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Desert Fox or Hitler Favorite? Myths and Memories of Erwin Rommel: 1941-1970

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in History

by

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September 2019

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Desert Fox or Hitler Favorite? Myths and Memories of Erwin Rommel: 1941-1970

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by

Joseph Allen Campo

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ABSTRACT

Desert Fox or Hitler Favorite? Myths and Memories of Erwin Rommel: 1941-1970

by

Joseph Allen Campo

This dissertation traces the different ways in which German general Erwin Rommel has been perceived and portrayed in Great Britain and the United States. Two visions of Rommel have emerged over time: one, the “Desert Fox,” a romanticized image emphasizing military virtues such as honor and leadership; two, the “Hitler favorite,” a stereotypical depiction of him as a devotee of Hitler. This study explores the ways that the “Desert Fox” and “Hitler favorite” visions clashed in public narratives, and how those visions reflected meanings that people have imputed to the events of the Second World War. At the core of these contradicting portrayals and perceptions is a recurring theme: champions and critics of the “Desert Fox” based their assessments on their understanding of Nazi Germany, specifically the responsibility that the German military had for enabling the criminality of Hitler’s regime. Those who drew sharp distinctions between Nazi villains and professional German soldiers tended to have positive views of Rommel, whereas those who rejected such a hard differentiation typically judged Rommel unworthy of remembrance. The clashing visions of “Desert Fox” and “Hitler favorite” were authentic expressions of how the British and US publics attempted to grapple with the question of what degree men such as Rommel, and more generally Germans during World War II, should share accountability for Nazi atrocities.

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Introduction

No German general from the Second World War has been portrayed as often or as positively as Erwin Rommel. His 1942 victories in the Western Desert of northern Africa prompted his Commonwealth opponents, who hardly concealed their admiration for the cleverness and audacity of his military leadership, to dub him the “Desert Fox.” Implicated in the failed July 1944 plot to overthrow Hitler, he was forced to take his own life. Just seven years later, Hollywood cast British film star James Mason in a well-received sympathetic representation of Rommel’s purported resistance against the German dictator in *The Desert Fox: The Story of Rommel*. Through the 1950s, 1960s and into the 1970s, he was the subject of numerous flattering biographies (most penned by British authors) and international public commemorations (usually held in Germany). His military conduct was often respected and remembered in international public narratives despite his service to the Nazi regime. This is illustrated succinctly by a 1987 US documentary aptly titled “The Last Knight,” which remarked of his death: “Erwin Rommel, soldier, was laid to rest in the village cemetery of Herrlingen. It planted back into the soil of a disgraced Germany at least one seed of honor and decency for a new flower.”¹

Yet Rommel was not always portrayed or perceived as a knight. At the time of his death in October 1944, the *New York Times* referred to him as the “foremost Nazi soldier” and a “Hitler favorite” who had joined the Nazi Party in its earliest days and led murderous raids as a Storm Troop leader.² Postwar representations of Rommel as an honorable soldier worthy of remembrance, however prevalent, were contested. In 1953, the British writer

¹ *Rommel: The Last Knight* (A&E Television Networks: 1987).

² “Death of Rommel Revealed by Nazis,” *New York Times*, October 16, 1944, 1.

Simon Harcourt-Smith embodied the core of this counter-narrative in his censoring review of *The Desert Fox*: “You cannot make a hero out of him without considerable dishonesty. It is here that [*The Desert Fox*] becomes pernicious ... We are apt to assume that all Germans opposed to Hitler must automatically have been men of peace who abhorred his dreams of European hegemony.”³

Despite these contrasting narratives, there is one prevailing and persistent personification: the “Desert Fox” whose art of surprise and aggressive maneuver could turn an apparent losing position into a triumph, a “gold standard” for tactical excellence in armored warfare. One anecdote that captures the essence of “The Desert Fox” was an incident after the Battle of 73 Easting, fought in 1991 during the Gulf War, in which US armored forces defeated their Iraqi Republican Guard opponents. One US tank crew hung a picture of Erwin Rommel in the back of their vehicle because, in the words of their commander, “we had admired [him] and sort of patterned ourselves after [him] in terms of his tactics.” When asked by a captured Iraqi officer why they had a picture of their World War II adversary, a US private retorted, “If you’d read a little more about Rommel, you wouldn’t be sitting in the back of my truck.”⁴

This study examines the reception history of Erwin Rommel in Great Britain and the United States from 1941 to 1970. Historian Harold Marcuse has articulated the concept of reception history as:

[T]he history of the meanings that have been imputed to historical events.
This approach traces the different ways in which participants, observers, and

³ Simon Harcourt-Smith, “Growth of a Legend - Rommel,” *Sight and Sound* 21, no. 3 (January/March 1953): 134.

⁴ As in being held captive in the back of a victor’s vehicle. Taken from “The Battle of 73 Easting,” *Greatest Tank Battles* (Breakthrough New Media: Toronto, 2010).

historians and other retrospective interpreters have attempted to make sense of events, both as they unfolded, and over time since then, to make those events meaningful for the present in which they lived and live.⁵

I seek to uncover how and why Rommel was portrayed and perceived over time, the ways that the “Last Knight” and “Hitler favorite” views conflicted in public narratives, and how those views are indicative of meanings that people have imputed to historical events. As we will see, amidst the tangle of contradicting portrayals and perceptions is a recurring theme: creators and audiences based their evaluation of Erwin Rommel on their understanding of Nazi Germany, specifically the interrelationship between National Socialism and German society, and thus the responsibility that the German military – the *Wehrmacht* – had for enabling and perpetrating the criminality of Hitler’s regime. Positive and sympathetic views tended to be supported by those who were apt to draw the line between Nazi villains and professional (as opposed to political) German soldiers, whereas those who deemed Rommel unworthy of remembrance rejected such a hard differentiation. The issue of how people portrayed and perceived Rommel reveals tensions in the United States and Great Britain, tensions that arise from the fundamental question of to what degree men such as Rommel, and more generally Germans of the Hitler-era, should share responsibility for Nazi atrocities.

Contested Biography

Erwin Rommel was a complex historical actor who has been interpreted in numerous, unsatisfying ways. They contradict each other, with the horrors of Nazi genocide raising the

⁵ Quote take from Harold Marcuse’s webpage <http://marcuse.faculty.history.ucsb.edu/receptionhist.htm#hmdef>, (accessed August 23, 2019). Other studies that are examples of reception history are Emily Rosenberg, *A Date Which Will Live: Pearl Harbor in American Memory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Wolfram Wette, *The Wehrmacht. History, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Jay Winter and Antione Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001); Harold Marcuse, *Legacies of Dachau, The Uses and Abuses of a Concentration Camp, 1933-2001* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

unnerving question of how a nonpolitical professional soldier who insisted on following the rules of war could willingly serve Adolf Hitler. The myth of the “Desert Fox,” on the other hand, portrays an oversimplified beau ideal that resolved those messy uncertainties. It offered Americans, Britons, and Germans a sanitized and romanticized version of the Second World War in which Rommel did not know of the atrocities and turned against Hitler upon learning the truth. It is best to recognize that the historical Erwin Rommel is not the same as the mythic “Desert Fox,” and as such I use these two terms intentionally to distinguish between the historical figure and its mythic counterpart.

Rommel and Hitler developed a mutual attraction during the close proximity the two had when Rommel was appointed to command the *Führerhauptquartier*, an army battalion responsible for Hitler’s security in the field, on October 1, 1938.⁶ During the occasion of the takeover of Czechoslovakia on March 15, 1939, Rommel urged the German dictator not to delay and to proceed straight to the Hradčany, the castle in Prague, under his personal protection. As he later bragged to a colleague:

I said to him there was no other choice. There is only one way into the heart of the land, in the capital, and to the Castle of Prague. ... In a manner of speaking, I took Hitler along as he willingly entrusted himself to my protection and also he never forgot I gave him this good advice.⁷

Hitler invited Rommel to join his evening gatherings and reportedly the two frontline combat veterans talked about Rommel’s 1937 book about the First World War, *Infanterie greift an* (Infantry Attacks).⁸ The two found they had much in common. Both were frontline

⁶ Most recently articulated by Alaric Searle, “Rommel and the Rise of the Nazis,” in *Rommel Reconsidered*, ed. Ian F. W. Beckett (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2014), 7-29.

⁷ Kurt Hesse, “Wandlung eines Mannes und seines Types,” 10 in EP Microfilm, ed., *Selected Documents on the Life and Campaigns of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel* (Wakefield: England, 1978), reel 3, hereafter *LCER*.

⁸ Although there is no direct evidence that Hitler read the book, there is a consensus among historians that he probably did given his reading habits and preferences. Rommel told colleagues Hitler spoke highly of the book. One early example is a conversation recalled by one of his staff officers Heinz Werner Schmidt in H.W. Schmidt, *With Rommel in the Desert*, (Durban: Albatross, 1950), 94.

veterans of the First World War, bold in temperament, and both were disturbed at the prominence of the old Prussian aristocracy in the General Staff. Whatever disgust Rommel had for Nazi officials, it is clear he had uncritical trust in Hitler until at least the defeat at El Alamein in November 1942. This is unequivocally shown in letters to his wife during the outbreak of the Second World War. Rommel fawningly referred to Hitler as “the Master” and believed that he “knew exactly what was best for us.” When the carpenter Georg Elser’s bomb had narrowly missed killing Hitler by thirteen minutes on November 8, 1939, Rommel was horrified and wrote his wife, “It is inconceivable if the attempt had succeeded.”⁹ Hitler valued Rommel enough to confer on him command of a Panzer division, one of the few elite formations in the army, overriding the wishes of the German High Command. Rommel wrote his wife that General Alfred Jodl of the German High Command was astonished at “the manner of my new appointment” and that Hitler had given him a personalized copy of *Mein Kampf*: “General Rommel, with friendly memories. Adolf Hitler, 3.2.1940.”¹⁰

Yet Rommel seemed to conduct himself the battlefield with a panache and dignity that belied the disreputable regime he served. While in command of the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* [German Africa Corps, popularly called *Afrika Korps*¹¹] in the Western Desert campaign against the British Commonwealth, he displayed conspicuous tactical skill in attaining victories with an inferiority of forces. Moreover, the *Afrikakorps* adhered to the lawful rules of war and the fighting in North Africa was clean, which stood in sharp contrast

⁹ Erwin Rommel letter to Lucie Rommel, November 9, 1939, United States National Archives, Record Group (hereafter NA RG) 242 T84 roll 273.

¹⁰ Erwin Rommel letter to Lucie Rommel, February 17, 1940, NA RG 242 T84 roll 273a

¹¹ As the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* expanded, the Germans enlarged the command structure and subsumed the *Afrikakorps* into larger formations: *Panzergruppe Afrika* (August 1941), *Panzerarmee Afrika* (January 1942), *Deutsch-Italienische Panzerarmee* (October 1942), and finally *Heeresgruppe Afrika* (February 1943). “Afrika Korps” has always been the popular designation for the German African expeditionary force in the US and Great Britain.

to the brutality that characterized the Second World War. The “Desert Fox” as a professional military commander elicited respect from many on the Allied side who fought against him and more generally those who valued military ethos.

The tension and discordance between the portrayals of Erwin Rommel as the “Desert Fox” and favorite of Hitler were recognized by British and US commentators as early as summer of 1942 and continue to the present day. People have interpreted the significance of these biographical facts in different ways. Some have emphasized Rommel’s battlefield conduct and his refusal to pass on direct orders from Führer Headquarters to shoot political enemies¹² as indicative of a professional soldier who followed Hitler because of his patriotism or like many Germans was seduced by Hitler’s charisma. Others have asserted that because Rommel had such a close relationship with Hitler, he must have been aware of the criminality of the Nazi regime. Debates over Rommel’s place in history have been based on these two positions.

Rommel’s purported involvement with the German plot to assassinate Hitler only adds to the ambiguity in trying to make sense of his place in history. After the successful Allied D-Day invasion of June 6, 1944, Rommel and Hitler no longer had unqualified trust in each other and the two clashed sharply over strategy. The last time they saw each other was at a military conference on June 29 at Berchtesgaden, where Rommel laid out the untenable German military position and unequivocally challenged Hitler “about the further

¹² Testimony of Dr. Hans Laternser (Counsel for the General Staff and OKW) at the IMT on August 27, 1946. The Avalon Project, “Nuremberg Trial Proceedings Volume 22: Two Hundred and Twelfth Day. Tuesday, 27 August 1946.” Yale Law School. Lillian Goldman Law Library. <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/08-27-46.asp> (accessed December 14, 2015). The claim that Rommel “burned” the order in defiance is based on oral testimony.

development of the war.”¹³ Hitler, knowing Rommel was seeking “non-military solutions,” threw him out of the room.¹⁴ As to what non-military solutions Rommel was contemplating, the evidence is lacking and nebulous. He made statements to military confidants to the effect that “Germany has lost the war,” “The Führer must step down,” and “We really ought to conclude peace now.”¹⁵ By mid-July, he approached other military commanders of the Western front who were not his friends, including the commanding general of the *SS Panzer Corps Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler*, Sepp Dietrich, asking whether they would follow his orders if he contradicted Hitler’s. Dietrich, who also had no illusions about Allied military superiority, affirmed Rommel by saying, “with yours.”¹⁶ Rommel also had contact with intermediaries and associates of Claus von Stauffenberg’s resistance group; the most direct was a July 9, 1944 meeting with Stauffenberg’s cousin, Caesar von Hofacker. The evidence for (and against) Rommel’s involvement in the conspiracy against Hitler is fragmentary and conflicting; it is not even certain whether he even knew of the assassination attempt. A British fighter-bomber attack on his car on July 17, 1944 seriously wounded the German Field Marshal, rendering this question academic as he was unconscious three days later when Claus von Stauffenberg’s bomb attack failed to kill Hitler. It is telling that as recently as 2013 there have been assertive and incongruous conclusions offered by scholars. Russell A.

¹³ Testimony of Alfred Jodl at the IMT on June 5, 1946. The Avalon Project, “Nuremberg Trial Proceedings Volume 15: One Hundred and Forty-Seventh Day. Wednesday, 5 June, 1946.” Yale Law School. Lillian Goldman Law Library. <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/06-05-46.asp> (accessed December 14, 2016).

¹⁴ The records of this conference have not survived and accounts are based on testimony of survivors. Helmut Heiber and David M. Glantz eds., *Hitler and His Generals: Military Conferences 1942-1945* (New York: Enigma, 2003) 46-47, 466-467, endnote 665. Also, events at this conference sometimes get conflated with a conference held two weeks earlier, in which one witness recalled Rommel and Hitler also arguing over the issue of a negotiated peace. See Nicolaus von Below, *At Hitler’s Side. The Memoirs of Hitler’s Luftwaffe Adjutant 1937-1945*, trans. Geoffrey Brooks (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2001), 204.

¹⁵ David Irving has consolidated much of this testimony in reel 3 in *LCER*. Colonel Anton Staubwasser “Eidesstattliche Erklärung,” from July 20, 1945 in *LCER*, reel 8. Later in the introduction, I discuss the nature of this source material and why some of what Irving compiled is trustworthy even though he is not.

¹⁶ Captain Helmuth Lang, “Eidesstattliche Erklärung,” in *LCER*, reel 11; Interview with Manfred Rommel in *LCER*, reel 3.

Hart emphasizes that there is no credible evidence that Rommel was anything more than superficially connected with the margins of the anti-Hitler conspiracy and “therefore cannot be counted among the active participants.”¹⁷ Peter Lieb believes there is enough circumstantial evidence to substantiate that Rommel knew of the plot, supported it, and paid the price with his life; thus it is “therefore appropriate to state that he was firmly embedded in the military resistance against National Socialism.”¹⁸

The Nazi hierarchy, however, felt he was a party to it. Hans Speidel, Rommel’s Chief of Staff and a conspirator who tried to win him over, has been identified by some as being most responsible for incriminating Rommel.¹⁹ This is an exaggeration, however, as he was implicated by at least two other conspirators and there were rumors that he was considered a potential Reich president in a post-Hitler government.²⁰ Whatever Rommel’s involvement, General Wilhelm Keitel’s January 1946 testimony at the Nuremberg trials unequivocally stated that Hitler thought Rommel was guilty.²¹ On October 14, 1944, Hitler sent two General Staff officers to Rommel’s home to give him a choice to either commit suicide and receive a state funeral or face a show trial in judge Roland Friesler’s infamous

¹⁷ Russell A. Hart, “Rommel and the 20 July Bomb Plot,” in *Rommel Reconsidered*, 154.

¹⁸ Lieb, “Erwin Rommel: Widerstandskämpfer oder Nationalsozialist?” 343. The original reads: “Gleichzeitig war er aber doch mehr als nur ein reiner Sympathisant und bezahlte dafür mit seinem Leben. Man muss ihm also einen festen Platz im militärischen Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus zugestehen – und zwar in stärkerem Maße, als dies in der Geschichtswissenschaft und in der Öffentlichkeit in letzter Zeit der Fall war.”

¹⁹ Originally and most forcefully by David Irving, *The Trail of the Fox* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977). However marred Irving’s reputation is today because of his Holocaust denial and other falsifications, he was once considered a vigorous researcher and has had perceptible influence regarding Speidel’s responsibility (which is also in part because of Speidel’s compromising position). See also Heinrich Kirchheim’s statement in *LCER*, reel 4 and Friedrich Ruge, “‘The Trail of the Fox’: A Comment,” *Military Affairs* 43, no. 3 (October 1, 1979): 158 for further context on Irving’s implication of Speidel.

²⁰ Remy, *Mythos Rommel*, endnote on 367-369; Lieb, “Erwin Rommel: Widerstandskämpfer oder Nationalsozialist?” 328-343. It is doubtful Rommel was a serious candidate, although it is plausible the idea was mused over by some more idealistic conspirators. Historian John Wheeler Bennett asserted that Rommel himself refused the suggestion in deference to General Beck and it is not even clear Rommel knew of the plot. See John Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power: The German Army in Politics 1918-1945*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 609-610.

²¹ United States. Office of Chief of Counsel for the Prosecution of Axis Criminality, *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1946), 1256-1271.

“People’s Court.” As a guilty verdict would also extend to his wife and son under *Sippenhaft*, the practice of punishing a convict’s family members, Rommel opted for suicide via cyanide to save his family. Rommel’s death at the hands of the Nazi regime has further obfuscated interpretations as it was easy to represent the “Desert Fox” as a victim, if not an opponent of National Socialism.

The haziness and uncertainty of such biographical details makes straightforward assessments of Rommel’s life and historical significance difficult. Historian Williamson Murray and US General Omar Bradley have both ranked Rommel as one of history’s greatest battlefield commanders.²² Yet historian Wolf Heckmann and German Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt have both written that Rommel, while a gallant leader, was vastly overrated and unqualified for high command.²³ He was respected for his chivalry and correct military conduct, yet he fought for a regime that murdered millions. In particular, the ambiguity regarding his relationship with Hitler and the German Resistance is difficult to unpack. In 2002 Maurice Remy, who has written the most comprehensive biography of Rommel, concluded that that answer to whether or not Rommel was a convinced National Socialist or a hero of the German Resistance is as “simple as it is surprising: Rommel was both.”²⁴ Meanwhile, in 2005 Ralf Georg Reuth asserted in his respected study of Rommel that he “was neither the one nor the other. He intrinsically understood neither National Socialism, nor the resistance to it.”²⁵ People attempting to make sense of Rommel’s place in history can without much difficulty find an interpretation with accompanying (selective) evidence and

²² “Notes on People,” *New York Times*, April 12, 1977, 32; Williamson Murray, “Review of David Fraser’s Knight’s Cross” in *The Journal of Military History* 59, no. 2 (April 1995): 356.

²³ Wolf Heckmann, *Rommel’s War in Africa*, trans. Stephen Seago (New York: Doubleday, 1981), vii-x; B. H. Liddell Hart, *The Other Side of the Hill* (London: Cassell, 1948), 243.

²⁴ Remy, *Mythos Rommel*, 10.

²⁵ Reuth, *End of a Legend*, 222.

corroborating literature that suits their preconceptions. The potential for confirmation bias is rife and will be a constant theme in this study.

Sources

The secondary literature on Erwin Rommel can be divided into two periods in which the mid-1970s represents a watershed. Before, much of what was written about him emphasized the military imagery of the “Desert Fox” and his opposition to Hitler, in the mold of what British Prime Minister Winston Churchill wrote in his war memoir in 1950:

[Rommel] deserves our respect because, although a loyal German soldier, he came to hate Hitler and all his works, and took part in the conspiracy of 1944 to rescue Germany by displacing the maniac and tyrant. For this he paid the forfeit of his life.²⁶

There was not one historical event or groundbreaking discovery in the 1970s that changed perceptions of Erwin Rommel, rather it was the confluence of three researchers who examined Rommel’s life more critically: Wolf Heckmann’s 1976 *Rommels Krieg in Afrika*, David Irving’s 1977 *The Trail of the Fox*, and Martin van Creveld’s 1977 *Supplying War*. Together, these three books spotlighted the previously ignored blemishes on Rommel’s character, offered trenchant critiques of Rommel as a military commander, and Irving in particular highlighted evidence that suggested that Rommel did not know of the conspiracy against Hitler and remained loyal to German dictator until the end.²⁷ Since his exposure by Deborah Lipstadt in her 1993 book *Denying the Holocaust*, David Irving is a proven liar and manipulator of historical documents, and thus anything he writes should not be trusted.²⁸

²⁶ Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War* vol. 3: *The Grand Alliance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1950), 200.

