last hope for decisive battlefield success and the irretrievable loss of the 6th Army at Stalingrad, no one in the high command was suggesting surrender. Germany would fight on. “We shall create the 6th Army anew,” Hitler confidently told his chief of staff, General Kurt Zeitzler, and 1943 would see action raging on virtually all fronts.<sup>17</sup>

There is a famous, although apparently apocryphal, tale from the start of the war. On that fateful day back in September 1939, when the news first broke that Great Britain was about to declare war on Germany, Hitler had supposedly turned to his foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, and posed a simple question. The query facing the

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German army as the year 1943 dawned was the same one Hitler allegedly asked back then: “What now?”<sup>18</sup>

### The Work: Fighting a Lost War

*The Wehrmacht Retreats* will offer a detailed operational analysis of the great land campaigns of the German Wehrmacht—actually the *Heer*, or army—in the year 1943. Like two of my earlier works, *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years’ War to the Third Reich* (2005) and *Death of the Wehrmacht: The German Campaigns of 1942* (2007), it will attempt to place these modern events in the context of certain long-standing traditions of German military history and culture. Those works sought to analyze German military operations through the lens of what Fernand Braudel called the *longue durée*. Such a long-term view—involving centuries—is useful in clarifying seemingly inexplicable historical events by uncovering an often overlooked factor: just what it was that the historical actors thought they were doing. Without going into the detail of those earlier books—and the reader is encouraged to consult them for the long-term argument—the present work will continue to do the same for the German campaigns of 1943. It will lay special stress on the officer corps and its assumptions about military operations, its view of Prussia–Germany’s military history, and its professional evaluation of the enemy armies it was facing. In other words, we will attempt to describe the *mentalités* of the German military caste in a period when the fortunes of war had definitely turned against the Wehrmacht.

By definition, a book discussing the campaigns of 1943 must open in *medias res*. As the year dawned, campaigns were ongoing, German armies were in hectic retreat in Egypt, along the Don, and in the Caucasus, and the Allies were doing their best to pursue them. We will begin in the Mediterranean, with the arrival of the new gun in town, the U.S. Army. In tandem with its veteran partner, the British, the Americans landed on the shores of French North Africa in November 1942 in Operation Torch. Once ashore, the invaders found themselves racing for Tunis to cut off the retreat of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel’s *Panzerarmee* as it streamed away from El Alamein. In reality, it was never much of a race because the Germans arrived there the day after the Allied landing. Nevertheless, it was a fascinating campaign, with pocket-sized armies and a great deal of gritty fighting of the battlegroup (*Kampfgruppen*) variety in difficult terrain, and the inherent

fascination of watching the U.S. Army try to sort itself out into fighting trim. It wouldn't be easy. The Allies failed to seize Tunis before the end of 1942, and the New Year would see both sides strongly reinforced for a proper campaign.

While the Germans could count the first phase of the Tunisian fighting as a small victory, Soviet armies were trampling all over them in the east. With Soviet armored spearheads poised hundreds of miles closer to Rostov than the German Caucasus armies were, the situation was ripe for yet another Stalingrad-scale disaster. It was during this Soviet "Donbas campaign" that Field Marshal Manstein would, once again, rewrite the book on large-scale mechanized defensive operations. During later decades, when NATO was planning for war with the Warsaw Pact, Manstein's achievement—holding off much larger hostile forces, launching repeated and well-timed counterblows against them, and eventually smashing them—would become a matter of high interest to planners in the U.S. Army.<sup>19</sup>

From the Donbas, we will shift back to the great campaign in Tunisia. Rommel's ability to outpace his pursuers after Alamein allowed him to link up with the German force defending Tunisia, the 5th Panzer Army under General Hans-Jürgen von Arnim, giving the Axis a definite, though temporary, superiority in numbers. Rommel and Arnim used it to launch twin offensives (Operations *Morgenluft* and *Frühlingswind*) against U.S. forces in Tunisia (the II Corps under General Lloyd R. Fredendall). The twin offensives would smash through one U.S. defensive position after another, including the Kasserine Pass, but would ultimately fail, the victim of rushed planning, a confused set of command relationships, and insufficient logistical support. Despite the outcome, however, Kasserine Pass had a major impact on the psyche and behavior of the U.S., British, and German armies for the rest of the war.

The end of the Tunisian campaign in May 1943 saw the Wehrmacht deep in the planning cycle for yet another offensive in the East. Operation Citadel (*Zitadelle*) was a straightforward, two-pronged drive aiming to destroy Soviet forces deployed inside the Kursk salient, a vast bulge in the lines in the northern Ukraine. Citadel became the subject of a great deal of interest in the postwar era, and indeed, the literature of the Eastern Front continues to describe it as "the greatest tank battle of all time."<sup>20</sup> This was particularly so for the climax of the battle, the clash between the II (S.S.) Panzer Corps and the 5th Guards Tank Army near the town of Prokhorovka. Recently, however, historians have been cutting Kursk down to size, reducing it from an all-out

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attempt at a strategic breakthrough on the 1941–1942 model to an operation with more limited goals: maintenance of the initiative in the east and a spoiling attack to destroy a Soviet buildup on the central front.