²⁷ Heckmann, *Rommel’s War in Africa*; Irving, *Trail of the Fox*; Martin van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

²⁸ The Hon. Mr. Justice Gray, *Judgment to be Handed Down David John Caldwell Irving Vs. Penguin Books Limited and Deborah E. Lipstadt*, April 11, 2000; Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (New York: Free Press), 1993; Richard J. Evans, *Lying About Hitler: History, Holocaust, and the David Irving Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

However, in the 1970s Irving was seen as a vigorous researcher and expert of sorts on Adolf Hitler. His thesis that Rommel was ignorant of July 20 was influential, even with authors who are sympathetic to Rommel.²⁹ What was most crucial in the 1970s paradigm shift was the uncovering of numerous German sources that had hitherto been unexamined. Heckmann tracked down some of Rommel's wartime colleagues who had previously opted to keep their harsh criticisms private (this will be examined more fully in Chapter Twelve). In particular, the eleven reel collection of diaries, archival documents, interviews, correspondence, and other official memoranda compiled by David Irving (published by EP Microform) has brought to light perspectives and information that did not match the "Desert Fox" hagiography that emerged in the 1950s. Although Irving is untrustworthy, most of this compilation consists of photocopies of primary sources and other assorted documents not authored by him and thus a distinction ought to be drawn the collection and the collector.³⁰ It is an essential repository for anyone who does research on Erwin Rommel, and thus I cite it despite Irving's association with it. The consequence of these sources is that since 1980, the historiography on Rommel has generally paid more attention to his actual relationship with Hitler, been more critical of his military strategy, and it has since become a mainstream interpretation – although not a consensus – to deem Rommel's connection with the resistance against Hitler as a myth. This is a crucial point. The pre-1970s "Rommel myth" was in large part the result of an incomplete source base that was favorable, not because of intentional distortion.

²⁹ For instance, Fraser, *Knight's Cross* and Reuth, *End of a Legend*.

³⁰ That being said, I would not trust Irving's own notes and, unfortunately, his interviews must remain suspect unless cross referenced with other sources. While Irving's career suggests he compiled these sources tendentiously, there are occasional documents that work against the arguments in *Trail of the Fox*.

The most comprehensive biography of Erwin Rommel is *Mythos Rommel* (2002), authored by Maurice Philip Remy, a German documentary filmmaker. Remy conducted more than two dozen interviews with Rommel's contemporaries (many of whom are now dead), investigated numerous archives in Germany as well as Washington, London, Milan, and Sydney, and his impressive bibliography includes unpublished manuscripts.³¹ David Fraser's *Knight's Cross* (1993) and Ralf Georg Reuth's *Rommel: The End of a Legend* (2005) both make good use of the newer sources. Fraser, a retired British general, offers a well-researched sympathetic portrayal, whereas Reuth's more critical assessment is an insightful account of how divergent the historical Rommel was from the legend of the "Desert Fox." Peter Caddick-Adams' *Monty and Rommel* (2012) is an insightful comparison with his most famous wartime opponent, British General Bernard Montgomery, which is based almost exclusively on English language sources.³² German historiography has traditionally been more critical of Rommel's aptitude as a military commander (dating back to the Second World War, when Rommel's peers did not think highly of him);³³ Martin Kitchen, Douglas Porch, and Niall Barr have written well-argued recent English language critiques.³⁴ The 2015 publication of Daniel Allen Butler's well-received *Field Marshal: The Life and Death of Erwin Rommel* demonstrates that the image of "Desert Fox" still finds a readership around the world.³⁵

³¹ Remy's work is currently only available in German. English speakers can view a three-part documentary based on Remy's work in English that was made for The History Channel back in 2003. Acquiring a (legal) English language version is possible, though will require some investigation. I have *Rommel* (MPR GmbH: 2008).

³² Caddick-Adams, *Monty and Rommel*.

³³ Heckmann, *Rommel's War in Africa*; Adalbert von Taysen, *Tobruk 1941: Der Kampf in Nordafrika* (Freiburg: Rombach, 1976).

³⁴ Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*; Niall Barr, *Pendulum of War: The Three Battles of El Alamein* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004); Douglas Porch, *The Path to Victory: The Mediterranean Theater in World War II* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2004), especially 204-208.

³⁵ Daniel Allen Butler, *Field Marshal: The Life and Death of Erwin Rommel* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2015).

While this study will clarify some contested aspects of Rommel's life and uncover the origins of some of the myths associated with him, it is not another biography. Rather it shows how Americans and Britons have portrayed and perceived Erwin Rommel during the Second World War until the mid-1970s paradigm shift. The portrayals are easier to determine – they comprise the historical record. However, gauging reception is not straightforward, though there are some good and hitherto unlooked at contemporary sources that can enable us to uncover the motives of those most influential in sculpting the “Rommel myth.”

For the period during the Second World War, newspapers are the best gauge of public knowledge of Rommel. At the peak of his fame in 1942, the “Desert Fox” was an almost daily subject in Allied papers (no other German military commander even comes close), which brings the question of how portrayals of him changed over time into sharper relief. I have investigated nearly every article that mentions Rommel in the two papers of record in the United Kingdom and the United States, *The Times* (of London) and the *New York Times* respectively, as well as in other newspapers such as *The Manchester Guardian*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Daily Express*, and *The Boston Globe*, among others. I do not include many testimonies from soldiers who fought against Rommel. Most of them were retrospective and thus Rommel's fame and events after the fact influenced these recollections. Besides these can be glimpsed from the better war correspondents who were in the field and recorded infantrymen's opinions at the time. Thus, newspapers dominate my source base during the war. In fact, newspapers were the primary means of disseminating information to the US and British publics until at least 1948, when the first postwar retrospectives on Rommel were published.

In the postwar era, newspapers still remain an important source. However, they cease to become people's main source of information about Rommel. From 1950 to 1953, the "Desert Fox" became the subject of three foundational mass media creations, which provided their many consumers with far greater knowledge and deeper commentary than before: Desmond Young's biography *Rommel* (1950), Twentieth Century-Fox's blockbuster motion picture *The Desert Fox: The Story of Rommel* (1951), and Rommel's posthumous memoir edited by B. H. Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers* (1953). Journalists, reviewers, and editors still provide valuable insight into public opinion, although these sources were reacting to a new mainstream narrative of Rommel. Indeed, they often contested the interpretations of that narrative, which is important as they demonstrate that views of Rommel changed over time and were not monolithic.

I devote considerable time to examining these mass consumed productions in order to demonstrate the thought processes the creators had in how and why they portrayed Rommel as they did, which is the heart of this project. This is possible because there are repositories of memoranda, letters, and other assorted sources that provide first hand insights: the records of Desmond Young's US publisher Harper & Row are held by the Rare Manuscript Library at Columbia University, the papers of Nunnally Johnson, the primary creator of the motion picture *The Desert Fox*, are at the Howard Gotlieb Center at Boston University, and Liddell Hart's prodigious collection is stored at the repository named after him at King's College London. The materials in these archives are specific enough to clarify the ways these creators attempted to make sense of Rommel's place in history, as well as their accompanying biases and preconceptions. These sources provide an evidentiary foundation

for a hypothesis on how the “Rommel myth” circulated so quickly in British and US societies after the Second World War.

Conventional Narratives on the Origins of the “Rommel Myth”

The British are typically seen as the progenitors of the “Rommel myth.” Because Rommel had achieved some dramatic victories against the British Empire in North Africa, it is assumed that British commentators overhyped his genius to rationalize their defeats. Once the British had won a strategic victory, this propaganda still served a useful purpose to highlight the British military contribution; only the best could beat the “Desert Fox.” In a 1951 review of Young’s Rommel biography, US historian Jim Dan Hill noted, “The British often gave Rommel praise ... it was a gracious, pride-salving way of explaining defeats.”³⁶ In 1967 Italian military historian Emilio Faldella declared that “the myth of Rommel was created by the English, who preferred to justify their defeats with the presence in the enemy camp of an exceptional general, rather than recognize the superior quality of the combatants, German and Italian.”³⁷ Irving similarly said ten years later: “The Allies...deliberately publicized his invincibility – at first to explain away their own misfortune in battles against him, then to make their victories over him seem worth that much more.”³⁸ In 1997, US Colonel James R. Robinson wrote: “Rommel's brilliance mitigated for the British their defeats in North Africa. Rommel became a demigod of war...little doubt can exist either that by acknowledging Rommel's putative genius, Churchill helped excuse British errors, thereby deflecting political criticism of his government.”³⁹ Reuth in 2005 asserted that the British

³⁶ Jim Dan Hill, review of *Rommel, The Desert Fox*, by Desmond Young and *Invasion 1944: Rommel and the Normandy Campaign* by Hans Speidel, *The American Historical Review* 57 (Jan 1952): 440-442.

³⁷ Taken from James J. Sadkovich, “Of Myths and Men: Rommel and the Italians in North Africa, 1940-1942,” *The International History Review* 13 (May 1991): 284.

³⁸ Irving, *Trail of the Fox*, 7.

³⁹ James R. Robinson, “The Rommel Myth,” *Military Review* 77 (Sep/Oct 1997): 81-89.

and in particular Churchill “found it useful to portray the German general as a virtual superman in order to justify British reverses in North Africa.”⁴⁰

Yet none of these studies have undertaken a comprehensive examination of British wartime representations to confirm whether Rommel was overhyped for such a purpose. Winston Churchill’s January 1942 magniloquent quote about Rommel being a “great general” in the House of Commons is usually cited, but the context of that speech is not (so much so that the date is often misattributed). Investigating British wartime portrayals of Rommel reveal there was no single representation, and many views of him were decidedly negative. This can quickly be determined by examining Rommel’s obituaries in Allied newspapers, where his military achievements were downplayed and the focus was on his alleged political career as a murderous “Storm Troops leader,” a “top-drawer hooligan,” and a “fanatical Nazi” fond of “sleeping in front of Hitler’s bedroom door.”⁴¹ My investigation into Allied wartime reporting on Rommel shows that it was dynamic and transformed over time as the political and military contours of the war changed. It was not fixed with a specific agenda. The fact that Americans and Britons were exposed to different and sometimes contradictory views of Rommel during the war is something modern readers should appreciate, as seventy years later, there are still different and contradictory views of Rommel.

Rommel’s good reputation is also attributed to the Cold War. The outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 made it obvious that the Federal Republic of Germany would have to be a political and military ally of Great Britain and the United States. This entailed rearming the

⁴⁰ Reuth, *End of a Legend*, 141-142.

⁴¹ Quotes taken from “Death of Rommel Revealed by Nazis,” *New York Times*, October 16, 1944, 1; *Time*, October 23, 1944, 29; “Obituary,” *The Manchester Guardian*, October 16, 1944, 6.

Germans, which meant former *Wehrmacht* personnel would be integrated into the NATO alliance. There was thus a palpable interest for a “good” German general, and as Rommel was not involved in war crimes and was connected to the German Resistance – or at least killed by the Nazi regime – the Allies, as Reuth put it, “restored the reputation of the German soldier, indeed of Germany as a whole, with the myth of Rommel.”⁴² This line of thinking is currently almost axiomatic.

For understandable reasons. It is not wrong to note the confluence of convenience: on the surface it seems Rommel was one of the few “good Germans” for all sides, considered an honorable combatant by friend and foe, and his death at the hands of the Nazi regime was unequivocal and cleansing, even if people argued about his role in the resistance. His reputation was no doubt aided by Cold War necessities. Yet examining the contemporary sources reveals that this explanation is overly reductionist and incorrectly attributes the primary cause of Rommel’s positive reputation.

The fascination of almost all Rommel enthusiasts with the “Desert Fox” myth stems from a military perspective, not a political one. They admire him as a bold and colorful tank commander who had fought according to the soldier’s code, not because of the plot against Hitler. This thread of public memory can be traced back to 1942 with Rommel’s victories in the Western Desert and is thus independent of the Cold War. Moreover, Rommel’s connection with the German Resistance did not automatically change attitudes toward him. Some interpreted it as unprincipled opportunism, which did not diminish the previous years of loyal service Rommel gave the Third Reich and thus the responsibility he ought to bear for the crimes of the Nazi regime. Also significant, the United States government and US High

⁴² Quote taken from Reuth, *End of a Legend*, 216.

commissioner James McCloy were explicitly hostile to using Rommel as Cold War “memory diplomacy,” to use historian Brian Etheridge’s phrase,⁴³ precisely because they believed it was injurious to foreign policy. Film critics, public commentators, and ordinary citizens expressed similar views (this will be examined in Chapters Eight and Ten). This is a classic case of speculative hindsight. In 1944, there was already what *The Manchester Guardian* dubbed a “strange hero-worship” regarding Rommel, and policy-makers during the Cold War rejected the logic that he served as a useful icon. Of course, *after* Rommel’s positive reputation became more deeply entrenched, there were West German commemorations and NATO public events that showcased the “Desert Fox” as an honorable symbol of Germany’s past. Yet this was a reaction to a mythic reputation that was already in place.

These conventional narratives are not rooted in contemporary primary sources and thus oversimplify complex processes. Their appeal stems from what makes sense in hindsight rather than what people at the time supposed. During the war, hardly any commentators felt it was a good idea to overhype Rommel’s reputation – indeed, there were numerous people who sought to devalue it, including the Supreme British Commander who fought against him – and in the early 1950s, there was considerable opposition to what critics dubbed a whitewashing of Rommel’s history. Mostly, these miss the essence of what encompassed the attraction and mythos of the “Desert Fox,” an idealization of what a military leader ought to be. Naturally some Britons evinced pride because their Eighth Army eventually bested Rommel and no doubt the notion of Rommel as an honest professional was easier to accept in a Cold War context. It is best to see these as contributing factors that buttressed a public narrative that had already been established.

⁴³ Brian C. Etheridge, “*The Desert Fox, Memory Diplomacy, and the German Question in Early Cold War America*,” *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 2 (April 2008): 207-238.

Thesis and Methodology

The reception history of Erwin Rommel has been a contested landscape that featured contradicting views reflecting people's understanding of the relationship between National Socialism and the German military. People who drew a distinction between the two typically viewed Rommel as an honorable general worthy of remembrance, whereas people who did not make such a distinction perceived him as a Nazi general and responsible for the regime's base malevolence. Both of these perspectives are reductionist and oversimplified, yet that is the point – heroes and villains make for an easy and sanitized understanding of history. The meanings people imputed to Rommel stemmed in large part from how they made sense of Germany and the Second World War. I interpret the shifting public acceptance of these views of Rommel as representative of the tensions and changing perspectives on how much responsibility Germans of the Hitler-era should shoulder for the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime.

In formulating this thesis, I use Erwin Rommel as a lens and a case study to gauge British and US attitudes toward Germany. This may seem a large leap, as the “Desert Fox” is sometimes seen as exceptional in being the one acceptable military icon from the *Wehrmacht*. While it true that Rommel is certainly the most famous German general, as historians Ronald Smelser and Edward J. Davies have recently reminded us, the *Wehrmacht* and generals such as Erich von Manstein, Franz Halder, and Heinz Guderian – all of whom were implicated in war crimes – were generally perceived as nonpolitical professionals during the 1950s and 1960s.⁴⁴ Rommel's good reputation reflected the widely accepted “clean” *Wehrmacht* myth in Great Britain and the United States.

⁴⁴ Ronald M. Smelser and Edward J. Davies, *The Myth of the Eastern Front: The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

More generally, I am attempting to capture the elusive concept of public consciousness of Erwin Rommel. This is fraught with difficulties, (which is probably why it has not been done yet,) namely how to measure what the predominant beliefs in the public sphere were when the best sources are individual testimonies. Some sort of extrapolation is necessary, and I believe the scholarly concept of collective memory provides a workable methodology to understanding how and why Americans and Britons perceived Rommel as they did.

Many scholars who study collective memory consider the work of Maurice Halbwachs, who was the first to use that term, as a reference point for the study of societal remembrance.⁴⁵ Halbwachs theorized that individual private memory⁴⁶ is understood only through a social context as memories are biased by environment and altered by interaction. Thus, the term ‘collective’ is not metaphorical; shared communications about the past transfer memories of them to nonparticipants. Collective memories are taken on by a group as their own memory whether or not they experienced it. These groups could be as small as a family or as large as a nation-state. Whatever their size the process is similar: the group needs to maintain a unifying identity as memories are negotiated, adopted, and eliminated to build a shared common past.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ For a brief survey of the theorists and literature that prefigured Halbwachs, see Jeffrey K. Olick, Vared Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Daniel Levy, eds., *The Collective Memory Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁴⁶ The brain does not store memory in the way a photograph is stored in an album or data on a hard drive. During recall memories are reconstructed and remembered anew from influences in the present environment as well as information we have stored about the past. See Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

⁴⁷ Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980). Halbwachs’s first major publication on memory was *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1925).

Scholars have since refined Halbwachs's concept and have argued that terms such as "collective remembrance,"⁴⁸ "national memory,"⁴⁹ "social memory,"⁵⁰ or public memory"⁵¹ would be better descriptors. Much of this scholarship expands the emphasis on how groups influence individual memories and the ways that the present uses and reconstructs the past. Jan Assmann's concept of "cultural memory" is perhaps best suited for large groups. Whereas Halbwachs mostly described direct social interaction, cultural memory, in contrast, comprises cultural creations that are beyond face-to-face interaction such as literature, rites, motion pictures, movements, images, and texts, which serve to convey a community's (imagined) past. Assmann also makes the important point that when audiences access a cultural memory, the meaning they draw from it will not be the same as the (intended) embodiment when it was created, as the context will be different.⁵² As we will see, this is the case with portrayals of the "Desert Fox," as they were conditioned by changing political context and historical understanding during the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. Wulf Kansteiner has insightfully argued that studies of collective memory place too much emphasis on elite groups and historiography. Instead he contends that more focus needs to be placed on popular culture and mass media productions because they are consumed by a much wider audience, and wide-ranging distribution is what shapes mainstream narratives and influences

⁴⁸ J. M. Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Yale University Press, 2006).

⁴⁹ Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Columbia University Press, 1996-1998).

⁵⁰ James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1992).

⁵¹ John E. Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992); Alon Confino, "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method," in *The American Historical Review* 102, no. 5 (December 1997): 1386-1403.

⁵² Jan Assmann, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," in *New German Critique* 65 (Spring – Summer, 1995): 125-133. Trans. John Czaplicka.

historical consciousness.⁵³ This is especially relevant in the case of Rommel after 1945, as the information disseminated about him via film, books, and other assorted texts (primarily newspaper articles) are commercially driven popular media rather than publicity created by the state or those in power.

There are cautionary points regarding collective memory that should be noted when considering the reception history of Rommel. First, as there are multiple groups in a society, there is not just one single or monolithic collective memory. There are competing and divergent visions that persist and challenge the prevailing narrative (for instance, the “Desert Fox” and Hitler devotee views). In general, there has not been enough attention paid to memory recipients. It has been too often assumed in studies of Rommel that the static “Rommel myth” was imposed on a passive population and was not challenged because it suited narrow state interests. This is not true. Recipients mediated the portrayals of Rommel they encountered and either accepted or rejected them based on their own intellectual idiosyncrasies. Secondly, as scholar Barry Swartz has argued, some memories have an intrinsic element to them that resist manipulation.⁵⁴ I think this is relevant as there are arguably transcendent characteristics about the “Desert Fox” such as being an honorable combatant and dynamic military commander that resonate across time and national boundaries. These may be constructs, but they do comprise a common warrior ethos that has long been embedded in military cultures and thus is not entirely dependent on a particular present.⁵⁵ The mythos of Rommel was not a fantasy concocted by British publicists. It was

⁵³ Wulf Kansteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory. History, Television, and Politics after Auschwitz* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2006).

⁵⁴ For example, Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of American Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

⁵⁵ Barry McCarthy, “Warrior Values: A Socio-Historical Survey,” in John Archer (ed.), *Male Violence* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 105-120.

rooted in soldierly creeds that were familiar and palpable to many people who esteem military values.

Collective memory is quite different from historical knowledge. To understand something historically is to accept ambiguities, to be aware of complexities, and to comprehend multiple perspectives. Historical knowledge shuns all-encompassing narratives, recognizes hypotheses are not fixed, and subjects itself to scrutiny. In short, it is messy and unsatisfying for people who want easy answers. Collective memory, on the other hand, is impatient with ambiguities and tends to reduce complex events to mythic archetypes. Through constant retelling, individual memories of events tend to converge with those of other people into a single satisfying narrative as these circulate and spread in the public sphere. Collective memory is tidy; it simplifies the past to derive meaning and comfort. The hazy and sometimes contradictory biography of Erwin Rommel is tailor made for historical inquiry. Not so for collective memory, which is reductionist and epitomized by the competing images of the gallant “Desert Fox” or the unworthy “Hitler favorite.”

One final important point about collective memory is that I am persuaded by scholars of memory that people are heavily influenced by the historical context that predominated in their youth, which makes each generation distinctive agents of historical change.⁵⁶ It became apparent during my research that around the mid-1970s debates over Rommel’s place in history changed, remade in a different era by a new age cohort with different aspirations, and, most critically in my assessment, a more thorough historical awareness of the Second World

⁵⁶ Karl Mannheim, “The Sociological Problem of Generations,” in Paul Kecskemeti, *Karl Mannheim: Essays* (Routledge, 1953), 276-320; Jane Pilcher, “Mannheim’s Sociology of Generations: An Undervalued Legacy,” in *The British Journal of Sociology* 45, no. 3 (Sept. 1994): 481-495. Harold Marcuse, “Generational Cohorts and the Shaping of Popular Attitudes towards the Holocaust,” in *Remembering for the Future* (London: Palgrave, 2001), vol. 3, 652-663; Alan B. Spitzer, “The Historical Problem of Generations,” in *The American Historical Review* 78, no. 5 (Dec. 1973): 1353-1385.

War and the how far the Nazi regime penetrated German society. Thus, this study concludes with that more historical assessment, twenty-five years after the Second World War.

To summarize my findings explaining why the reputation of Erwin Rommel unfolded as it did from 1941 to 1970: individuals typically interpreted Rommel's biography in a manner that suited their worldview. They were not passive. They recognized that there were competing visions and argued for one or the other, usually by their intuitive sense of the relationship between the Nazi regime and the German military. If their perceptions were oversimplified, reductionist, and sound naïve, it was because most people were not experts and relied on stereotypes, their worldview, hearsay, an incomplete source base, and the general "climate of opinion" in societies without the benefit of the seventy-plus years of historical research on World War II that we enjoy today. The reception history of Rommel represents what was within the horizons of understanding of contemporaries.

The "Desert Fox" mythos emerged during the first six months of 1942 (not 1941 as is sometimes presumed) under a very specific set of military circumstances: twice he delivered a shocking riposte to Allied forces.⁵⁷ In January he threw back British forces, which had publicly conveyed they had all but won in North Africa, and June 1942 saw the disastrous collapse of the British fortress at Tobruk, occurring a mere week after *The Times* haughtily printed that Rommel "is only a mediocre strategist" and "there is so far not the slightest

⁵⁷ While there were a lot of unexpected military outcomes in the Second World War, it is not easy to find parallels in which a campaign-level military balance was dramatically altered. The two best examples are the Soviet counter offensive at Moscow in December 1941 and the March 1943 German counterstrike after the Stalingrad disaster. The Soviet effort consisted of multiple fronts involving over 1 million men and credit is thus diluted to multiple commanders (Zhukov, Vasilevsky, Konev, even Stalin). As Erich von Manstein is seen as the brainchild of the latter, it is no coincidence that he is often cited as Germany's best general by experts.

reason to suppose that Rommel will retake Tobruk.”⁵⁸ These stunning victories were legitimate achievements of an excellent military tactician, yet the Allies had so badly misrepresented the military situation that it fostered the impression that Rommel possessed almost superhuman military qualities. The British in fact plainly admitted they had committed inexcusable (albeit correctable) mistakes. Yet the contrast of generalship was so obvious that it became an object of grim humor for the British in the summer of 1942 and it was in this context that the nom de guerre “Desert Fox” originated. I conclude this representation was an idealization rooted in military stereotypes.

Immediately after the fall of Tobruk – the timing was no coincidence – the Hitler devotee view of Rommel emerged in the Allied publics. The reasoning is laid out in a *New York Times* article that contributed to that narrative:

But we had better not concentrate our thoughts on this colorful military personality. Whether Rommel fights fair or foul his every advance expands the area within which the Nazis’ sneaks, thieves and butchers are free to operate.⁵⁹

Perhaps ninety percent of all criticisms of the “Desert Fox” can be boiled down to those two sentences. It did not matter whether Rommel was an honorable fighter; it did not matter that he tried to kill Hitler; it did not matter if German soldiers needed to be rearmed. What was imperative was that he willingly enabled Nazi criminality to operate. This view did not replace that of the good or even brilliant German strategist, rather it contested that portrayal as an alternative collective memory. Both views have had their supporters and critics, and the best predictor for which side of the spectrum a given person will inhabit all is their attitude toward German responsibility for the crimes of the Nazi regime. It is not a clear

⁵⁸ “Third Phase in Libya,” *The Times*, June 15, 1942, 5. For “Black Saturday,” see Alexander Clifford, *The Conquest of North Africa 1940-1943* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1943), 284-299.

⁵⁹ “Rommel and the Beast,” *New York Times*, June 26, 1942, 20.

bifurcation or direct causation. Yet after examining hundreds of opinions, views, and perspectives about Rommel, it is evident that one of the primary ways people made sense of the contradicting portrayals of him was their intuitive sense of how deeply Nazism penetrated German society.

During the Second World War hardened attitudes toward Germans and the “Luther to Hitler” version of history that equated all Germans with Nazis and warmongers had shaped Allied public discourse. Reflecting that development, representations of Rommel as a “Hitler favorite” who kicked the teeth of Englishmen quickly eclipsed those of the wily military commander. However, this shift in portrayals was the consequence of a specific wartime context that again quickly changed after 1945. Allied soldiers and journalists soon made sharper distinctions between the Nazi government and the German people. The context was ripe for reevaluation. After 1950, when the British and US publics read and watched accounts from ostensible trustworthy sources that asserted the wartime propaganda about Rommel was false and that he was an honest professional soldier who had sought to end the war against Hitler’s wishes, it *seemed* historically plausible.

One particularly important factor in enabling the “Desert Fox” as an acceptable (as opposed to wholly believed) narrative after 1945 was the lack of historical awareness about the Nazi regime’s relationship to German society. The victims of the Second World War were often conspicuously absent in the historiography, Nazi villains were blamed for atrocities, and, as Omer Bartov writes, both relied on the

assumption, widely held in Germany and generally accepted in the West, that there was no correlation between the German soldier, who conducted a

professional ‘fair’ war, and the criminal policies of the regime carried out by the SS and its various agencies.⁶⁰

Moreover, as noted before, the source base on Rommel was also overly favorable. As early as January 1946, General Wilhelm Keitel testified at the International Military Tribunal (the first major postwar trial at Nuremberg) that Rommel’s position as a conspirator against Hitler was “not ambiguous and this is the only thing that could be deduced.”⁶¹ This is why the correlation between attitudes toward German responsibility for the crimes of the Nazi regime and perceptions of Rommel is important. Presented with conflicting views of Rommel, people relied on their worldviews and from 1950 to 1970, historiography and common assumptions made the “Desert Fox” appear as a reasonable interpretation.

And that interpretation was comforting. What was it about “The Last Knight” who, upon being laid to rest in Herrlingen, “planted back into the soil of a disgraced Germany at least one seed of honor and decency for a new flower”?⁶² Knighthood was an honorary title, a warrior institution associated with loyalty, military prowess, bravery, and the chivalric code, which entailed proper conduct on and off the battlefield. Rommel, being the last, was a symbol of a romanticized era when war was an unadulterated affair between combatants in which skill at arms determined the victor. But it was the “disgraced Germany” part that is significant. While scholarship about the Holocaust and Nazi criminality was rare before the 1960s, there was no debate that Germany had perpetrated these crimes; US General Dwight D. Eisenhower’s “media blitz” about the liberated camps in Spring 1945 established the

⁶⁰ Omer Bartov, *Germany’s War and the Holocaust: Disputed Histories* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 55.

⁶¹ United States. Office of Chief of Counsel for the Prosecution of Axis Criminality, *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1946), 1256-1271.

⁶² *Rommel: The Last Knight* (1987: A&E Television Networks).

Third Reich as a symbol of evil.⁶³ But which Germans were responsible? German historian Hans Mommsen titled one of his more important articles on the Holocaust: “The Realization of the Unthinkable.”⁶⁴ He framed the “Final Solution,” that is the intentional mass murder of Jews, as “unthinkable” precisely because it encapsulated the wishful desire to attribute the Holocaust beyond “normal” human history and thus the responsibility to exceptionally evil people (which Mommsen forcefully argued against). The “Desert Fox” provided superficial affirmation that there were decent Germans who knew nothing of the mass atrocities and fought a clean war. If it was Hitler and his Nazi underlings who were the perpetrators, now that they were gone a “new flower” of Germany could bloom. I do not mean to imply that such intellectual indulgence was decisive, rather it was a stereotype that went hand in hand with the “Desert Fox” that found a fertile breeding ground due to a lack of historical awareness. It was no coincidence that the paradigm shift on Rommel came in the mid-1970s after new scholarship spread historical responsibility for Nazi criminality to a much wider net of German society. Still, Erwin Rommel is a complicated, complex, confusing, and contradictory historical figure. It is in the nature of collective memory to reconcile unsavory aspects of the past and resist such uncertainties.

⁶³ Marcuse, *Legacies of Dachau*, 52-55. See also Norbert Frei, “‘Wir waren blind, ungläubig und langsam’: Buchenwald, Dachau und die amerikanischen Medien im Frühjahr 1945,” *VfZ* 35 (1987): 385-401.

⁶⁴ “Die Realisierung des Utopischen: Die ‘Endlösung der Judenfrage’ im Dritten Reich,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 9 (1983), 381-420. Published in English as “The Realization of the Unthinkable: The ‘Final Solution of the Jewish Question in the Third Reich,’” in Gerhard Hirschfeld, ed., *The Policies of Genocide: Jews and Soviet Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1986), 93-144. See also Walter Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth about Hitler’s “Final Solution”* (Boston: Little Brown, 1980) who makes this point earlier.

Chapter 1

“Our Friend Rommel”

The origins of the international mythic image of the “Desert Fox” can be pinned down to the beginning of 1942. There is little evidence that Rommel was portrayed or perceived as anything more than an ordinary German general through 1941. By January 1942, the British Commonwealth had seemingly broken the back of Axis forces in Africa. The confidence in the British High Command, which was making plans to advance on Tripoli, was reflected by Allied newspapers such as the *New York Times*, which deemed German ambitions in North Africa as “hopeless.”¹ On January 21, an Axis counterattack led by German general Erwin Rommel shattered these expectations, and representations of Rommel immediately changed. One week later, Churchill uttered his (now famous) remark in the House of Commons that Rommel was a “great general,” and later that spring British Commander-in-Chief Claude Auchinleck issued a memorandum ordering his officers and troops to stop harping on “our friend Rommel.” Before any political significance or propaganda considerations were attributed to the German general who would become known as the “Desert Fox,” he was respected by his opponents as a resilient and adroit military leader.

This chapter explores three aspects that help illustrate how the myth of the “Desert Fox” began. First, it examines the mundane portrayals of Rommel in 1941 to contextualize properly the sudden emergence of approbation towards the German general. Second, the chapter considers the influences of censors and other impediments that shaped the perspective given by Allied journalists and newspapers, which were the main source of

¹ Joseph M. Levy, “Nazi Tunisia Move Viewed as Futile,” *New York Times*, January 11, 1942, 19.

information most ordinary Americans and Britons had of Rommel during the Second World War. On the whole, obtaining information, even from German sources, was not difficult. Representations of him thus were more the products of selective information that suited the creator's purpose more than an (in)ability to get relevant information. Third, this chapter seeks to highlight the disconnect between the overly sanguine military assessments given to the American and British publics and the military realities that unfolded in the African campaign that was marked by ebb and flow. These unrealistic expectations, which will be a constant theme in the first half of this study, did much to cultivate the impression that Rommel repeatedly trumped the Allies' ace. Taken as a whole, the origins of Rommel mythology are relatively mundane, arising from a combination of shifting military fortunes and organic journalistic reporting.

An Inconspicuous German Commander: February 1941 – January 1942

Rommel was not portrayed as an exceptional or even a distinctive enemy commander for nearly a year after his initial unexpected offensive against Commonwealth troops in North Africa. Even the best-informed commentators have ignored this chronology in their assumptions that Rommel's military mystique derived from British military reverses and British self-exonerations. In his 1950 biography of Rommel, Desmond Young reminisced about the first retreat of the hitherto victorious British Eighth Army, which had wiped out the main Italian army in the Libyan province of Cyrenaica:

But if, in the early summer of 1941, one had stopped the first passer-by in the streets of Cairo and asked him the reason for this astonishing reversal of fortune, it is odds-on that he would have replied in one word: "Rommel."²

² Young, *Rommel*, 22.

The evidence does not support this. To be sure, Germany publicized the arrival of Rommel and the *Afrikakorps* to Africa in February 1941.³ And it was obvious that the well-trained mobile German forces he commanded were responsible for the Axis resurgence in North Africa. Nevertheless, the mainstream Allied press hardly mentioned Rommel by name when reporting the dynamic military situation that unfolded during the spring and summer of 1941.

This stage of the Western Desert campaign was marked by ebb and flow, unexpected victories and defeats that have retrospectively become associated with the “Desert Fox.” In April 1941, Axis forces surprisingly threw the Allies back into Egypt, then in May suffered a sharp reverse in an attempt to storm the Commonwealth fortress of Tobruk, but in June stymied the British “Battleaxe” operation, a defeat significant enough that Churchill relieved the British commander, General Archibald Wavell, of his duties. Yet, the dramatic entry of the *Afrikakorps* and shifting fortunes on the battlefield did not arouse much interest in the German commander from British or US commentators. *The Times* mentioned him by name only once when Commonwealth armies retreated in April.⁴ *The Manchester Guardian* made a passing mention of “General Rommel losing eight tanks” on May 24 and did not specifically identify him again until September 3 when the paper concluded he was in a “less favourable position.”⁵ *The Daily Mirror*, a left-wing daily, generically identified him as the German commander about once per month.⁶ The press in the United States also paid him little heed for the entire spring and summer of 1941. During this period, dailies such as the

³ See “Nazi General Decorated,” *New York Times*, March 23, 1941, 19 and “Nwghelli’s Fall Aids Addis Ababa drive,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 24, 1941, 7 for Rommel’s appointment.

⁴ Rommel’s only *Times* April 1941 reference: “British in Massawa,” *The Times*, April 10, 1941, 4.

⁵ “Nazi Tanks Knocked Out in Libya,” *The Manchester Guardian*, May 26, 1941, 6 and “Army’s Part in Second Year,” *The Manchester Guardian*, September 3, 1941, 6.

⁶ See for example “Danger from the Desert!,” *Daily Mirror*, April 17, 1941, 7, “Huns Tripoli Trick Boast,” *Daily Mirror*, May 21, 1941, 3; T.E.A. Healy, “They’re Hot - They’re Dirty - But They’re UNDEFEATED!”, *Daily Mirror*, July 7, 1941, 2.

Boston Globe and the *Chicago Tribune* nondescriptly mentioned Rommel on average less than once per month; Axis successes were attributed to circumstance and equipment such as the Stuka dive bomber.⁷ *The Atlanta Constitution* only referenced him twice.⁸ The paucity of references can be taken as evidence that public awareness of Rommel's role in the 1941 fighting in the Western Desert was unexceptional, akin to him being a cog in the German military machine.

British newspapers ignored Rommel in their analyses of Allied military reverses and instead printed spin. Here was how *The Times* reported a British retreat in April:

A feeling of quiet confidence remains ... already [enemy] advance elements are believed to have been thinned out ... whereas our shortening of communications has brought about a substantial strengthening of the British forces.⁹

After the disappointment of "Battleaxe," which led to Wavell's dismissal, the *Daily Express* reported:

Verdict of the military experts tonight is ... "Reasonably satisfactory to us." Though we are steadily retiring to the positions we held before the attack, we have won some real advantages ... we have inflicted severe losses on the German and Italian mechanized forces and aircraft ... the extent to which we battered them is shown by the fact that not the slightest attempt was made to follow up our withdrawal.¹⁰

This was quite a different tone than Wavell's cable to the Prime Minister, which read:

"Regret to report the failure of Battleaxe."¹¹

⁷ See for instance "Many Troops Thought Lost on Axis Ships," *Boston Globe*, November 11, 1941, 12; "Germans Reach Egypt; Battle Around Sollum," *Chicago Tribune*, April 14, 1; "Stuka a German Hero Again in Big Desert Triumph," *Chicago Tribune*, June 21, 1941, 5.

⁸ "Berlin Terms Yugoslav War Closed Chapter," *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 13, 1941, 6; Paul Palmer, "Ahead of the Headlines," *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 13, 1941, 9.

⁹ "Fighting near Sollum," *The Times*, April 14, 1941, 4.

¹⁰ "Battle of Libya Dies Down," *Daily Express*, June 19, 1941, 1.

¹¹ General Wavell, Commander-in-Chief, Middle East to War Office, June 17, 1941. UK National Archives. ukwarcabinet.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/cab-66-17-8-0001.pdf, (accessed February 25, 2013). At no point does Wavell cite Rommel by name in his explanation for the British setback.

British and US newspapers tended to emphasize long-term Allied prospects, which were portrayed favorably compared to those of the Axis. In early Autumn 1941, British and US newspapers reported of the “specially satisfactory” British position in contrast to the Axis who suffered a “severe setback” and the “annihilation” of their convoys, which “means death to the Italians and the Germans in Libya.” *The Atlanta Constitution* even astonishingly mused about a possible British invasion of Italy, a logistical impossibility at that time.¹² Reporting that the British military forces were still in a superior position whatever the gains made by the Axis in North Africa was an unspectacular, albeit effective, means of disseminating unpleasant military developments. However dynamic the military events were in 1941, British and US newspaper coverage was rather mundane and thus the implication that the German general in the Western Desert was as well.

Out of the newspapers I have consulted, the only one to refer regularly to Rommel by name during this period was the British *Daily Express*. Its coverage of the German general was for the most part typical of the identified pattern: he was not afforded any military significance and referenced within optimistic messages such as, “General Rommel, the Nazi commander, is evidently much worried.”¹³ There was one exception, a May 1941 article written by war correspondent Morley Richards that identified him as a “gangster” and “Hitler’s thug organizer before he came to power.”¹⁴ “Erich Rommel” was, according to Richards, not from Germany’s military class but a former leader of the “S.S. Black Guard” infamous for his “notable list of murders and burnings ... the only man Hitler has any real

¹² Larry Allen, “Naval and Air Poundings Jolt Axis Efforts in Africa,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 29, 1941, 5; “Eighth Army in Libya,” *The Times*, November 17, 1941, 4; Alan Moorehead, “Britain Is Winning Libya Race,” *Daily Express*, November 13, 1941, 1; “Invasion of Italy Seen as Possible,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, November 20, 1941, 7.

¹³ Morley Richards, “Tobruk Does It Again,” *Daily Express*, April 21, 1941, 1.

¹⁴ Morley Richards, “Gangster Goes to War,” *Daily Express*, May 6, 1941, 2.

affection for.” Represented as a “gangster but not a soldier” and “entirely without human feelings,” Richards believed he was at a marked military disadvantage *vis-à-vis* the professional and experienced Wavell. Aside from the name being incorrect, the characterizations of Rommel as an SS leader and “thug organizer” were wrong (Rommel was not in the SS and did not personally meet Hitler until a formal military parade in 1934). What made this sudden specific denunciation of the German general curious is that neither Richards nor the *Daily Express* bothered following up on this characterization in later editions by referring to Rommel as “Hitler’s thug” or a “gangster general” – their representations of him afterward reverted back to the nondescript pattern of other Allied newspapers.

In all likelihood this was because Rommel was not perceived as militarily or politically significant in 1941 and Richards’s intent was to ensure his readers that the Commonwealth still held the military advantage. The article’s last paragraph makes the latter point explicitly: “Wavell, subtle soldier, wise in desert war, beloved by his men, ruthless to his enemy. Rommel, merciless, hated by those nearest him, a gangster but not a soldier – my money is on Wavell.” This was a timely message given that at that moment the Commonwealth garrison at Tobruk had recently thwarted several attempts to take it by Axis forces. Such a perspective links the “gangster general” article’s significance to the military circumstances of May 1941 and helps to explain why Richards and the *Daily Express* did not refer to “gangster” Rommel thereafter. The only other similar politically themed article I found was a December 1941 profile by journalist William Bayles in the *Picture Post*. It repeated many of the same tropes identified by Morley, as well as added various odd unsourced claims, such as Rommel had “the honour of sleeping in a cot stretched across the

entrance to Hitler's bedroom."¹⁵ This information was available but did not generate interest. At least not yet.

The origin and likely catalyst of the article was the Nazi Propaganda Ministry's April 1941 profile of Rommel in the Nazi flagship weekly *Das Reich*. It portrayed the German general as not merely a warrior, but "the soldierly manifestation of a revolutionary people." As described in the article, Rommel met Hitler while a student at Tübingen where he became one of the first SA leaders and from that point encountered "the social and emotional upheavals of our time" due in large part to the "inner enthusiasm that he received from the personal close experience with the man Adolf Hitler." This purportedly set Rommel apart; he was "no professional military figure like General Wavell," but a "political fighter and military writer ... belonging to this century" in the National Socialist mold.¹⁶ The timing and contents of the *Das Reich* article match up with Morley's "gangster" representation.

An interesting footnote to the *Das Reich* episode is that the profile aggravated the very man it had intended to spotlight. When Rommel got a copy of the article, he angrily scrawled "Nonsense!" in the margin and dispatched Alfred-Ingemar Berndt, an ambitious and well-connected National Socialist of whom Rommel had a high opinion, to relay that he strongly protested the distortion of his background. To which the unsympathetic editor of *Das Reich* replied the article could only aid his reputation and, "even were it not correct, it would nevertheless be good if it were." Rommel was not placated and eventually Goebbels agreed to put a stop to "vulgarity of the propaganda being produced about him."¹⁷ However,

¹⁵ William Bayles, "Rommel," *Picture Post*, December 6, 1941, 22-23.

¹⁶ "Generalleutnant Rommel," *Das Reich*, April 6, 1941, 1.

¹⁷ Fred Taylor, ed., *The Goebbels Diaries: 1939-1941* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1983), entry for June 7, 1941, 399.

the genie was out of the bottle. As biographer Daniel Allen Butler noted, “*Das Reich* complied, but grudgingly, and, in the time-honored tradition of newspapers everywhere, buried the retraction in an obscure section, on an inside page.”¹⁸ A few diligent journalists such as Curt Riess correctly identified *Das Reich* as fiction.¹⁹ But as we will see in future chapters, “Nazi gangster” portrayals would eventually become predominant.

As Richards’s portrayal can be traced back to German news, this offers an opportunity to further explore the means by which Allied journalists were able to acquire news – both German and domestic – and what limitations curbed their ability to transmit the information they did receive to the US and British publics. These factors are crucial as this study relies heavily upon newspaper reporting during the Second World War.