From Kursk, the narrative will shift back to Europe, following the Allies from Tunisia to Sicily. Here a massive and complex invasion plan (Operation Husky) showed just how formidable a strategic power the Western Alliance could be: no coastline in Europe could be safe against such a massive huge array of naval, air, and land power. Hitler himself claimed to have halted the Kursk offensive in midstream in order to respond to the Allied invasion. Most historians have scoffed at the notion, but as we shall see, the Führer was telling the truth. Husky was a small campaign with strategic results: the overthrow of Benito Mussolini and the shaking of the Axis alliance to its foundations. On the operational level, however, the campaign in many ways proved frustrating. A force of some 500,000 men, enjoying clear superiority in the air and absolute supremacy at sea, failed to trap or destroy a much smaller Axis garrison, essentially comprising three German divisions. The Axis managed to evacuate the entire force back to safety across the Strait of Messina to the Italian mainland—a “bitter victory” for the Allies indeed.<sup>21</sup>

From Sicily, we will head east once more. Later German officers would often label the German failure at Kursk as a victory forsaken, claiming that the Wehrmacht had been on the verge of a breakthrough when Hitler pulled the plug. Those claims fail to take into account what happened immediately afterward: massive Soviet counterstrokes north and south of the salient. Operation Kutuzov against the Orel salient and Operation Rumiantsev toward Belgorod and Kharkov displayed a newly mature Soviet “operational art” in action, combining brute force, mass, and doctrinal sophistication into a nearly irresistible package. In 1943, the Wehrmacht learned there was no position it could defend if the Soviets wanted to take it badly enough and were willing to suffer the casualties—and they almost always were. The autumn would see the Germans retreating in some disarray all along the southern sector of the front, with four massive Soviet army groups chasing them back across the Dnepr. The failure of the Germans to defend even the line of this great river demonstrated how badly blooded they had been by the events of the year.

Finally, we will make one last trip to the Mediterranean. The Anglo-Americans would follow up Sicily with one of the most controversial campaigns of the war, and one that American historians in particular continue to debate. The Allies timed the invasion of Italy (three sepa-

rate operations code named Baytown, Slapstick, and Avalanche) to coincide with Italian surrender, hoping to use to altered political conditions to effect a quick seizure of southern Italy, at least. What they got was something very different: a lightning German campaign to disarm their erstwhile ally and occupy virtually all of Italy (Operation Axis); a dog-fight on the beaches of Salerno, where U.S. 5th Army (General Mark W. Clark commanding) came close to disaster; and a hard slog up a narrow, mountainous peninsula that the Almighty had apparently designed for defense. First there was hardening of the front along what the Germans called their Winter Line (*Winterstellung*), then absolute deadlock on the Gustav Line south of Monte Cassino. Accounts of the campaign often describe the Germans as masters of defensive warfare in this campaign, although such a claim requires some nuance. At any rate, the Germans defended themselves quite competently, even in the face of massive matériel superiority on the part of the Allies. The end of 1943 would see the Allied armies stuck in the mud some distance from Rome and wondering just how they might break out of their predicament. The answer would come in January 1944 at a place called Anzio.

What will emerge from this narrative is the absolute interconnect-edness of the various fronts in this multifront war.<sup>22</sup> Parochialism continues to be an occupational hazard of writing the history of World War II: European theater of operation versus the Pacific, and within the ETO, Western Front versus Eastern Front. In fact, the history of the war should integrate the fronts whenever possible, and that is particularly so in attempting to analyze the behavior of the *Macht in der Mitte*, the “power in the middle”: Germany.<sup>23</sup> On any given day, as we shall see, German planners might be dealing with Panzer operations deep inside the Soviet Union, trying to vector the destination of an Allied invasion fleet, and deciding where to send increasingly scarce resources and reinforcements, all at once. They handled it better on some days than others, and there were some days it must have seemed like a bad idea to get out of bed.

As in all of my books, *The Wehrmacht Retreats* will try to refrain from lecturing the historical actors on what they ought to have done. It will eschew the “good general–bad general” approach to military history,<sup>24</sup> one that assumes there are clear solutions to every battlefield problem and awards victory points to the commander who gets the right answer. Modern warfare is far too complex for us to grade like a true-or-false exam, and at any rate, it is puzzling enough merely to explain why the historical actors did what they did, let alone grade them. Likewise, this book will not attempt to describe how the Germans might have won

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the war if only they had made this or that clever operational maneuver or avoided this or that mistake—an interesting intellectual exercise, perhaps, and one that can be quite entertaining, but not something that I undertake here.

Instead, I will attempt to answer more fundamental questions. How, for example, does a military establishment historically configured for *Bewegungskrieg*—violent aggression, relentless assault, and mobile offensive operations—react when it suddenly and unexpectedly finds itself thrown onto the defensive? How did German commanders view their newest enemy, the U.S. Army? They had been fighting the British for over three years now and the Soviets for a year and a half, and they had a pretty good idea of how those opponents tended to react. The Americans, with their nearly limitless base of resources, a firepower-drenched war-fighting doctrine, and a level of mechanization that the Wehrmacht could not begin to match, were something new to the equation. How did the Germans cope with this fresh battlefield challenge? Finally, since the Allies held the initiative (*das Gesetz des Handelns*) for most of 1943, choosing when and where to launch their offensives, *The Wehrmacht Retreats* will analyze their operations in detail as well. This emphasis will be especially noticeable in the early chapters detailing the debut of Germany's new enemy, the U.S. Army. The arrival of the U.S. Army, clumsy and not yet fully battleworthy but bristling with weapons and equipment, was in many ways *the* story of 1943, and it deserves careful treatment and analysis. With the entire Grand Alliance now in the European theater in force, the Germans had lost the war. Why, despite what was already a sizable matériel and manpower superiority, were the Allies unable to turn 1943 into something more decisive?