With regard to many aspects of the Second World War, German news was relatively easy to get – accuracy notwithstanding. The Germans themselves freely transmitted their version of daily military events – whether to gloat in successes or spin reverses – to international agencies such as the Associated Press; indeed the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* sometimes printed these official statements verbatim even after Germany declared war on the United States.²⁰ Neutral countries often shared rumors and photos they had acquired from German sources.²¹ It was also not unusual for high profile German and

¹⁸ Butler, *Field Marshal*, 239-240.

¹⁹ Curt Riess, *The Self Betrayed: Glory and Doom of the German Generals* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons: 1942), 258-259.

²⁰ See for instance “German,” *New York Times*, June 22, 1942, 2 and “British Admit Tobruk Falls to Axis,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 22, 1942, 1. In a more general vein, a belligerent’s mass circulated tabloids were no secret. Goebbels kept tabs on US and British war reporting in his diary.

²¹ For instance, a photograph of Rommel at his Western Desert Headquarters via Portugal can be found in “Rommel, Crafty Panzer General, Called ‘The Fox,’” *Chicago Tribune*, July 5, 1942, 5. A rumor of Rommel’s impending transfer to the Eastern Front via Turkey can be found in “Rommel Groomed to Head Attack,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 12, 1942, 2.

Japanese personalities to be featured in the mainstream Allied media. The US periodical *Time* often featured these men as cover stories.²²

Allied journalists proved adept at mining the news Germany did not want to leak out. They had a wide array of sources and some even had access to sources behind enemy lines. Deborah Lipstadt's study of the readily available accounts of the Nazi atrocities perpetrated against the Jews in the US press during the war is one well-documented example.²³ Richards himself claimed in 1943 that he had "reports from Berlin sources" that claimed Rommel knew his position at El Alamein was tenuous despite the German marshal's public pronouncements to the contrary.²⁴ Recent German émigrés eager to disavow National Socialism were also potential sources of information.²⁵

Allied journalists were able to draw out Rommel-related rumors and reports from behind enemy lines. Germany tried to hide the news that the field marshal had been severely wounded in an air attack on July 17, 1944, yet within days there were rumors on the Allied side that Rommel had been knocked out of action by Allied ground attack aircraft. Barely two weeks later, Germany felt compelled to admit as much.²⁶ At Rommel's funeral in October 1944, Hitler staged an elaborate funeral representing Rommel as a fallen National

²² To take a contemporary sample of one year, from March 1941-March 1942, the following German and Japanese personalities were featured on the cover of *Time*: German Field Marshal Wilhelm List, Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs Yōsuke Matsuoka, German Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, Japanese ambassador Kichisaburō Nomura, Japanese Prime Minister Hideki Tōjō, German Field Marshal Fedor von Bock, Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, German Admiral Karl Dönitz, German Governor Reinhard Heydrich, Japanese General Tomoyuki Yamashita.

²³ One need not agree with Lipstadt's overall conclusions to recognize that her analysis of the information that reached the US public is compelling. Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust, 1933-1945* (New York: Free Press, 1986).

²⁴ Morley Richards, "If Rommel Were an Englishman..." *Daily Express*, January 15, 1943, 2. The contents of the article were fairly accurate.

²⁵ As will be seen in Chapter Three, many of the negative and politicized portrayals of Rommel that emerged after the summer of 1942 originated from German émigrés.

²⁶ "Rommel Reported Wounded," *New York Times*, July 20, 1944, 3; "Rommel Reported Wounded at Front," *New York Times*, July 29, 1944, 5; "Germans Admit Rommel Was Wounded," *New York Times*, August 3, 1944, 3.

Socialist war hero to cover up the German marshal's presumed involvement in the failed *Attentat* of July 20, 1944. Yet by spring of 1945, the BBC was broadcasting messages into Germany stating that Rommel was a leading member of the conspiracy.²⁷ Allied newspapers even reported jokes in occupied Denmark made about Rommel's habit of retreating from British general Bernard Montgomery.²⁸

In the main, information about Rommel was particularly easy to acquire because Goebbels was especially keen to showcase him in the German media, to which foreign journalists had ready access. The Nazi Propaganda Minister was fascinated with Rommel (the feeling was mutual) and his diaries are replete with praise such as "a magnificent officer," "an exemplary personality," and a "real soldier."²⁹ At one international news conference at the Berlin Sportpalast in September 1942, which Goebbels felt was important to raise German morale, he invited Rommel to speak in front of the newsreels and an assemblage of foreign journalists (as well as inviting him to stay with his family). The Propaganda Minister admired how his military protégé handled the question and answer session and the German press duly played up the spectacle.³⁰ Goebbels continued seeing the best in his favorite general even after the Allies had defeated him. One month after the British victory at El Alamein, Goebbels marveled in his diary how Rommel conducted himself in front of an audience:

Without making any gesture he talked in a classic style, practically without correcting himself a single time. What he said and the way he said it, the play

²⁷ "Rommel Role Seen in Anti-Hitler Plot," *New York Times*, March 11, 1945, 29; "Rommel in Hitler Plot, BBC Reports," *The Baltimore Sun*, March 11, 1945, 3; "Rommel Called Leader of the Plot," *Chicago Tribune*, March 11, 1945, 4.

²⁸ "Danes Gaze at Rommel; Wait to See Montgomery," *New York Times*, March 10, 1944, 8.

²⁹ Taylor, *The Goebbels Diaries*, entry for March 21, 1941, 275; Louis P. Lochner, ed., *The Goebbels Diaries: 1942-1943* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1948), entry for January 24, 1942, 41 and entry for January 25, 1942, 46.

³⁰ Reuth, *End of a Legend*, 150-152.

of his features and his whole appearance – all give evidence of the greatness of an outstanding personality.³¹

In May 1943, days before the imminent surrender of Axis forces in North Africa, Goebbels wrote of a visit by Rommel (who had been dismissed two months earlier):

We sat together until midnight. These were beautiful and interesting hours for me. If all our marshals were cut out of the same cloth as Rommel we would need to worry no longer about our military leadership. Unfortunately, however, Rommel is not the rule, but the exception to the rule.³²

German historian Ralf Georg Reuth's contention that the *Das Reich* article represented a National Socialist CV for foreign inquiries is believable given these circumstances.

In a general sense, news flowed relatively easily between Germany and the Western Allies. It is reasonably certain that Goebbels's *Das Reich* profile and the fact that *Erwin* (as opposed to *Erich*) Rommel commanded the *Afrikakorps* were news items that were readily available for Allied journalists. If Allied reporting on Rommel was sparse and uneven during 1941, this was due to a lack of interest rather than a lack of information.

Factors on the domestic front, specifically how correspondents and editors filtered the information they did receive, were more significant in shaping the portrayals of Rommel (and more generally the war) than the capacity for the Allied media to acquire this information. The better Allied correspondents were relatively well connected and informed with respect to domestic war related news. Hanson W. Baldwin, who wrote for the *New York Times* and would win a Pulitzer Prize in 1942 for his coverage of the Guadalcanal campaign, was respected enough in military circles to be invited as a member of the prestigious Council on Foreign Relations in 1939 and of the Armaments Group in 1940. He guarded the anonymity

³¹ Lochner, *The Goebbels Diaries*, entry for December 16, 1942, 245.

³² Lochner, *The Goebbels Diaries*, entry for May 11, 1943, 372.

of his extensive sources to such a degree that his biographer Robert B. Davies was unable to determine the full extent of his contacts, but they included those who made policy such as Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal and high-ranking officers such as Henry H. Arnold, Commanding General of the US Army Air Force.³³ Baldwin was well informed and very good at his craft.

The same could be echoed for Alan Moorehead, an Australian whose *Daily Express* dispatches from the North African campaign earned him international renown. Like Baldwin who visited battlefronts, Moorehead drove countless hours across the Western Desert to multiple Eighth Army headquarters and units that had just seen combat. Although Moorehead admitted in his memoir that he feared going on these ventures as they placed his life in danger (on one occasion the British unit he was with was ambushed by Italians), he went anyway because it was the only way to secure trusted contacts, win the confidence of the men he was writing about, and obtain the information needed to write the best story.³⁴ Moorehead's dedication to his craft and astute observations garnered him the trust of notable sources. For instance, his wife was appointed as the personal secretary to the British commander in the Western Desert, General Claude Auchinleck.³⁵ It ought to be stressed that Baldwin and Moorehead represented the best. The less established, less talented, or the less

³³ Baldwin kept no notebook and his biographer noted "decades later, when asked to name some of his sources, he refused, saying that either he had forgotten their names, or that, if they were still alive, he would need their permission." See Robert B. Davies, *Baldwin of the Times: Hanson W. Baldwin, A Military Journalist's Life, 1903-1991* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2011), 82.

³⁴ Correspondents were not officially embedded in the manner modern US correspondents are in the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, it was recognized they would spend enough time with front-line units that they were issued specific uniforms and even gas masks. Many of the better correspondents went beyond what was officially allowed under international protocol in their desire to get the best story first.

³⁵ Tom Pocock, *Alan Moorehead* (London: The Bodley Head, 1990), 114-115. Other journalists grumbled she passed on valuable nuggets. Moorehead denied he was given specific information that would have given him a privileged position, but his biographer Tom Pocock did admit that Moorehead's wife passed on general "lines of enquiry."

vigorous who relied on the tight-lipped pronouncements of official Allied military agencies were bound to leave their readers ill-informed.³⁶

Acquiring relevant information proved less formidable than circulating it to the US and British publics. There were tangible obstacles even the best correspondents had to contend with. Censors were the most obvious. Baldwin attended meetings at the Pentagon and had access to sensitive information he could not disseminate.³⁷ Even some of the military's shortcomings that were public knowledge were off limits. It was understood by politicians, soldiers, and correspondents that many of the British tanks fighting in the Western Desert were inadequately armed, yet Moorehead was forbidden from openly criticizing them. It was only through the creativity of quoting a Scottish sergeant who said, "We have got to get a six-pounder gun like the Germans," that he was able to circumvent the censor and make his point.³⁸ There were also palpable patriotic pressures that weighed on correspondents, mainly from their audience. Baldwin valued what he deemed was an objective perspective in his columns and tended to be more forthright in pointing out the tangible obstacles to victory. He nevertheless received enough mail accusing him of being pro-Nazi and a stooge of Goebbels's that left him to conclude that "many Americans believe only what they want to believe."³⁹

Hanson's point is worth emphasizing. Newspaper editors had to consider the expectations and desires of their subscribers as much as censors. Moreover, journalists had their own prejudices, partialities, and predilections. Many US journalists freely used

³⁶ Consider that even in the decisive US naval victory over the Japanese at Midway, the US Navy did not reveal specifics such as the sinking of the carrier *Yorktown* for over three months. See "Big Warship Hit by Planes, Sent Down by Submarine," *New York Times*, September 16, 1942, 1.

³⁷ Davies, *Baldwin of the Times*.

³⁸ Pocock, *Alan Moorehead*, 110.

³⁹ Davies, *Baldwin of the Times*, 116.

stereotypes that identified “the entire German nation with a fanatical, arrogant, treacherous ‘Nazi type.’”⁴⁰ Patriotic sentiments also induced the better correspondents not to print potentially damaging truths of which they were cognizant.⁴¹ These domestic pressures typically meant much of the reporting and many editorials were overly optimistic, something best expressed by Winston Churchill when he addressed the “rosy character” of British reporting to the House of Commons after the shocking fall of Tobruk in July 1942:

[War correspondents] have been allowed to roam all over the battlefield, taking their chance of getting killed, and sending home their very full messages whenever they can reach a telegraph office ... These war correspondents, moving about amid the troops and sharing their perils, have also shared their hopes and have been inspired by their buoyant spirit. They have sympathised with the fighting men whose deeds they have been recording, and they have, no doubt, been extremely anxious not to write anything which would spread discouragement or add to their burdens.⁴²

Churchill’s point about not wanting to spread discouragement is a solid explanation for the spin and the lack of ink devoted to Rommel during the British military reverses in 1941.

These domestic filters were the primary reason Goebbels’s influence on Allied perceptions of Rommel was limited. Given the dictates of propaganda, whatever accolades the German wartime media foisted upon its war heroes – and in Rommel’s case there were many, beginning as early as the summer of 1940 with his command of the 7th Panzer division during the French campaign⁴³ – few reached the US and British publics. The information that did appear in the Allied public sphere typically devalued Rommel’s alleged military

⁴⁰ Ferdinand A. Hermens, “The Danger of Stereotypes in Viewing Germany,” in *Public Opinion Quarterly* 9, no. 4 (Winter 1945-1946): 418-427.

⁴¹ Alan Moorehead witnessed firsthand the crisis and panic within the British leadership during at a critical point during the Crusader offensive. It was not until two years later, after the African campaign was won, did he reveal the reality that the British were running away in a “contagion of bewilderment and fear and ignorance.” See Pocock, *Alan Moorehead*, 109.

⁴² “Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons Official Report July 2, 1942,” *ibiblio*, <http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/1942/420702a.html>, (accessed March 2, 2013).

⁴³ Reuth, *End of a Legend*, 121-161.

genius and conformed to the general wartime anti-German climate. Richards's "gangster general" article epitomized this filtration process: the German general was characterized as a Nazi braggart whose gangster tactics only worked against collapsing French resistance and had already failed against the professional Wavell.

The Allied press first began to consistently name the Axis commander in the Western Desert when the Commonwealth opened its "Operation Crusader" offensive on November 18, 1941. Although this was a substantive difference as the enemy commander was now personalized, it is difficult to pin down a reason for this change. Allied commentators had little to say about Rommel other than identify him as the Axis commander; on the whole, they did not comment on his politics or his military acumen or his personality. The principal takeaway from Allied reporting during "Crusader" was not so much about Rommel, rather how correspondents were keen on celebrating and exaggerating British military accomplishments. In doing so, they circulated overly optimistic military assessments and engendered unrealistic expectations, which no doubt made Rommel seem that much more brilliant when he demolished Allied pronouncements of victory.

If inaccuracies are to be expected during an ongoing and fluid major military campaign, the magnitude of the misleading impression that Commonwealth forces were constantly on the attack and trouncing their German opponents was not. After just three days of battle – when the Axis forces were arguably in a superior position – the *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed "British Trap Entire Nazi Army in Libya."⁴⁴ The same day, the *Daily Mirror*

⁴⁴ "British Trap Entire Nazi Army in Libya," *Los Angeles Times*, November 22, 1941, 1.

pronounced: “Huns Lose Half Tank Force in Libya Trap.”⁴⁵ Two days later, the *Daily Express* asserted, “We have broken Rommel’s Power” and “600 panzers smashed and the rest trapped.”⁴⁶ When this “trap” failed to materialize and the fighting was still very much in the balance, *The Times* incorrectly printed that the Eighth Army was “vigorously prosecuting their chief task of destroying the enemy’s armored forces” and relegated an Axis counterattack to “a desperate gamble ... on the part of von Rommel” that failed.⁴⁷ In December when Axis forces began a general withdrawal, British and US headlines left little doubt the Axis position was untenable and its forces nearly wiped out: “Trapped Nazis Battle to Escape Annihilation,” “Routed Nazi Units Flee Past Bengazi,” “Rommel’s Army Cut Off From Tripoli,” “Observers See No Escape for Rommel’s Army,” and “Rommel’s Defeat: Remnants in Full Flight.”⁴⁸ In late December, correspondent Tom Wintringham of the *Picture Post* presciently warned that despite the lofty headlines proclaiming victory, there was still work to be done.⁴⁹ His caution was not heeded.

Indeed, by the beginning of 1942, readers from New York to London and in neutral Dublin were unequivocally informed that “Crusader” was a resounding strategic success.

⁴⁵ “Huns Lose Half Tank Force in Libya Trap,” *Daily Mirror*, November 22, 1941, 1. Interestingly an editor from the same paper mused a few weeks later that because the Axis still possessed significant armored forces that the report was “airy-fairy optimism.” See “The Optimist in Cairo,” *Daily Mirror*, December 4, 1941, 3.

⁴⁶ Morley Richards, “We Have Broken Rommel’s Power,” *Daily Express*, November 24, 1941, 1; “600 Panzers Smashed and Rest Trapped,” *Daily Express*, 24 November 1941, 1.

⁴⁷ “British Successes in Libyan Battle,” *The Times*, November 28, 1941, 4. See also “15,000 Prisoners,” *Daily Express*, November 24, 1942, 1; “German Glider Trains Speed Arms to Libya,” *The Baltimore Sun*, November 24, 1941, 1; Edward Kennedy, “Nazis Caught Unprepared for Libyan Assault,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, November 25, 1941, 6.

⁴⁸ “Trapped Nazis Battle to Escape Annihilation,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 29, 1941, 7; Joseph M. Levy, “Routed Nazi Units Flee Past Bengazi,” *New York Times*, December 22, 1941, 9; “Rommel’s Army Cut Off from Tripoli,” *Washington Post*, December 24, 1941, 3; “Rommel’s Defeat,” *The Manchester Guardian*, December 19, 1941, 5; “British Shatter Center of Axis Forces in Libya,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 17, 1941, 15; “Rommel’s Forces in Full Retreat,” *The Times*, December 19, 1941, 4; “British Chase Axis Forces in Rout Almost to Bengasi,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 21, 1941, 5; “Rommel Flees Beaten and Smashed,” *Daily Express*, December 19, 1941, 1; “Benghazi Mopping Up Goes On,” *Daily Mirror*, December 29, 1941, 5.

⁴⁹ Tom Wintringham, “What Has Happened in Libya,” *Picture Post*, December 20, 1941, 22.

Even the *New York Times*, which sometimes exercised more caution in its editorials, was all but declaring the Africa campaign over. Columnist Joseph M. Levy alleged, “It is highly unlikely [the Germans] will ever again threaten Egypt through the Western Desert, expert strategists here insist.” Levy termed German ambitions as “hopeless” since the Allies “have a huge, well-equipped army and air force” that made the potential German conquest of any African coastline “worse than useless.”⁵⁰ The *Irish Times*, a paper that was pro-Allied but was not subject to the same domestic pressures as its British counterparts, proclaimed it “fairly obvious” that “unless some *deus ex machina* appears at the last moment, a British victory in Libya seems to be as certain as anything can be in these strange times.”⁵¹

These highly exaggerated analyses most likely stemmed from the British Middle East Command, which came to believe by January that the Axis position was untenable.⁵² The reality was quite different. Commonwealth forces had won an indisputable tactical victory as the Axis suffered twice as many casualties and had lost all the ground it had captured the previous spring. However, the ability of Axis forces to retreat in good order combined with the arrival of significant reinforcements soon tipped the balance of military power.

One other theme evident in British commentary on Rommel was the pride exhibited in British soldiers. This is quite different from the typical assumption held by postwar commentators that the British highlighted Rommel’s genius to dramatize the scope of their victories. If anything, his generalship was typically devalued. For instance, *The Manchester Guardian* implied Rommel could not duplicate Polish Marshal Józef Piłsudski’s successful plan that defended Warsaw against the Red Army in 1920. “Piłsudski knew how to time his

⁵⁰ Joseph M. Levy, “Nazi Tunisia Move Viewed as Futile,” *New York Times*, January 11, 1942, 19.

⁵¹ “What Now?,” *Irish Times*, December 23, 1941, 4.

⁵² See Auchinleck’s assessment of Axis forces on January 12, 1942 in Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War: The Hinge of Fate* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1950), 23-24.

counter-push ... Not much seems left to General Rommel except a fight to the end ... before his final defeat.”⁵³ More typically British papers extolled the virtues of the British way of war. *The Times* asserted how the battle proved “what we have all known ... man for man and machine for machine the British are more than a match for Germans.”⁵⁴ A *Manchester Guardian* editorial dismissed the Germans’ “racial qualities and military traditions” and boasted: “Given good equipment and anything like equality in numbers British troops match the Germans. Deprived of this material the Germans are definitely no match for our men, who can and still do use the bayonet arm.”⁵⁵ The gratification the editorial exhibited in the skill British troops had with bayonets – hand to hand combat weapons demanding physical prowess in a war dominated by machines – illustrates a warrior-masculine motif that characterized many congratulatory military portrayals during the Second World War. British correspondents praised their troops for being “tough-guys,” “charging with bayonets,” and capturing objectives with “cold steel,” anachronistic descriptions that evoke romanticized images of seasoned warriors who conquer by virtue of their skill with melee weaponry.⁵⁶ In contrast, the Germans were only as good as their *machines* of war, no match for British *men*. Such a perspective adopted by the British press is consistent with the tendency of belligerents to depersonalize the virtues of enemy combatants and openly avow them as inferior warriors.⁵⁷

⁵³ “Rommel’s Push Begun Too Late,” *The Manchester Guardian*, November 29, 1941, 7. See also the mocking in “Rommel’s Retreat Medal,” *Daily Mirror*, January 22, 1941, 5

⁵⁴ “Battle of Tanks Still Raging in Libya,” *The Times*, November 25, 1941, 4.

⁵⁵ “Lessons from Libya,” *The Manchester Guardian*, January 20, 1942, 6.

⁵⁶ “Commandos Call on Rommel -- He Was Out,” *Daily Mirror*, December 31, 1941, 1; “Cold Steel Won Battle of Sollum,” *Daily Mirror*, January, 14, 1942, 5; William Barkley, “Cried Lord Beaverbrook to the Workers of the Clyde,” *Daily Express*, December 1, 1941, 2.

⁵⁷ For example John W. Dower’s excellent study of US attitudes toward Japan during the Second World War in *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986). On a more general level, Lawrence H. Keeley, *War Before Civilization: The Myth of the Peaceful Savage* (Oxford: Oxford

Throughout 1941, neither in victory nor defeat did Allied commentators find the German general commanding the *Afrikakorps* particularly interesting. That he remained relatively inconspicuous suggests the origins behind his fame are more complicated than the generally assumed notions of Goebbels's influence or that British publicists were simply reacting to military events. Rather, a compelling hypothesis can be made that it was largely circumstance that thrust Rommel into the Allied spotlight. He was, since the Allied loss of Crete in early June, the only German commander fighting British troops. Not until the Allied "Torch" offensive in November 1942 and the subsequent Tunisia campaign did British and US ground forces engage a German force under the command of someone other than Rommel. This does not explain how and why his reputation unfolded, but it does help to illuminate why Allied commentators began to pay more attention to him and why he became readily identifiable in Britain and to a lesser degree the United States. In any event, by the end of 1941 readers of British and US newspapers would have known Rommel's name, although portrayals of him at that time remained relatively neutral.

A Great General: January 1942 – May 1942

The best date to pin down when Allied representations of Erwin Rommel fundamentally changed was January 21, 1942 when Rommel launched a counterattack that quickly erased much of what the Commonwealth had won during "Crusader." If this came as a surprise to the Italian and German High Commands, neither of whom Rommel had informed in advance, the sudden resurrection of Axis military power was a shock to the Allies who had been reporting his impending annihilation for the previous two months. British commander Auchinleck was almost at a loss for words when he reported to Churchill:

University Press, 1996) offers a perceptive insight on how civilized soldiers have universally deprecated technologically less sophisticated warriors who did not fight "fair" and would be routed in a standup battle.

“it must be admitted that [the] enemy has succeeded beyond his expectations and mine, and that his tactics have been skillful and bold ... Rommel has taken considerable risks ... So far he is justified by results.”⁵⁸ When Axis forces were primed to capture the port of Benghazi one week later, the fourth time in the past year it would change sides, both Hitler and Churchill found occasion to cite Rommel specifically in very public spectacles. On January 30, 1942 at a mass rally arranged by Goebbels at the Berlin Sportpalast, Hitler explicitly named Rommel as an example of German resolution in the face of a numerically superior enemy.⁵⁹ There is little question that Hitler was using Rommel’s victory as a diversionary tactic to veil the reality that on the Eastern front, the Red Army had successfully defended Moscow and had been pushing the Germans back for nearly two months.⁶⁰ As for Churchill, he proclaimed in the House of Commons, “We have a very daring and skillful opponent against us and, may I say across the havoc of war, a great general.”⁶¹ Was Churchill, like Hitler, attaching a political significance to Rommel? As no other German or enemy commander received such specific public praise and Churchill’s quote would be commonly invoked in postwar Rommel commentary, it deserves closer investigation.

Churchill’s praise is typically cited as evidence that the Allies, specifically the British, were inflating Rommel’s reputation to justify British military misfortunes in North Africa.⁶² The fault with this logic, aside from the problematic notion that Churchill is

⁵⁸ Taken from Churchill, *Hinge of Fate*, 31.

⁵⁹ Max Domarus, *Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, vol. 4 (Wauconda, Ill: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2004), 2577.

⁶⁰ Reuth, *End of a Legend*, 145-152.

⁶¹ “House of Commons,” *The Times*, January 28, 1942, 8.

⁶² Reuth, *End of a Legend*, 141-142; James R. Robinson, “The Rommel Myth,” *Military Review* 77 (Sep/Oct 1997): 81-89. The following internet discussion thread on Rommel’s inflated reputation is a useful overview of many of the typical arguments (as well as the passions which debaters bring to them) and also contains several references to Churchill praising Rommel: “Rommel - the most overrated general since Alexander the Great,” *Axis History Forum*, <http://forum.axishistory.com/viewtopic.php?f=76&t=113911&start=240>, (accessed May 6, 2012).

equivalent to “the British,” is that the quote about Rommel in the House of Commons is cited only to highlight Britain’s military defeats, rather than its historical context of one sentence in a 10,000 word speech in which a poised Churchill, among other achievements, called attention to the destruction of two-thirds of Rommel’s forces during “Crusader.” If the Prime Minister admitted Cyrenaica still had to be defended, he reminded the House that the Axis had suffered far heavier losses than the Commonwealth in an “episode of war most glorious” to the troops who took part in it. Churchill stressed victories rather than concocted excuses for defeats. He would do so again six months later in July when he called the “Crusader” campaign a “highly creditable and highly profitable transaction.”⁶³ The great general quote is so often used in the erroneous context of British defeatism that the Erwin Rommel *Wikipedia* page had for years and through numerous revisions incorrectly attributed the remark to the British surrender at Tobruk in June 1942 – a far more significant and humiliating defeat when Churchill faced a second vote of no confidence – instead of January 1942 after the Commonwealth had pushed Axis forces backwards in a hard fought two month campaign.⁶⁴

More to the point, Churchill emphasized successes and exuded confidence in the developing military situation that was now in flux. He declared that the fighting “tested our

⁶³ “Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons Official Report July 2, 1942,” *ibiblio*, <http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/1942/420702a.html>, (accessed May 6, 2012).

⁶⁴ “Erwin Rommel,” *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erwin_Rommel, (accessed October 3, 2012). Under the heading of “Quotations about Rommel,” *Wikipedia* states: “The British Parliament considered a censure vote against Winston Churchill following the surrender at Tobruk. The vote failed, but in the course of the debate, Churchill stated: We have a daring and skillful opponent against us, and, may I say across the havoc of war, a great general.” The phrase “following the surrender at Tobruk” was added on 11 November 2005 from a previous version of the page’s history to replace “for his failure to defeat Rommel.” On 27 August 2009, a contributor linked a citation to the quotation: Barton Biggs, *Wealth, War and Wisdom* (John Wiley & Sons: Hoboken, N.J., 2008). The Erwin Rommel *Wikipedia* page had been edited many times by many different people. That such an attribution has not only persisted for so long but also has been made to specifically reference Tobruk and received a citation to support it illustrates how strongly Churchill’s remark is incorrectly attributed with a British military disaster and an alleged process in which the British overhyped Rommel’s generalship to justify embarrassing defeats.

manhood” and boasted that “not only our men can die for King and country – everyone knew that – but that they can kill. (Cheers).” He then mocked German pronouncements that they would be in Suez and asserted that the Commonwealth “hurled [the Germans] backward, inflicting upon them far heavier losses and damage than we have suffered ourselves” (which was indeed accurate). Churchill was poised; he exhorted, “We are going to win.”⁶⁵ This was precisely how the *Irish Times* interpreted his speech. Churchill projected such conviction and certainty that the Irish daily was highly impressed and called his speech “a brilliant *tour de force*” which “ran a *leit-motif* of ultimate confidence.”⁶⁶ Historian and Churchill biographer Martin Gilbert investigated the diary entries of MPs at the debate, which noted that Churchill held “the vast audience enthralled” and “one can actually feel the wind of opposition dropping sentence by sentence.”⁶⁷ Moreover, I find it significant that it is Rommel biographers who emphasize the significance of “great general” remark, whereas Churchill biographers do not attribute much meaning to it. In fact, Gilbert’s eight volume biography does not even mention the remark.⁶⁸ Rommel authors are reading too much into it. British historian Andrew Roberts is probably correct in asserting that Churchill, a man renowned for his rhetoric and prone to magniloquent boasts, uttered the remark because he had a penchant for admiring resolute enemies and had no ulterior motivations.⁶⁹ Churchill’s

⁶⁵ “House of Commons,” *The Times*, January 28, 1942, 8.

⁶⁶ “Mr. Churchill’s Apologia,” *Irish Times*, January 28, 1942, 4. Note: although the term *apologia* can imply excuse making, the contents of the article explicitly note that Churchill made no excuses and sought no scapegoats. The author was highly impressed with the British Prime Minister, noting he “is regarded as the outstanding personality in the world to-day.” The paper meant for the term to be used in its literal sense, that is a formal defense of one’s conduct.

⁶⁷ Martin Gilbert, *Road to Victory*, vol. 7 of *Winston S. Churchill* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 50-51.

⁶⁸ Gilbert, *Road to Victory* covers the period of the speech.

⁶⁹ Andrew Roberts, *Churchill: Walking with Destiny* (New York: Viking, 2018), 138, 711. British historian David Reynolds also notes that Rommel exemplified what Churchill prized in a commander, an aggressive spirit and indifference to logistics. Churchill, a disciple of the Thomas Carlyle philosophy that victory and defeat revolve around great leaders, saw combat romantically and as a test of manhood.

remark was not defeatist in nature and more accurately categorized as an interesting footnote than something historically significant.

What is decisive and ultimately most important regarding Churchill's "great general" quote was that his example was *not* followed by Allied media organs. There is little evidence the remark caused any commotion in British public discourse. Churchill claimed in his postwar memoirs that the remark "passed off quite well" and it is true that it elicited a "hear, hear."⁷⁰ However, Churchill wrote his memoirs to establish his version of history,⁷¹ and Roberts notes he was criticized for his tribute to Rommel.⁷² What probably happened is that Churchill had heard from both people who agreed with him and those who were offended, and that these conversations occurred in private quarters as the British media did not seem interested in debating the (de)merits of the encomium at this time. Even the *Daily Mirror*, which was highly critical of the British government throughout the war, made numerous complaints about Churchill's speech but was silent about the "great general" comment.⁷³ That the Allied press ignored Rommel's alleged greatness was a sensible decision and is consistent with the "rosy character" tendency that characterized war reporting so as not to sow discouragement amongst fighting troops. However retrospectively logical it might appear that the British Prime Minister was attributing the cause of Allied military reverses to Rommel, this was neither how Churchill represented the military situation to the House of Commons nor how the Allied press portrayed it afterward. Nor would Churchill publicly

⁷⁰ "House of Commons," *The Times*, January 28, 1942, 8.

⁷¹ David Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (New York: Random House, 2005).

⁷² Roberts, 711.

⁷³ "The Great 'But,'" *Daily Mirror*, January 30, 1942, 3.

refer to Rommel as “great” again until publishing his war memoirs in 1950.⁷⁴ The “great general” remark did not enter public narratives about Rommel in Great Britain or the United States until *after* the hagiographic Rommel literature of the early 1950s, when commentators imputed meaning into Churchill’s quote and construed it as evidence that Rommel was a brilliant general or that the British had overhyped his reputation.

Allied reporting continued along the predictable track of exaggerating Commonwealth successes and minimizing the Axis counterattack despite the shifting military fortunes in Cyrenaica. The day after Churchill called Rommel a great general and reported the current battle as unresolved, two headlines from *The Times* read: “Rommel Checked by the R.A.F. [Royal Air Force]” and “Axis Thrust in Libya Checked: Smashing Air Attacks on Rommel’s Forces, Exaggerated Enemy Claims Disproved.”⁷⁵ Or consider the reporting of the US paper of record, the *New York Times*. The day before Benghazi was retaken by the Germans, Levy, who had previously categorized the German position as “hopeless,” wrote, “the initial German thrust has spent its force” and the RAF was “taking a heavy toll” on Rommel’s tanks.⁷⁶ Two days later Levy dismissed Benghazi as a “little seaport” and a “worthless position” taken only for “the use of German and Italian propaganda.” Levy was unimpressed with Rommel; he called the German general “lucky” and the outcome as an “upset” that

⁷⁴ Churchill, *Hinge of Fate*, 67. Churchill would remark in a 1948 note to former Vice-Chief of the Imperial Staff Sir Henry Pownall that “I consider Rommel a very great commander.” Churchill did believe Rommel was great, yet resisted repeating his utterance during the war. Reynolds, *In Command of History*, 301.

⁷⁵ “Rommel Checked by the R.A.F.,” *The Times*, January 29, 1942, 3 and “Axis Thrust in Libya Checked,” *The Times*, January 29, 1942, 4.

⁷⁶ Joseph M. Levy, “Germans’ Libyan Drive Checked as R.A.F. Extracts Increasing Toll,” *New York Times*, January 29, 1942, 1. See also “Rommel’s Advance,” *The Manchester Guardian*, January 24, 1942, 7 and Ronald Monson, “Rommel Halted by Air Blitz,” *Daily Express*, January 28, 1942. The *Daily Mirror*, perhaps motivated by its critical stance of Churchill’s government, was one of the few media outlets that recognized the Axis possessed the initiative. See “German Desert Thrust Threat to Our Petrol,” *Daily Mirror*, January 27, 1942, 5 and “Cassandra,” *Daily Mirror*, January 28, 1942, 2.

succeeded only “because of a series of circumstances that worked in favor of the Axis forces.”⁷⁷ Allied commentators printed a litany of excuses to explain the sudden restoration of the Axis forces in Africa. British equipment, lauded just a month earlier in victory, all of a sudden was found wanting: “Rommel has been greatly assisted throughout the campaign ... by his Mark IV tanks. These heavy, well-armoured monsters, with their 75 mm guns, have proved a continual thorn in our side.”⁷⁸ The Axis forces were aided by their “greatly superior strength” and “superior guns” whereas the British were plagued by a “shortage of spare parts.” Vichy France was accused of providing supplies for Germany, and it was reported that Rommel’s drive “may be directly traced to aid he had received from Vichy.”⁷⁹ Even the desert weather was reported to have conspired against the Commonwealth: “The worst weather conditions in history have hampered the movement of vehicles and favored the enemy.”⁸⁰ Newspapers also made liberal use of specious headers noting minor Allied successes such as “Axis columns harassed,” “Smashing Air Attacks on Rommel’s Forces,” “R.A.F. Delivers Fierce Blows,” and “Germans Captured” to conceal the military reverses.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Joseph M. Levy, “Upset in Libya Shows Woes of a Desert War,” *New York Times*, February 1, 1942, E4.

⁷⁸ “Grim Fight in Desert,” *The Times*, February 4, 1942, 5.

⁷⁹ “Vichy Supplies Go to Rommel,” *Daily Mirror*, February 7, 1942, 1; Morley Richards, “Vichy Help Backs Rommel Advance,” *Daily Express*, February 7, 1941, 1; Edwin L. James, “Again Berlin and Vichy Nearer Collaboration,” *New York Times*, February 8, 1942, E3.

⁸⁰ “How Benghazi Fell,” *The Times*, January 31, 1942, 4; “Rommel’s Halt in Libya,” *The Times*, February 18, 1942, 3; “Supplies to Libya,” *The Times*, February 5, 1942, 5; “The Western Desert,” *The Manchester Guardian*, February 5, 1942, 4; “Rommel’s Return,” *The Manchester Guardian*, January 28, 1942, 4; “Superior Guns of Germans Won Tank Battle in Libya,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 18, 1942, 1; Sam Brewer, “British Rallying African Forces to Halt Rommel,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 31, 1942, 7; “Storms Slow British in Libya,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 21, 1942, 8; “Mud, Sandstorm Cloak Nazi Retreat from Agedabia,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, January 8, 1942, 3. Eventually the perceptive Alan Moorehead offered a more sober (and accurate) explanation based on supply difficulties in “Ding-Dong Battle of the Year,” *Daily Express*, February 10, 1942, 2.

⁸¹ “Benghazi Again in Danger,” *The Times*, January 28, 1942, 4; “Axis Thrust in Libya Checked,” *The Times*, January 29, 1942, 4; “Benghazi Retaken, the Axis Declares,” *New York Times*, January 30, 1942, 1; “Rommel’s Advance,” *The Manchester Guardian*, January 24, 1942, 7; Sam Brewer, “British Rallying African Forces to Halt Rommel,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 31, 1942, 7; “Germans Drive on into Libya,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 3, 1942, 4.

In the wake of these Allied setbacks in January 1942, newspapers were not trying to overhype Rommel's military reputation.

Many Allied civilians were ill-informed about the battles waged in the Western Desert.⁸² There were, to be sure, instances of accurate reporting and some astute correspondents. Hanson W. Baldwin correctly assessed in February 1942:

Marshal Rommel, again showing himself one of the ablest armored force commanders of the war, struck at precisely the right time ... As a result the British have again lost most of Cyrenaica even more rapidly than they had twice conquered it, and the threat to the Suez and the Eastern Mediterranean is again very real.⁸³

The perceptive Alan Moorehead presciently warned in January 1942 that the *Afrikakorps* was a well-trained force that was not easily defeated: "But look at the way the Germans fall back. They mix their retreats with many sudden sharp counter-attacks upon the British vanguard ... That talk about once you get the Germans on the run they're beaten is dangerous nonsense."⁸⁴ Yet, as noted before, these correspondents represented the best as opposed to what was characteristic of even the more renowned Allied papers. From November 19, 1941 until April 15, 1942 (the entire period of the "Crusader" operation and its aftermath), Levy, whose war reporting was overly bullish on Allied military prospects, wrote thirty-four articles in which Rommel's name appears for the *New York Times*, whereas Baldwin wrote

⁸² While beyond the scope of this project, the war related articles I have come across in this study lead me to believe the wildly optimistic reporting of the Allies characterized the entire war. This was not limited to the African campaign or Rommel. For instance consider the *Los Angeles Times* reporting on the Pacific theater in January 1942 that is so divorced from reality it is difficult to determine what actual historical events the paper was reporting on: Polyzoides, "War Lords of Japan Underrate Opponents," *Los Angeles Times*, January 17, 1942, 2 and Polyzoides, "Japanese Given More Than They Bargained For," *Los Angeles Times*, January 27, 1942, A. Further investigation into the nature of war reporting in the Second World War would make an intriguing research topic.

⁸³ Hanson W Baldwin, "Threat to Suez Returns," *New York Times*, February 17, 1942, 8.

⁸⁴ Alan Moorehead, "The German Army Vivisected," *Daily Express*, January 12, 1942, 2.

but thirteen.⁸⁵ The *Irish Times* offered similar excuses. Like its British and US counterparts, at the end of January 1942 the *Irish Times* emphasized the favorable circumstances that aided Rommel by claiming the weather “rescued” Rommel and that the German Mark IV tank was the “secret of Marshal Rommel’s successes in Libya.” There was one difference. The ostensibly neutral paper may have found it easier to admit a logical deduction for the rapid shift in military fortunes: “The British have no tactician to compare with General Rommel.”⁸⁶

The Allied press responded to the Rommel-led counterattack by downplaying the threat the reinvigorated Axis forces represented and printing excuses. This was a more mundane means of mitigating a poor military performance than the retrospective assertion that the British overhyped the German marshal. If any psychology was involved, it was that many military observers and war correspondents were taken aback by the reemergence of an enemy that they had thought was all but destroyed just a few weeks earlier. Or domestic pressures had induced the better correspondents not to print the unpleasant truth that the British military leadership accepted during this stage of the war: without significant superiority in armor the Commonwealth could not defeat the core of the Axis army, the mobile elements of the *Afrikakorps*.⁸⁷ Italian historian Emilio Faldella was correct in declaring that the Allies refused to publicly recognize the militarily superior quality of their Axis opponents. He was incorrect in assuming the means was through creating a myth in Rommel. The practice of concocting alibis and attributing fortunate circumstances to explain enemy military successes was how the Allied press explained the military disappointments in

⁸⁵ I do not have the sources to determine if this was the intent of the *New York Times*. That being said, whether or not the paper intended on granting Levy more ink or not does not alter the fact that the US paper of record disseminated notably more military analyses that were facile and comforting rather than judicious and objective.

⁸⁶ “The Western Desert,” *Irish Times*, January 27, 1942; “Libyan Chessboard,” *Irish Times*, February 11, 1942, 2; “Ebb and Flow,” *Irish Times*, January 29, 1942, 4.

⁸⁷ Auchinleck unequivocally stated this in a message to Churchill in January 1942. See Churchill, *The Hinge of Fate*, 33. His predecessor Wavell and successor Bernard Montgomery also accepted this assessment.

the beginning of 1942 and was characteristic of how it would explain future North African setbacks, such as Gazala in June 1942 and Kasserine Pass in February 1943.

Early 1942 represented a watershed moment when Rommel became something more than a respected enemy commander in the eyes of some Britons. The *Irish Times* admission implies that Rommel was probably perceived as the best German commander by Allied and neutral pundits (though not by his German peers) after January 1942. Hitler's dismissal of the three field marshals who had led the German spearheads in the stalled invasion of the Soviet Union at the end of 1941 would have reinforced such perceptions. There are indicators of Rommel's emerging prestige among the Allies in the wake of his successful January counterattack. The *Daily Mirror* mused on January 28 that the way Rommel fights "compels our respect."⁸⁸ And within the flood of excuses, there were some oblique acknowledgements of Rommel's military talents in the Allied media such as the use of the terms "astute," a "slippery customer," a "brilliant soldier," or more generically an expert at desert warfare.⁸⁹ Indeed, Rommel himself sensed this and in a late January letter to his wife wrote, "The foreign press opinion about me is improving again."⁹⁰ There was the "hear hear" in the House of Commons after the "great general" remark. From neutral Turkey, the *Los Angeles Times* reported on March 12 that Rommel was groomed for an upcoming special attack because he was "regarded in neutral quarters here as the ablest German commander."⁹¹ Many veterans of the British Eighth Army recalled that troops would say "a Rommel" to

⁸⁸ "Cassandra," *Daily Mirror*, January 28, 1942, 2.

⁸⁹ "Rommel's Halt in Libya," *The Times*, February 18, 1942, 3; "Rommel's Return," *The Manchester Guardian*, January 28, 1942, 4; "Cassandra," *Daily Mirror*, January 28, 1942, 2.

⁹⁰ Erwin Rommel letter to Lucie Rommel, January 25, 1942, taken from Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, edited by B.H. Liddell Hart, trans. by Paul Findlay (New York: Da Capo Press, 1982), 182.

⁹¹ "Rommel Groomed to Head Attack," *Los Angeles Times*, March 12, 1942, 2.

indicate an excellent performance, a use I can document as far back as 1943.⁹² In fact, Rommel had been the focus of so much attention that Auchinleck felt it necessary to issue the following order in March 1942:

To: All Commanders and Chiefs of Staff
From: Headquarters, British Troops in Egypt and Middle East Forces

There exists a real danger that our friend Rommel is becoming a kind of magician or bogey-man to our troops, who are talking far too much about him. He is by no means a superman, although he is undoubtedly very energetic and able. Even if he were a superman, it would still be highly undesirable that our men should credit him with supernatural powers.

I wish you to dispel by all possible means the idea that Rommel represents something more than an ordinary German general *and a pretty unpleasant one at that, as we know from the mouths of his own officers* [emphasis added].

The important thing now is to see to it that we do not always talk of Rommel when we mean the enemy in Libya. We must refer to “the Germans” or “the Axis powers” or “the enemy” and not always keep harping on Rommel. Please ensure that this order is put into immediate effect, and impress upon all Commanders that, from a psychological point of view, it is a matter of the highest importance.

(Signed)
C.J. Auchinleck,
Commander-in-Chief, M.E.F

PS I am not jealous of Rommel [emphasis in original]⁹³

This is a key piece of evidence with which students of Rommel are most likely familiar, although the edited version in Desmond Young’s 1950 biography omitting the postscript and the disparaging phrase, “and a pretty unpleasant one at that, as we know from

⁹² Unfortunately, it is difficult to pin down a date when this began. First alluded to by British war correspondent Alexander Clifford in *Three Against Rommel* (1943) and later more explicitly by Desmond Young in *Rommel* (1950), it has been since corroborated by others. I suspect while the phrase was used in early 1942 (especially in light of Auchinleck’s order discussed below), I would doubt it was used after the Commonwealth victory at Alma Halfa in September 1942, which permanently stopped the Axis advance into Egypt and marked the beginnings of a perceptible *esprit de corps* in the Eighth Army under the leadership of Bernard Montgomery.

⁹³ Sir Claude Auchinleck order, “Übersetzung!”, March 30, 1942, NA RG 242 T84 roll 277.

the mouths of his own officers” is typically found in the literature. This continues to be the case decades after Wolf Heckmann identified the disparity between the two back in 1976.⁹⁴ I have been unable to locate the original so I am relying on a German facsimile produced by German radio interception. This order was in Rommel’s files that were captured by the US Army at the end of the war and made available at the US National Archives among other documents such as many of his personal letters to his wife, official orders, and other random items such as the lyrics to a marching song from the 7th Panzer Division, “On the Rommelbahn.” As it was in Rommel’s files, this was how Desmond Young acquired the order and edited it. I am confident this facsimile is an authentic reproduction of Auchinleck’s order. My understanding is that Auchinleck intended this order to have the widest distribution and did not consider it sensitive or secret. With the regularity in which troops from both sides were captured and subsequently escaped as described in Alan Moorehead’s discerning first-hand account *African Trilogy*, Rommel would have had a more accurate assessment of the psychological disposition of the British Eighth Army than readers of the *Times*. It would have been pointless for Auchinleck to label such an order secret.

Aside from the obvious indication that Rommel’s mystique began to have an unwanted effect among Commonwealth troops, other interesting aspects about the German marshal can be derived from this order. Germany’s monitoring of British radio signals (coupled with Italy’s ability to read the Cairo-based US military attaché’s coded transmissions) provided Rommel a significant tactical advantage until these sources largely dried up in July 1942.⁹⁵ It is also interesting – and believable – that some German junior

⁹⁴ See for example, Steven Pressfield, *Killing Rommel: A Novel* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 92. Heckmann, *Rommel’s War in Africa*, 228-229.

⁹⁵ The US State Department, whose transmissions the Axis had been able to decipher, adopted a different code system at the end of June 1942. The experienced German signal unit that had much success in monitoring

officers regarded Rommel as unpleasant.⁹⁶ Auchinleck did not have to make that up. Indeed, the primary reason he felt compelled to circulate this order was because British troops were “harping” on only the positive military aspects of Rommel’s persona (a theme that was repeated in the hagiographies of the 1950s). Auchinleck’s inclusion of the postscript suggests that there were rumors and whisperings mistrusting his own abilities in comparison to “our friend Rommel.”

Desmond Young’s recollection of the significance of Rommel was correct, however he misattributed the timing. It is illustrative of Alessandro Portelli’s study into memories that indicates factually incorrect memories can still retain the symbolic importance of events and people.⁹⁷ In the span of a few months, Rommel had gone from a commander who was scarcely mentioned in British newspapers to someone whose prestige was deemed potentially dangerous. Indeed, before 1942 British commanders felt no compulsion to stop their troops from “harping on Rommel,” most British war correspondents did not sense anything about the German commander making it worthy to print his name in their columns, and Rommel had not yet acquired his famous nickname “Desert Fox.” The British role in fostering the budding Rommel mythology at this time was unintentional, a consequence of their military

British radio traffic was captured shortly thereafter in July. Wil Deac, “Intercepted Communication, A Secret Ear for the Desert Fox,” *Historynet*, September 1996. <http://www.historynet.com/intercepted-communications-a-secret-ear-for-the-desert-fox-september-96-world-war-ii-feature.htm>, (accessed April 12, 2014). Hans-Otto Behrendt, *Rommel’s Intelligence in the Desert Campaign 1941-1943* (London: William Kimber, 1985), 145-147, 166-167, 225-226.

⁹⁶ Rommel was an argumentative and confident personality who clashed with officers who did not perceive things as he did. His unorthodox methods and visible disdain for the traditions of the German General Staff also created numerous rows with trained staff officers. He was, however, valued highly by his troops and had excellent relations with those officers who agreed with his assessments.

⁹⁷ Alessandro Portelli, “The Death of Luigi Trastulli: Memory and the Event” in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 1-26.

professionals and observers having engendered inaccurate expectations that Rommel's forces were trapped and the Axis threat in North Africa was neutralized. If the sudden Axis resurgence was something the British commander Auchinleck had difficulty explaining to Churchill, it was little wonder that the troops of the Eighth Army began to perceive "our friend Rommel" as something more than a vigorous commander who used astute tactics.

Chapter 2

The Desert Fox as a Warrior Archetype

The first half of this chapter delves into what has been hitherto commonly assumed, but not investigated: that the British portrayed Rommel as a military genius to explain their inability to defeat the Axis forces in North Africa. The misattribution of Churchill's "great general" remark to the summer of 1942 after the shocking military defeat at Gazala suggests things have been oversimplified. I believe dismissing Allied portrayals of Rommel during this time as expedient propaganda is a mistake and misses the best opportunity to capture the essence of what it was about Rommel that seemed to make him an iconic military commander. There was substance and authenticity to Allied portrayals. The British defeat came as a surprise; just days before Churchill's generals assured him the British position would hold and *The Times* expressed confidence in what it assumed was a superior British position. The post-mortem offered by Allied commentators was immediate and impulsive, indicative of their instinctual attempt to make sense of a military disaster. It was candid, had a genuine quality to it, and most importantly, openly admitted that their generals' mistakes and defects in the British military establishment were responsible for the defeat. Those Allied commentators who remarked about Rommel and his tactics did so precisely to take their own generals to task, point out the problems in British Army, and highlight the urgent need to reform. That is not excusing a military defeat. That is candid introspection faulting the army for creating a disaster of its own doing. The myth of the "Desert Fox" was rooted in the idealization of what a successful military commander ought to be.

The second half of this chapter looks more closely into that idealization to understand better why an enemy general would have such prestige and why it has been so enduring. In

their attempt to make sense of the dramatic change of fortune during the battle, Allied military experts and journalists both often cited military virtues such as aggressiveness, bravery, skill, and cleverness as determining factors. Although these were stereotypes and intellectual constructs, they held genuine meaning in military ethos and served as a common frame of reference that cut across political and even ideological boundaries. The Allied portrayals of Rommel from this time indicate genuine respect for his generalship and, at times, even his character. The opinion of German POWs in the United States is an interesting lens here because Rommel has often been associated with them (the first POWs in the U.S. were those captured in North Africa). Views of the German prisoners suggest that shared cultural assumptions and superficial attraction could elicit feelings of familiarity and positive attitudes. There was substance to the positive Allied acknowledgements of Rommel and dismissing them as the byproduct of British propaganda misses the essence of what attracted enthusiasts to the “Desert Fox” myth.

The Desert Fox: Gazala and the Fall of Tobruk

The fall of Tobruk in June 1942 was a military humiliation that particularly galled the British Prime Minister. When writing his war memoirs, Churchill was still puzzled how this “awful story ... where 25,000 surrendered to 4,000” could have happened and wrote to General Sir Henry Pownall, who had access to the Cabinet Office’s Historical Section, for insight (as it turns out, Pownall was also perplexed).¹ With the Eighth Army in headlong defeat and some Allied newspapers printing ominous headlines such as “All Egypt Periled as Rommel Races to Within 100 Miles of Alexandria,” the loss of Tobruk fundamentally

¹ Reynolds, *In Command of History*, 301-303.

changed the perception of the strategic character of the North Africa campaign.² The specter of a Nazi victory in the Middle East suddenly seemed plausible. Even Hitler did not anticipate such success. He and the German High Command initially did not intend for the *Afrikakorps* to be much more than a “blocking force” to prevent the Allies from seizing Libya. The objective was defensive in nature and Rommel’s constant oversteps miffed General Franz Halder, Chief of Staff of Army High Command, who in his diary bemoaned the “senseless demands” and the need “to head off this soldier gone stark mad.”³ It was Rommel’s initiative and unexpected success that prompted Hitler to write Mussolini that they had arrived at a “militarily historic event” because “the British Eighth Army is virtually destroyed” and urged an Axis advance to the Suez Canal as “the goddess of fortune in battle comes to commanders only once.”⁴ As we will see, the end of June marked nearly six months of uninterrupted defeats for British Eighth Army by Axis forces under command of a man who was by that time popularly known in the Allied press as the “Desert Fox.”

Allied correspondents once again overdramatized initial Allied successes and fostered unrealistic expectations. When the next round of combat in North Africa opened with the Axis attack on the Gazala position on May 26, 1942, it immediately went awry and Rommel retrospectively admitted that he “was seriously worried.”⁵ British and US newspapers once

² “All Egypt Periled as Rommel Races to within 100 Miles of Alexandria,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 1, 1942, 1. See also “Rommel Only 85 Miles from Alexandria,” *Daily Express*, July 1, 1942, 1.

³ Franz Halder, *The Halder War Diary, 1939-1942* (Novato CA: Presidio Press, 1988), 374.

⁴ Hitler’s full letter to Mussolini can be found in Robert L. Miller, ed., *Hitler at War: Meetings and Conferences, 1939-1945* (New York: Enigma Books, 2015), 147-148. A good summary of Germany’s overall strategic goals in the Mediterranean theater and the factors that influenced Hitler’s directives for Rommel’s *Afrikakorps* is Gerhard Schreiber, Bernd Stegemann, Detlef Vogel, *Germany and the Second World War*, vol. 3, *The Mediterranean, South-east Europe, and North Africa 1939-1941*, trans. Dean S. McMurry, Ewald Osers, Louise Willmot (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 654-659, 673-676 and Horst Boog, Werner Rahn, Reinhard Stumpf, Bernd Wegner, *Germany and the Second World War*, vol. 6, *The Global War* trans. Ewald Osers, John Brownjohn, Patricia Crampton, Louise Willmot (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 655-660, 706-710.

⁵ Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, 208.

more cultivated the impression that the Allies were on the verge of a momentous victory. Headlines in early June 1942 proclaimed “Rommel Force Reported in Trap Facing Flight or Annihilation,” “Rommel Mauled, Turning Back,” and “Rommel Disaster.” Commentators reported that Rommel “fled by plane when he found himself surrounded and his tank formations destroyed,” and the “highest hopes are justified” as “the desert is dotted with burning German tanks.”⁶ As Allied newspapers were erroneously writing him off, Rommel already felt the gravest crisis was over and wrote his wife, with whom he was very candid, on June 3, that “we’re in such a favorable position that I’ve got no more serious worries.”⁷ Rommel was perhaps overly ebullient himself as the British armor was still in the field, but his assessment indicates that Allied commentators were overestimating their position.⁸

Instead of adjusting their reporting on the dynamic military situation at Gazala, most Allied correspondents continued to report the battle through rose-colored glasses. Britons were informed of the (non-existent) “Victory In ‘Cauldron’” as “another definite repulse for Rommel” who was “completely thwarted,” and that “British arms had won a victory which must ultimately have a decisive effect on the Battle for Libya.”⁹ The *Chicago Tribune* set the

⁶ Joseph M. Levy “Nazis Held in Libya,” *New York Times*, June 1, 1942, 1; “Retreat in Desert,” *New York Times*, June 2, 1942, 1; “Why Rommel’s Desert ‘Blitz’ Failed,” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 2, 1942, 1; “Gen. Rommel Flees Battle, Cairo Hears,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 2, 1942, 1; Polyzoides, “British Give Germans Serious Libya Setback,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 2, 1942, A; “Battle of Libya Reaches its Climax,” *The Times*, June 1, 1942, 4; “The Libyan Battle,” *The Manchester Guardian*, June 2, 1942, 4; Eric Bigio, “Panzers Caught in Triangle,” *Daily Express*, June 1, 1942, 1; “Rommel Mauled, Turning Back,” *Daily Mirror*, June 1, 1942, 1.

⁷ Erwin Rommel Letter to Lucie Rommel, June 3, 1942, taken from Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, 214.

⁸ Samuel W. Mitcham Jr., *Rommel’s Greatest Victory: The Desert Fox and the Fall of Tobruk, Spring 1942* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1998) is a solid modern analysis of the battle. Many British authored accounts cover the Gazala battle in conjunction with the later battles fought at El Alamein, such as Niall Barr, *Pendulum of War: The Three Battles of El Alamein* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004) and John Bierman and Colin Smith, *Alamein: War Without Hate* (London: Penguin, 2012). The classic study of the Gazala battle is F. W. von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles: A Study of the Employment of Armor in the Second World War*, trans. H. Betzler (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 92-113.

⁹ “Our Position in Libya Satisfactory,” *The Manchester Guardian*, June 9, 1942, 5; “Libyan ‘Battle of the Cauldron,’” *The Times*, June 9, 1942, 4.

tenor of US newspapers with its headline: “Britain Smashes Toward a Libyan Knockout Punch.”¹⁰ Amidst the chorus of overconfident predictions, the *Daily Express* and Baldwin of the *New York Times* were divergent voices to declare soberly the sides “evenly matched.”¹¹ Such admissions did not dissuade the “rosy character” of British reporting during the battle.¹² As late as June 15, two days *after* much of the Commonwealth armor had been destroyed in what British war correspondent Alexander Clifford retrospectively called “Black Saturday,” Britain’s paper of record reported a supposed “Third Phase in Libya,” declaring:

There is so far not the slightest reason to suppose that Rommel will retake Tobruk ... All reports suggest that our command still regards the issue with complete confidence, and is convinced that the enemy will wear himself out in these headlong attacks.¹³

The *Daily Mirror* similarly remarked Rommel “is desperately gambling” and that “the British are hitting back strongly.”¹⁴ No such phase ever materialized. On June 15, Rommel wrote to Lucie, “The battle has been won and the enemy is breaking up.”¹⁵ That was near the truth. Less than a week later, Commonwealth resistance in Cyrenaica ceased and Axis forces easily captured Tobruk, a powerful symbol of British resolve that had eluded Rommel the previous year, and with it some 30,000 prisoners and vast stocks of war matériel.

This was the second time inaccurate Allied reporting had inadvertently assisted Rommel’s publicity in fostering the impression that Rommel had again trumped the

¹⁰ “Britain Smashes Toward a Libyan Knockout Punch,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 7, 1942, 5; “Two Fierce Nazi Tank Thrusts Repelled by British in Libya,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 9, 1942, 1; Joseph M. Levy, “Axis in Libya Hit,” *New York Times*, June 7, 1942, 1; Stephen Barber, “Rommel’s Panzers Twice Driven Back; Nazi Personally Leads Two Attacks, Reels Back in Defeat,” *Washington Post*, June 8, 1942, 3.

¹¹ Hanson W. Baldwin, “Fighting is More Intense Because Forces Are More Evenly Matched,” *New York Times*, June 10, 1942, 5; Morley Richards, “Terms Even,” *Daily Express*, June 8, 1942, 1. The *Daily Express* was the one Allied newspaper that adjusted its effusive initial reporting.

¹² Churchill’s use of this phrase can be found in “Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons Official Report July 2, 1942,” *ibiblio*, <http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/1942/420702a.html>, (accessed March 2, 2013).

¹³ “Third Phase in Libya,” *The Times*, June 15, 1942, 5. For “Black Saturday,” see Alexander Clifford, *The Conquest of North Africa 1940-1943* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1943), 284-299.

¹⁴ “Our Tanks Hold Rommel’s Bid to Take Tobruk,” *Daily Mirror*, June 15, 1942, 1.

¹⁵ Erwin Rommel letter to Lucie Rommel, June 15, 1942, taken from Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, 224.

Commonwealth's ace. The source and thus the blame for these overly sanguine assessments in the press was the British military leadership. Auchinleck and his staff had explicitly communicated to London back in February that they had no intention of holding Tobruk and as a result many of its defenses were removed to reinforce the British lines at Gazala.¹⁶ Yet after much of the British armor had been knocked out and with an Axis breakthrough looming, the three key figures in the Eighth Army's leadership, Auchinleck, his immediate subordinate General Neil Ritchie who was directing the Gazala battle, and General William Gott, decided that Tobruk could withstand an assault, a dubious assessment considering their previous conclusion and that its defenses were not maintained: guns were transferred to the Gazala position, mines and barbed wire cleared for vehicle passage, and sand silted up anti-tank ditches. Auchinleck, who was in Cairo and did not know all the facts, based his reasoning on the belief that the Germans had suffered heavily during the battle. In his order to hold Tobruk, he wrote: "I must stress my opinion [the] enemy ... cannot really be in a position to carry out large scale offensive operations ... He must, I feel, have lost heavily, and we know his ammunition is short."¹⁷ Churchill, who had known and accepted the February decision not to defend Tobruk, cinched the matter with a communication praising the decision to defend the dilapidated "fortress" after all.¹⁸ It is debatable who was most responsible for the disastrous decision to defend Tobruk, but it is clear there was a failure to communicate the essential facts between the principals and that wishful thinking prevailed.¹⁹

¹⁶ Correlli Barnett, *The Desert Generals*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 155; I.S.O. Playfair, *British Fortunes reach their Lowest Ebb (September 1941 to September 1942)*, vol. 3 of *The Mediterranean and Middle East* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office: 1960), 197-199.

¹⁷ Playfair, *British Fortunes reach their Lowest Ebb*, 246-247.

¹⁸ Reynolds, *In Command of History*, 301-304 gives an insightful perspective of how Churchill's flawed perception of the situation at the time placed undue pressure on his generals, as well as of the less than accurate account he wrote in his postwar memoirs.

¹⁹ In my estimation, Auchinleck must bear most responsibility. He relied too much on his subordinate Ritchie to direct the battle and did not leave Cairo to see for himself the state of the Eighth Army. Churchill did place

The gulf between the upbeat expectations during the Battle of Gazala and the shocking realities that unfolded is difficult to overstate. How frustrated many Britons must have been can be glimpsed from a revealing letter to the editor in *The Times* after the Axis had breached the British defensive lines: “It is hoped that present events in Libya will dissuade any further prognostications until we have defeated the enemy in this or any other campaign.” The letter concluded that ordinary Britons “are beginning to doubt the ability” of public proclamations based on the “culpable underestimation of a most formidable enemy.”²⁰ The *Daily Mirror* railed at the “rosy edifice of hope” and demanded “tell us the truth!”²¹ A week later, the paper editorialized: “The public may be a little superstitious. It has been observed that preliminary announcements of approaching triumphs are often followed by crashing failures.”²² Churchill, at that moment in Washington DC conferring with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, was stung. “It was the first time my life,” recalled General Hasting Ismay, Churchill’s chief of staff, “that I saw the Prime Minister flinch.”²³

It was in this context that Rommel received his moniker “Desert Fox.” Biographers agree that it emerged on the Allied side and that is most probably correct. The “Desert Fox” appears earlier and is much more common in English language publications than their German counterparts. Indeed, often German press releases do not even mention the nickname, not even the May 1943 “27 Months Battle in Africa” broadcast put out by the Propaganda Ministry that Goebbels deemed crucial to mitigate the news of the surrender of

unwelcome pressure to defend Tobruk, but it was Auchinleck’s duty as theater Commander to communicate unpleasant military realities to his government, even if the Prime Minister did not want to hear them. Playfair, *British Fortunes Reach their Lowest Ebb*, 245-249 gives a good summary of the equivocal exchanges between the principal British commanders that led to the dubious decision to defend Tobruk.

²⁰ Owen G. Barrow, “Forecasts of Victory,” letter to the editor, *The Times*, June 20, 1942, 5.

²¹ “Tell Us the Truth!” *Daily Mirror*, June 22, 1942, 3.

²² “During the Battle,” *Daily Mirror*, June 27, 1942, 3.

²³ Hastings Lionel Ismay, *Memoirs* (London: Heinemann, 1960), 254.

German forces in Africa. Kurt Hesse and Lutz Koch, who both worked in the press wing of the *Wehrmacht* and were cordial to Rommel, wrote sympathetic biographies in the late 1940s and did not dispute the British origins of the nom de guerre. No German has ever claimed to have coined “der Wüstenfuchs” and I see no reason to judge otherwise.²⁴ Pinning an exact origin to the name is difficult, but it is reasonably certain that the nom de guerre emerged in late June during the immediate aftermath of the fall of Tobruk. The first mention I could find of “Desert Fox” in a major Allied newspaper was on July 5, 1942 in the *Chicago Tribune*.²⁵ On July 10, 1942 the *Washington Post* noted that Rommel was “referred to in recent news dispatches as ‘The Fox of the Desert’” in a (legendary) story how the German general had studied US Civil War battlefields.²⁶ The *New York Times* first printed the name in a trivia quiz on October 11, 1942, suggesting the name must have been known in the public sphere by that time.²⁷ Gazala was Rommel’s most famous victory and represents the apex of his fame.

Explaining Defeat: British Public Commentary After Tobruk

Judging from contemporary evidence, British politicians, journalists, and military observers did not make a legend of Rommel to explain their defeat. They did not have to. He was already perceived as a formidable opponent before the battle²⁸ and the unrealistic

²⁴ See “27 Monate Kampf in Afrika,” NA RG 242 T84/276. Kurt Hesse to Erwin Rommel, March 6, 1941, NA RG 242 T84/276 reveals how knowledgeable and invested Hesse was for the propaganda given to Rommel in North Africa.

²⁵ “Rommel, Crafty Panzer General, Called ‘The Fox,’” *Chicago Tribune*, July 5 1942, 5.

²⁶ “Gen. Rommel Visit Recalled in W. Va. Area,” *The Washington Post*, July 10, 1942, 3.

²⁷ “Who’s Who? Twenty News Questions,” *New York Times*, October 11, 1942, 2E. Google ngrams, a tool which searches through many books and periodicals that have been digitized, also suggests the nickname was not used in association with Rommel prior to 1942. Ngrams has some problems that make relying on it more than a supplementary tool difficult. It is case-sensitive, can only access certain books, and because authors and journalists sometimes just referred to the German general as “Rommel” or “marshal/general Rommel” it makes what might seem easily obtainable comparisons and searches difficult.

²⁸ During the battle as well. On 3 June 1942, while the battle was still in the balance, the *Daily Mirror* remarked that “Rommel is a brilliant general” and hoped that the flaw of indiscretion accompanied that brilliance. “Rommel v. Richie,” *Daily Mirror*, June 2, 1942, 3.

expectations of victory engendered by Allied reporting made the stunning and sudden surrender of Tobruk appear as a veritable *tour de force*, and the British press plainly admitted the defeat. There were certainly numerous excuses and explanations. A prevalent theme among them, characterized by Churchill's explanation in the House of Commons, was that the failure lay mostly with British mistakes and squandered opportunities.

The British press was more forthcoming in admitting the scope of the defeat; the *Daily Mirror*'s front page headline "DISASTER AT TOBRUK" left little room for equivocation.²⁹ Yet in many explanations for the defeat, commentators tagged Rommel as lucky, not a genius. *The Manchester Guardian*'s headline for June 22, "Our Defeat In Libya: Errors in the Field, Inferior Arms," captures the essence of the British explanation that pinned the blame on poor leadership and inadequate equipment. For roughly one week after the fall of Tobruk, British papers hammered these themes repeatedly in their analyses. Here is a sample of representative excerpts: "The reasons for our reverse, in addition to the mistakes made in the field, are the enemy's marked superiority in heavily armed and armoured tanks and also in anti-tank guns," and "It cannot be too strongly emphasized that, apart from blunders in generalship, the main reason for our reverse was the fact that once again we were outgunned." They stressed the Germans had "tanks armed with considerably heavier guns than ours and much thicker armour," whereas Britain's own two-pounder anti-tank gun was deemed "almost useless." In most articles, the German 8.8 centimeter Flak cannon, a versatile and feared weapon that Allied troops dubbed the "88," was specifically cited as decisive.³⁰ Commentators mused "whether we have the right men in the right place"

²⁹ "Disaster at Tobruk," *Daily Mirror*, June 22, 1942, 1.

³⁰ This German weapon was designed an anti-aircraft weapon. However, the combination of its versatility and the poor performance of existing dedicated German anti-tank weapons against the heaviest Allied armor soon saw the 8.8 flak cannon pressed into an anti-armor role, a task at which the weapon excelled.

and censured “the generals who choose our weapons” in their inquiries why no British equivalent existed. One correspondent unequivocally blamed the British government stating, “our defeats start in Whitehall – in the War Office and the Ministry of Supply, which are still not ordering and producing the right war material.” As for the German commander, Rommel, like the German army he commanded, was deemed the beneficiary of superior equipment and missed Commonwealth opportunities. Editorials pointed out that “Rommel was able to fight again not only with more but with better material” and hypothetically asked, “Can the name of any general be put forward who could be relied upon to defeat Rommel with inferior tanks and inferior guns?”³¹

The thrust of these analyses attributed the defeat to correctable deficiencies. With the implication that the Commonwealth could and would win in a fair fight, British commentators could attribute much of the cause for defeat to factors beyond the control of its Eighth Army troops. British commentators were not necessarily lying, but disseminating half-truths and concocting excuses – a practice that ought to be expected by a belligerent.³²

³¹ “Our Defeat in Libya,” *The Times*, June 22, 1942, 5 and *The Manchester Guardian*, June 22, 1942, 5; “Lessons of the Libyan Defeat,” *The Times*, June 23, 1942 and *The Manchester Guardian*, June 23, 1942, 6; “The Road to Victory,” *The Times*, June 27, 1942; “The Defeat,” *The Manchester Guardian*, June 23, 1942; “Causes of Failure,” *The Manchester Guardian*, June 24, 1942; “Alan Moorehead, “Why Tobruk Fell: Outnumbered 3 to 1,” *Daily Express*, June 22, 1942, 1; Alan Moorehead, “Libyan Analysis,” *Daily Express*, June 23, 1942, 2; “Germans Had Better Material,” *Daily Mirror*, June 23, 1942, 1; “After Libya,” *The Manchester Guardian*, July 1, 1942; Tom Wintringham, “Libya: Our Defeats Start in Whitehall,” *Picture Post*, July 4, 1942, 18; “Tobruk,” *Irish Times*, June 22, 1942, 2. It is interesting the *Irish Times* agreed with these British analyses.

³² Commonwealth forces probably had a slight edge at the eve of battle. They had some 110,000 men to the Axis 90,000. While some of its equipment was obsolete by this time, such as the two-pounder gun, the same could be said for Axis forces, particularly the Italian forces. Military observers have since uniformly concluded that the Axis were able to nullify the advantages the Commonwealth enjoyed on paper because its leadership was energetic and decisive whereas its opponent was hesitant and disjointed, and its core striking force, the *Afrika Korps*, was superbly trained and possessed a superior battlefield doctrine. The battle probably represented Rommel’s best performance during the Second World War.

Historian John Dower noted a similar phenomenon in the American reaction to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and Japan's subsequent triumphs in southeast Asia.³³

Not all Britons indulged in blaming the defeat on the (incorrect) belief that the Axis forces possessed quantitative and qualitative superiority. Indeed, Commonwealth forces had superior numbers and possessed a new tank in their arsenal, the American built M3 Grant, which had a 75mm gun that enabled British armor to outrange their German opponents for the first time in the Western Desert.³⁴ Some commentators instead criticized the failure of the British military establishment to adapt to a modern mechanized battlefield. One editorial from *The Times* lamented the current state of the British military, which it believed was impaired by a “lack of imagination” and clung “to conventional methods and procedures.” It called for “the urgent needs for bringing fresh blood and fresh ideas into the conduct of war,” men who were “tank-minded and air-minded.”³⁵ *The Manchester Guardian* bemoaned the “inability to act with the same dash as the Germans,” and “little can be seen” of the “inspired imagination and rapid decision which generals are expected to show.”³⁶ Moorehead began his analysis by writing, “Quick-decision men – that’s what we lacked most of all.”³⁷ British United Press war correspondent Richard McMillan grumbled, “it was the old story of ‘wait and see’ once again.”³⁸ *The Daily Mirror* blasted the “hoary tradition” that prevented the

³³ Rather than accept that the Japanese were capable of a surprise attack on a US Naval base or easily sweeping aside Allied resistance in Southeast Asia, American commentators were apt to attribute such success to Japanese racial characteristics, secret German assistance, or internal sabotage. Dower, *War Without Mercy*.

³⁴ Steve Zaloga, *Armored Thunderbolt: The U.S. Army Sherman in World War II* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008), 28-30. Hans von Luck, *Panzer Commander: The Memoirs of Colonel Hans von Luck* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 91.

³⁵ “The Road to Victory,” *The Times*, June 27, 1942.

³⁶ “After Libya,” *The Manchester Guardian*, July 1, 1942; “Causes of Failure,” *The Manchester Guardian*, June 24, 1942,

³⁷ Alan Moorehead, “Libyan Analysis,” *Daily Express*, June 23, 1942, 2.

³⁸ Richard McMillan, “We Allowed the Enemy in Libya to Make Every Move – It Was Wait and See Again,” *Daily Mirror*, June 23, 1942, 1.

best brains from reaching the top of the British military establishment. The paper looked to the arrival of a US commander, a “tank general,” and hoped “the influence of our American Allies [would] help to hurry our system of promotion.”³⁹ These commentaries explained the defeat by directing attention to what the British were doing wrong.

This narrative criticizing British generals served as the context of respect for Rommel’s abilities. There were acknowledgements of his stubbornness in continuing his attack, of his “resilience, speed, and sheer tactical skill” in contrast to the Allied generals for their failure to exploit what appeared to be a winning position early in the battle.⁴⁰ As *The Manchester Guardian* explained, the battle turned when “the German commander made his audacious and confident sweep” and baited the British armor with anti-tank guns because “the enemy ... showed considerable cleverness in their use.” “The outstanding lesson,” the paper mused, was the “need for speed both in decision and in maneuver.”⁴¹ Or, as the ostensibly neutral *Irish Times* candidly put it, “Marshal Rommel succeeded, therefore, firstly, because he is a better strategist and tactician than any general officer whom the British have.”⁴²

Rommel may have served as a foil for what was taboo: the view that British soldiers were less capable fighters than their German counterparts. As military historian Max Hastings has noted in his history of Churchill:

The “tommy” was perceived – sometimes rightly – as the victim of his superiors’ incompetence, rather than the bearer of any personal responsibility for failures of British arms. In private, however, and among ministers and

³⁹ “Brains at the Top,” *Daily Mirror*, June 17, 1942, 3.

⁴⁰ “Lessons on the Libyan Defeat,” *The Manchester Guardian*, June 23, 1942, 6; “The Defeat,” *The Manchester Guardian*, June 23, 1942, 4; “Causes of Failure,” *The Manchester Guardian*, June 24, 1942, 4; Richard McMillan, “We Allowed the Enemy in Libya to Make Every Move – It Was Wait and See Again,” *Daily Mirror*, June 23, 1942, 1.

⁴¹ “Lessons on the Libyan Defeat,” *The Manchester Guardian*, June 23, 1942, 6. See also “The Defeat,” *The Manchester Guardian*, June 23, 1942, 4.

⁴² “Tobruk,” *Irish Times*, June 22, 1942, 2.

senior officers, this issue was frequently discussed ... Many British officers perceived their citizen soldiers as lacking the will and commitment routinely displayed by the Germans and Japanese.⁴³

The relative inefficiency of Allied troops *vis-à-vis* the German Army was an unstated reality that Allied commanders had to deal with throughout the Second World War.⁴⁴ Moorhead recognized in 1943 how this manifested in Rommel's reputation:

"Rommel was an abler general than any on the British side and for the one reason – because the German Army was an abler army than the British Army. Rommel was merely the expression of that abler German Army."⁴⁵

Rommel was a standard of comparison for what British generals failed to accomplish. During the summer of 1942, Britons critical of the perceived class-prejudice in the British Army joked that "If Rommel had been in the British Army, he would still have been a sergeant." First articulated on June 27 by the *Daily Mirror*, which championed the working class, the "sergeant Rommel" taunt was echoed by Labour MP Aneurin Bevin in the House of Commons on July 2 claiming it was "on everyone's lips."⁴⁶ Although there was an obvious need to reform, such self-criticism had limits. When Joseph Kenworthy, the 10th Baron Strabolgi, repeated the "sergeant Rommel" taunt in a biting critique of the British Army in the American magazine *Collier's* in August 1942,⁴⁷ his peers censured him in the

⁴³ Max Hastings, *Winston's War: Churchill, 1940-1945* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 225-226.

⁴⁴ Max Hastings, "Their Wehrmacht Was Better Than Our Army," *Washington Post*, May 5, 1985; Trevor N. Dupuy, *A Genius for War: The German Army and General Staff, 1807-1945* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977); Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and US Army Performance, 1939-1945* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1982).

⁴⁵ Alan Moorehead, *Don't Blame the Generals* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1943), 308. This book is the second part of his well-known *African Tribology: The North African Campaign 1940-1943* (London: Cassell, 1997), which the quote appears on 419. *African Tribology* originally published by Hamish Hamilton 1944.

⁴⁶ Hansard, the Official Report of Debates in Parliament, "House of Commons debate on 'Central Direction of the War,'" July 2, 1942, http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1942/jul/02/central-direction-of-the-war#S5CV0381P0_19420702_HOC_292, (accessed May 5, 2012). See also "Brains at the Top," *Daily Mirror*, June 27, 1942, 3.

⁴⁷ Lord Strabolgi, "What's Wrong with the British Army?" *Collier's*, August 22, 1942, 13, 58-59.

House of Lords. Lord Lovet, an army Commando leader, argued that it was slanderous to the British Army and “British-made ammunition for the enemy’s propaganda guns.” Lovet asserted that Rommel’s rise to the rank was being mischaracterized as a model the British were not following:

Yet Field-Marshal Erwin Rommel has been produced by the noble Lord as a white rabbit is produced by a conjuror out of his pocket, to confuse the issue.... He has now thirty-two years of uninterrupted service in the German Army behind him. Reading *Collier’s* magazine one would assume that after a whiff of grapeshot he was given a baton. That is very far from being the case.

The thrust of Lovet’s concern, however, was that Kenworthy sent “his defamations across the Atlantic Ocean” and thus “a blow has been dealt in the United States against the faith that they may possess in our Generals and in our competence as a fighting race.”⁴⁸ Lord Cecil reiterated this point shared by Kenworthy’s many opponents (only one Lord publicly deemed the article productive):

But the point on which I think people both inside this House and outside are at issue with Lord Strabolgi is this. It is not that he expressed the views he did, but that he chose the particular medium he did for expressing them.⁴⁹

Kenworthy’s isolation demonstrates that if Britons in 1942 were willing to argue among themselves on how to improve their army, they were nevertheless sensitive to overt proclamations in international forums of how Rommel (or the Germans) were military exemplars that their own army did not match.

The closest thing to an official explanation for the defeat came from Churchill. The British Prime Minister faced a Vote of Censure, and his speech in the House of Commons on

⁴⁸ Hansard, the Official Report of debates in Parliament, “Lord Strabolgi’s Magazine Article,” October 1, 1942, http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1942/oct/01/lord-strabolgis-magazine-article#S5LV0124P0_19421001_HOL_7, (accessed May 11, 2012).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

July 2 asserted that the Eighth Army had been in a position to win, although it did not. In his explanation were candid admissions about the Commonwealth's position on the eve of battle:

We had 100,000 men, and the enemy 90,000, of whom 50,000 were Germans. We had a superiority in the numbers of tanks – I am coming to the question of quality later – of perhaps seven to five. We had a superiority in artillery of nearly eight to five. Included in our artillery were several regiments of the latest form of gun howitzer which throws a 55-pound shell 20,000 yards.

Such an acknowledgement was necessary considering the criticism that London failed to deliver sufficient armaments to the Eighth Army (this was the tactic used to deflect blame away from Churchill's government). Responding to the specific matter of the reported inferiority of British tanks, Churchill declared it was necessary to adopt a position of quantity over quality after the fall of France because of the immediacy of potential German invasion.

Nevertheless, he contended these tanks were up to the task:

They have rendered great services, and they are to-day of real value. In Russia the Valentine is highly rated. Has the House any idea of the number of tanks we have sent to Russia? As I said, we have sent 4,500 altogether to the Nile Valley. We have sent over 2,000 tanks to Russia, and the Russians are using them against the German armour, with vigour and effect.

Churchill did not directly engage the unspoken assumption, if the Soviets were using these tanks effectively against the Germans then so could the Eighth Army. As for the actual battle and why the British had been defeated, Churchill did *not* make any specific mention of Rommel's leadership. In fact, the Prime Minister offered very few specifics and invited the MPs to draw their own conclusions:

Up till 13th June the battle was equal ... But on the 13th there came a change. On that morning we had about 300 tanks in action, and by nightfall no more than 70 remained ... and all this happened without any corresponding loss having been inflicted on the enemy. Sir, I do not know what actually happened in the fighting of that day. I am only concerned to give the facts to the House, and it is for the House to decide whether these facts result from the faulty central direction of the war, for which of course I take responsibility, or whether they resulted from the terrible hazards and unforeseeable accidents of

battle. With this disproportionate destruction of our armour Rommel became decisively the stronger. The battlefield passed into the hands of the enemy.

Churchill professed to have confidence in Auchinleck and proclaimed that he was ready “to take my full share of responsibility,” but the implication of his speech was that London had placed the Eighth Army in a position to win. Indeed, the Prime Minister continued to express optimism. He cited “considerable” reinforcements en route and that “we do not regard the struggle as in any way decided,” despite the candid admission that some 50,000 troops were lost and that Axis forces were advancing toward Nile Delta. In this matter he was explicit: “in spite of our losses in Asia, in spite of our defeats in Libya, in spite of the increased sinkings off the American coast, I affirm with confidence that the general strength and prospects of the United Nations have greatly improved since the turn of the year.” This was close to the truth: in a few months, the Commonwealth would attain a decisive numerical superiority that would bear fruit in the famous Battle of El Alamein of November 1942. The thrust of Churchill’s speech, even if unstated, took the Eighth Army leadership to task and made it clear that the expectation after the fall of Tobruk was still victory. The House’s vote on the censure motion, defeated 475 to 25, suggests that the Prime Minister’s reasoning resonated with British public opinion at this time.⁵⁰

But that was not how the speech has been represented in the literature on Rommel. Churchill first represented it as a moment of triumph in his 1950 memoir *The Hinge of Fate*, whereupon he “turned the tables” on the Opposition and included congratulatory letters from US President Roosevelt and the president’s advisor Harry Hopkins.⁵¹ At least in this respect, biographers of Churchill are inclined to agree with that assessment. Churchill was the target

⁵⁰ “Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons Official Report July 2, 1942,” *ibiblio*, <http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/1942/420702a.html>, (accessed May 6, 2012).

⁵¹ Churchill, *The Hinge of Fate*, 391-409.

of some effective barbs, however Andrew Roberts asserted his speech was “frank and masterly.”⁵² Over time, Churchill’s candid admission of Commonwealth losses, conviction in the fighting potential of the Eighth Army, confidence in eventual victory, and the resounding victorious vote have been forgotten and supplanted by imaginary excuses centered on the “Desert Fox.” This has been the case even by reputable scholars who have written insightful books about Rommel. In 1982, Samuel W. Mitcham Jr. did not indicate the 475 to 25 vote in his interpretation of the speech. Instead, he asserted that Churchill stayed in power of by the skill of his oratory and that the Prime Minister attributed the military disaster to “Rommel’s skill as a leader and to the ineptness of his own military commanders.”⁵³ In 2008, Terry Brighton also did not include the 475 to 25 vote in his *Masters of War*. He wrote that after the fall of Tobruk, “Churchill, fighting for his survival, deflected attention from the failing of British generals by stressing the extraordinary qualities of their opponent: ‘We have a very daring and skillful opponent against us, and, may I say across the havoc of war, a great general.’” Once again, the great general quote was placed in the incorrect context and assumed to be part of a stratagem because “Churchill needed a diversion too.” Brighton continued:

He despaired of his generals and blamed *them*, but that was not for public consumption. In suggesting that the problem was not inferior British commanders but a superior enemy commander he spread the Rommel legend (already established by Hitler and Goebbels inside Germany) around the world.⁵⁴

⁵² Roberts, *Churchill*, 743. Gilbert, *Road to Victory*, presents Churchill as victorious and his opponents in “disarray.” Roy Jenkins, *Churchill: A Biography* (London: Macmillan: 2001) is cooler on Churchill’s speech, stating the speech “was more effective than memorable ... But it worked.”

⁵³ Samuel W. Mitcham Jr., *Rommel’s Desert War: The Life and Death of the Afrika Korps* (New York: Stein and Day, 1982). 109.

⁵⁴ Terry Brighton, *Patton, Montgomery, Rommel: Masters of War* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2008), 114-115.

The British Prime Minister made no such suggestion and the core of his speech very much insinuated that the fundamental problem was that the British commanders had failed to produce a victory when it was attainable. The various assumptions about Rommel's reputation have been taken for granted for so long they have become accepted as common sense. It is no wonder *Wikipedia* for years misattributed the "great general" comment, and why the notion that the British made Rommel a military legend is so persistent.

In sum, there were idealizations of Rommel that some British commentators used to argue what their own generals were doing wrong. This was less deflecting attention and more putting a spotlight on what needed reform within the British military establishment. Though even this can be exaggerated as Rommel's stature in this respect was by no means unique. In a June 23 debate in the House of Commons about equipment and supplies to Africa, Rommel's generalship was not mentioned – though the inadequacy of the British generals was implied by MP Dugdale's rhetorical question, "Is it not necessary to ask the Russian Government to send the best available General to Cairo in the shortest possible time?"⁵⁵

From its ostensibly neutral position, the *Irish Times* bluntly and succinctly offered its assessment: "As a manipulator of tanks marshal Rommel probably has no superior ... He seems to specialize in the art of converting defense into attack, and there is no doubt he has won the admiration of all British generals who have hitherto have been opposed to him."⁵⁶ This was certainly a stark contrast with what *The Times* printed. As late as June 15 – after the British armor had been destroyed – the London daily insisted that Rommel "is only a mediocre strategist." The extent to which the editors were printing what they wanted to

⁵⁵ "House of Commons," *The Times*, June 24, 1942, 8.

⁵⁶ Nicheco, "Lull on the Coupon Front: Libyan Battle Development," *Irish Times*, June 20, 1942, 4.

believe is an open question. The paper's claim that "General Ritchie does not appear to have made a false move," was untenable. Moreover, its statement that "Rommel may claim to be the more daring and spectacular, but in the last battle he paid dearly for his boldness, and may be made to pay again this time" is revealing.⁵⁷ It shows that some adjectives and idealizations associated with the "Desert Fox" were already in circulation before the battle was over. When Tobruk fell and General Ritchie was sacked, it lent credence to the notion that the admittedly more daring and spectacular Rommel had pulled a military masterpiece because of that boldness.

(Un)desirable Military Models: US Public Commentary After Tobruk

A crucial component of the enduring imagery of the "Desert Fox" is that it draws upon time-honored military axioms, idealizations, and masculine stereotypes. In US commentary, which was decidedly more explicit (a position no doubt easier as the US military did not take part in the Gazala battle), those valuations are cast into sharper relief. US analyses were more forthright than their British counterparts about the divergence in military performance between the two sides when explaining the Axis victory. Journalists, war correspondents, and military experts candidly chastised the British leadership for its passivity and the Eighth Army for its lack of toughness. They contrasted these deficiencies by pointing to Rommel's alacrity in the attack and his ability to execute successful stratagems as well as portraying the Germans as resolute fighters. These frank approbations were no doubt what British commentators meant when they sought "tank generals" who were "modern" and possessed "inspired imagination." When US (and to a lesser extent British) commentators drew implicit connections between masculine notions such as toughness,

⁵⁷ "Third Phase in Libya," *The Times*, June 15, 1942, 5.

aggressiveness, tenacity, and skill at arms to Rommel's military success, they spliced universalist traits into the military imagery of the "Desert Fox."

The most evocative of these analyses that focused on masculinity appeared in the *New York Times* under veteran war correspondent James Aldridge's revealing title, "British in Africa Lack Killer Urge." It is worth quoting at length:

No one can dismiss this defeat with those lofty phrases, "No equipment," or "Lack of imagination and initiative." To hell with that stuff! It goes deeper than that. This battle for Tobruk was lost on principles ... Specifically, what [the British] lacked was speed, anger, virility, and toughness ... The German Africa Corps defeated the Eighth Army because it had speed, anger, virility, and toughness. As soldiers in the traditional senses the Germans are punk, absolutely punk. But Field Marshal Erwin Rommel and his gang are angry men. They are tough to the point of stupidity. They are virile and fast ... The German soldier is trained with the psychology of the daredevil track rider. He is a professional killer with no distractions. He believes he is the toughest man on earth.

The war correspondent then blasted the British for following a tradition that "battles should be fought with as little death as possible" and "insulting" its soldiers by showing a "bad pacifist picture from the United States ... The picture ended with a woman opening a letter and her husband's identity disc dropping out of it. It was all to show the 'hopelessness of war.'" Aldridge remarked the British method had "everything to do with" sapping away "military toughness" and prevented British soldiers from being able to "scientifically kill the enemy."⁵⁸ Interestingly, Aldridge's contention that German soldiers were "tough to the point of stupidity" suggests there were limits on how much of this form as masculinity was desirable. It is unequivocal, however, that in his eyes the British failure to adhere to a masculine warrior ideal was decisive.

⁵⁸ James Aldridge, "British in Africa Lack Killer Urge," *New York Times*, June 24, 1942, 3.

Many US commentators eschewed the frank gendered language that Aldridge used, yet in pinpointing the fundamental flaws of the British military such as the lack of toughness and the overall passivity of its leadership, they were relaying the same message: toughen up, take control, “man up,” and give ’em hell. Throughout much of the war, there were perceptions in the US that the British were not tenacious fighters.⁵⁹ The *Los Angeles Times* editorialized that the British “have twice had lasting victory in their grasp” and brought disaster upon themselves because of their “defensive attitude” and “lack of aggressiveness” in contrast to the “tough Germans.”⁶⁰ The *Washington Post* similarly portrayed Rommel as a “shrewd tactician” and a “consummate master of desert warfare” while British generalship “was timid where it should have been bold” and was hampered by a “defensive complex.”⁶¹ Clare Boothe of *Life Magazine* asserted that the “lack of offensive spirit” was a defining characteristic of the British and mused: “Rommel had learned the great lessons of the desert (perhaps of all modern warfare) which he never, unhappily, managed quite to teach the British: *Hit first, move fastest, fire hardest, keep contact, and keep going*” [emphasis in original].⁶² Or, as *The Atlanta Constitution* bluntly put it in a headline, the British were “Not Tough Enough.” The paper opined: “The sadly inescapable fact is that the British are yet to prove themselves the tenacious type of fighters that are necessary to win this war.”⁶³

Churchill himself expressed similar sentiments that were not for public consumption. When asked by Soviet ambassador Ivan Maisky about North Africa, he bluntly remarked: “The Germans wage war better than we do. Especially tank wars. Also, we lack the

⁵⁹ Hastings, *Winston's War*, 241-243.

⁶⁰ “Editorials,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 24, 1942, A4.

⁶¹ “Rommel’s Chances,” *Washington Post*, June 26, 1942, 10.

⁶² Clare Boothe, “The Battle for Egypt,” *Life*, July 13, 1942, 73-82.

⁶³ Gladstone Williams, “Washington Parade: British Failure,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 7, 1942, 6.

‘Russian spirit’: die but don’t surrender!’ The last point particularly irked the Prime Minister. Of South African general Hendrik Klopper, commander of the 30,000 troops in Tobruk, Churchill alleged he “got cold feet and waved the white flag twenty-four hours after the German attack began. When Maisky uttered the Soviets would have shot him on the spot, Churchill was said to have replied, “I’d have done the same. But you try!”⁶⁴

There were also conspicuous admissions of respect for Rommel’s military skills. *Life Magazine* credited the *Afrikakorps* as “the best small army so far engaged in this war.”⁶⁵ In explaining why the “crafty” Rommel was called “the Fox,” the *Chicago Tribune* noted that “his tanks have a way of popping up in battle areas where there were no tanks the day before” and that the Germans use “tanks, planes and guns as one hard-driving assault team with a finesse that the British have not yet attained.”⁶⁶ The *New York Times* accepted the British explanation that the Germans had more and superior armaments, but also remarked “Marshal Rommel has again shown himself to be one of the ablest generals of the war,” referred to a “Rommel technique,” and in an editorial referred to him as a “tactical genius,” an assessment that the paper admitted some in Allied quarters held.⁶⁷ Clare Boothe of *Life* wrote of Rommel’s “slippery, brilliant tactics, his greased-lightning thrusts, his spider-and-the fly technique” that “made the most of the tactician’s paradise” that characterized desert warfare. Boothe noted of the premature British pronouncements of victory during the Battle of Gazala:

Suddenly the picture changed as the German tanks faded away and bewildered Ritchie met a great battery, a mass formation, of Rommel’s 88-mm guns firing

⁶⁴ Taken from Roberts, *Churchill*, 744.

⁶⁵ “Axis Opens its Big 1942 Drive,” *Life Magazine*, July 20, 1942, 23-29.

⁶⁶ “Rommel, Crafty Panzer General, Called ‘The Fox,’” *Chicago Tribune*, July 5, 1942, 5.

⁶⁷ “Better Nazi Tanks a Factor in Libya,” *New York Times*, June 19, 1942, 3; Hanson W. Baldwin “Rommel’s Libya Victory May Loose a New Drive,” *New York Times*, June 21, 1942, e5; Craig Thompson, “‘Disaster’ Is Seen in Tobruk’s Fall,” *New York Times*, June 22, 1942, 2; “The News of the Week in Review,” *New York Times*, June 28, 1942, E1.

point-blank, head on ... Brilliant new Rommelian tactics or old-fashioned ambush – nevertheless in this encounter Rommel, “the Trapped” trapped, captured and destroyed hundreds of Ritchie’s tanks, and the iron back of the 8th Imperial Army was broken ... Circling, swirling, thrusting ahead, Rommel lost neither his head nor his forward momentum.⁶⁸

The *Christian Science Monitor* similarly reported that the British had been “decoyed into an 88 millimeter gun antitank trap – the old familiar Rommel trick which nevertheless worked.

Then and there the issue was decided.”⁶⁹ *The Atlanta Constitution* depicted the attack on Tobruk as a “lightning blow ... with such rapidity that it stunned the British defenders.”⁷⁰

The Atlanta based paper later deemed Rommel “a fighter of the type of General Nathan Bedford Forrest, of Civil War fame,” a comparison that would have particularly resonated in the US South. Major George Fielding Eliot noted there were few potential British candidates who were “capable of dealing with the bold, resourceful Rommel and his armored warfare in the desert.”⁷¹ Some US commentators minced no words about generalship with assessments such as, “There is no mistaking the fact that Marshal Rommel outgeneraled Lieut. Gen. Neil M. Ritchie” and “Field Marshal Rommel proved himself a much superior strategist than the British commander, General Ritchie.”⁷²

The bluntness of US commentators and especially the allegations questioning British toughness and willingness to fight came easier because American military pride was not wounded. When the US Army suffered a humiliating defeat in its first engagement against

⁶⁸ Boothe, “The Battle for Egypt,” *Life*, July 13, 1942, 73-82.

⁶⁹ Edmund Stevens, “Allied Leaders Failed to Take Advantage of Initial Gains – What Nazi Success Means,” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 22, 1942, 1.

⁷⁰ Edward Kennedy, “Tobruk Defenders Dazed by Speed of Axis Assault,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, June 23, 1942, 3.

⁷¹ Major George Fielding Eliot, “Gen Wilson Can Deal with Rommel,” *Daily Express*, June 25, 1942, 4.

⁷² Craig Thompson, “‘Disaster’ is Seen in Tobruk’s Fall,” *New York Times*, June 22, 1942, 2; Gladstone Williams, “Washington Parade: British Failure,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 7, 1942, 6; “Tobruk and After,” *Washington Post*, June 23, 1942, 10; Henry W. Harris, “The Strategic Slant,” *Boston Globe*, June 23, 1942, 5; Henry Harris, “Can British Prevent Egypt Falling to Military Genius of Rommel?,” *Boston Globe*, June 28, 1942, D5.

Rommel's *Panzerarmee* at Kasserine Pass in February 1943, the roles of the respective Allies were reversed. As will be demonstrated in Chapter Four, the US media did not portray Rommel as a tactical genius, did not admit that Rommel had badly outclassed American generals, and offered spin and excuses to explain the defeat. Meanwhile, there were mutterings within the British military leadership about a fundamental lack of toughness in US troops that made them untrustworthy in battle. British General Harold Alexander, who commanded Allied ground forces in Africa after Kasserine, wrote to the British High Command that US soldiers were "soft ... lack the will to fight ... show no eagerness to get in and kill [the enemy] ... unless we can do something about it, the American Army in the European theatre of operations will be quite useless."⁷³ Such gendered assumptions why soldiers were not effective in battle were taken for granted by experts such as General Alexander or the war correspondent Aldridge.

As for how much this narrative of US public commentary reflected the views of the American populace, a Gallup poll conducted in the beginning of July 1942 provides insight. To the question, "What do you think was responsible for the loss of Tobruk and for other British reverses in Africa?", these were the responses and the percentage of Americans who picked them:⁷⁴

Shortage of men and equipment: 26%
No competent leadership; Germans outsmarted them and had better strategy: 25%
British were slow and unprepared: 10%
British won't fight, not good fighters: 8%
British were overconfident: 5%
Blundering and bad planning by government: 1%
Miscellaneous: 3%
No opinion: 33%

⁷³ Taken from Carlo D'Este, *Eisenhower: A Soldier's Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 2002), 397.

⁷⁴ George Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1935-1948*, vol. 1 of *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1935-1971* (New York: Random House, 1972), 342.

Rommel was not listed by name in the responses, although it is presumable that those respondents who opted for “No competent leadership; Germans outsmarted them and had better strategy” viewed his generalship as decisive. According to this poll then, roughly the same number of Americans accepted the British excuses that the Eighth Army was inadequately armed as those who believed the German military leadership primarily responsible. What the poll also reveals is that the 18% of Americans who selected the unflattering “British were slow and unprepared” and “British won’t fight, not good fighters” indicate that the critiques about the lack of “toughness” had some traction in the United States. So, while the poll suggests there may not yet have been a “Rommel myth” in the United States, it reveals that a good number of Americans believed that at least Rommel and the Germans possessed soldierly qualities to be emulated, and a fair number thought the German commander capable of executing decisive military stratagems.

The contrast between Rommel and his British opponents was palpable. He was portrayed as bold whereas the British were seen as passive. He was deemed resolute unlike the indecisive British. He demonstrated courage leading from the front, whereas Auchinleck deferred to Ritchie. He exhibited clever strategies with tanks, the glamor arm of modern warfare, while his opponents blundered theirs into a trap. And then there was the setting in the desert environment, where the vast expanses of emptiness and logistical constraints compelled both sides to field small, yet well-trained forces; what has been regarded as a tactician’s paradise and a quartermaster’s nightmare. Most of all, the limelight did not have to be shared with other German generals and formations, unlike the other noteworthy Blitzkrieg triumphs such as 1940 France. The proverbial “great person of history” argument

is attractive, and unlike the ambiguity on the British side, there was no question who led the Axis forces at Gazala.

Masculinity, Race, and Rommel's Military "Sex Appeal"

What sets Rommel apart from many of his (arguably more able) contemporaries is that he seemed to embody certain fundamental virtues of masculinized warrior ideals, qualities that are cherished and esteemed in military lore. The mythos associated with him is more an idealization of what a military leader ought to be than an assessment of his resume. The reputation of the "Desert Fox" as a tank commander is a gold standard, an example to be studied and emulated, and thus suggestive of why US General Norman Schwarzkopf had Rommel's book *Infantry Attacks* on his bedside table while commanding US forces in the 1991 Gulf War.⁷⁵ This allure stems back to 1942 and has a thread of continuity to Schwarzkopf and to the present day. In 1943 journalist Countess Waldeck deemed that among all German generals Rommel "alone had all the makings of a myth."⁷⁶ In 1948, she elaborated in *Forum* magazine, which was then reprinted in the mass circulated *Reader's Digest*, that although Rommel was not the best commander, "he brought to modern generalship something none of the others had – a quality which might be called military sex appeal."⁷⁷ This assessment returns in a 1974 letter to the editor that invoked Rommel's idealized reputation to defend the Los Angeles Police Department against criticism it received for a shootout against the Symbionese Liberation Army, an urban militant group:

When I read every one of those letters by those do-gooder critics saying how the police should have handled the shootout of those "six frightened young people" my stomach begins to retch.

⁷⁵ Charles Leroux, "Rommel May Guide U.S. in Desert Warfare," *Chicago Tribune*, February 19, 1991, D5; David Lamb, "General Has Heart of a Romantic," *Los Angeles Times*, February 25, 1991, 1.

⁷⁶ R. G. Waldeck, *Meet Mr. Blank: The Leader of Tomorrow's Germans* (New York: G.P. Putnam's, 1943), 24-27.

⁷⁷ Countess Waldeck, "Rommel's Last Days," *Forum* 110, no. 5 (November 1948): 279. Countess Waldeck, "What Really Happened to Rommel?," *Reader's Digest* 53, no. 320 (December 1948): 129-133.

What kind of maudlin sentiment is that? Every one of those critics if confronted by a hissing cobra with spread hood would have chopped its head off right now.

People who live by the gun must expect to die by the gun. When you have to take an objective you take it at once because this is war and you cannot handle cobras with kid gloves or powderpuffs. You advance and destroy the enemy or your culture falls. There is no other way.

Every one of those police officers should receive full honors. I take my hat off to a swift, capable tactical force. Erwin Rommel, the real field marshal, would have been proud of every man.⁷⁸

This section aims to explore how idealized conceptions such as masculinity and its presumed connection with “real” soldiering have cut across national and ideological boundaries and help explain why people, even from enemy nations, attributed estimable qualities to Rommel or outright admired him.

The gender-themed explanations used by US commentators in the wake of the Axis victory at Gazala were not isolated occurrences. During the Second World War, the warrior model of masculinity mattered. When the British beat Rommel, commentators often framed their praise in gendered language. Churchill acclaimed British soldiers in the House of Commons for passing the “test of manhood.”⁷⁹ British editorials affirmed that the Germans were only as good as their machines of war, “no match for our men.”⁸⁰ After the Commonwealth victory at El Alamein, the *Daily Mirror* applauded Allied commander Bernard Montgomery’s leadership and characterized him as “in every sense of the word a front-line commander.”⁸¹ US commentators also praised Montgomery as “extremely virile,” a “firm disciplinarian,” someone who aimed “to storm Axis defense positions and take them

⁷⁸ Charles E. Higgins, “Letter to The Times,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 29, 1974, OC_A10.

⁷⁹ “House of Commons,” *The Times*, January 28, 1942, 8.

⁸⁰ “Lessons from Libya,” *The Manchester Guardian*, January 20, 1942, 6; “Battle of Tanks Still Raging in Libya,” *The Times*, November 25, 1941, 4.

⁸¹ T.E.A. Healy, “Monty Leads in Own Tank,” *Daily Mirror*, November 6, 1942, 1.

in hand-to-hand fighting” and was “frequently seen where the action is thickest.”⁸² In these portrayals, there was an intrinsic connection between ideas of manhood and military success.

Ideals of manhood and warfare have a wide diversity across cultures and through time. Yet when considering the connection between the two, namely the desirable role males have as combatants in war, that diversity sharply narrows. As Joshua S. Goldstein, an expert on international relations and war studies, succinctly observed, “gender roles in war are very consistent across all known human societies.” “The puzzle,” Goldstein remarked, “is why this diversity disappears when it comes to the connection of war and gender.”⁸³ There is considerable scholarly debate in this matter, though there is general agreement that the crucial links between masculinity and the military stems from the fact that soldiers are made, not born, and that men have almost exclusively fulfilled the role of combatants.⁸⁴ Many human cultures across time have constructed notions of “tough” males who can stoically endure the ever-present physical and psychological pains that come with war.⁸⁵ The

⁸² “Montgomery a Field Fighter Who Stresses War of Attack,” *Christian Science Monitor*, November 9, 1942, 7. See also James MacDonald, “That Military Giant - Little Monty,” *New York Times*, November 15, 1942, SM8; “Montgomery, A Two Fisted Vet, Rommel’s Match,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 6, 1942, 33; George Tucker, “Montgomery, Desert Leader, Field Man and Disciplinarian,” *The Baltimore Sun*, November 6, 1942, 15.

⁸³ Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 9. The evidence is overwhelming that women have proven time and again they possess the physical strength and psychological makeup to succeed in battle. But historically it is difficult to identify exceptions to male soldier paradigm. The Soviet Union’s mobilization of females during the Second World War is perhaps the best known example, yet less than one percent of Soviet *combat* forces were women despite having mobilized nearly 800,000. The best exception was the Dahomey Kingdom of the 18th century where women regularly served as front line combat forces (unlike the Soviet case). It is almost certain the Soviet Union and the Dahomey Kingdom were exceptional because both states were under dire military threat and in desperate need of “man”power/fighters/warriors.

⁸⁴ An insightful and substantiated account of the role women have played in war is Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

⁸⁵ David Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). Goldstein, *War and Gender* and Barbara Ehrenreich, *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1997) offer similar conclusions. For a more modern context, Martin van Creveld, “Women of Valor: Why Israel Doesn’t Send Women into Combat,” *Policy Review* 62, (Fall 1992): 65-67 is also relevant. How long humanity has needed (male) warriors is a matter of debate. Lawrence H. Keeley, *War Before Civilization* and Jean Guilaine and Jean Zammit, *The Origins of War: Violence in Prehistory*, trans. Melanie Hersey (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) originally published

recurrent parallels between military virtues and wider social definitions of gender were neither coincidental nor a limited trickle-down effect, rather “an inescapable emergent theme: the almost universal, intimate bond between warrior values and conventional notions of masculinity.”⁸⁶ War is hell. It does not require bloodlust, rather the self-discipline to suppress the instinct to flee and “soldier on” despite physical and psychological hardships. The admonitions of drill instructors, “faggot,” “pussy,” or simply “woman” – “the entire arsenal of patriarchal ideas” as scholar Cynthia Enloe eloquently noted – are the modern manifestations of a time honored practice of inculcating the message that becoming a soldier meant being a man.⁸⁷

No pure notion of masculinity exists. However, as sociologist R.W Connell has noted, within the multiple forms of masculinity present in a society, there can be one that attains hegemony depending what group(s) have attained leading positions and their perceived needs.⁸⁸ With the expansion of empires and modern states such as Germany and the United States forged in warfare, “no arena [beyond the military] has been more important for the definition of hegemonic masculinity in European / American culture.”⁸⁹ In the subculture of soldiers and military enthusiasts, stereotypical notions of gender roles have

as *La Sentier de la guerre: visages de la violence préhistorique* (Paris: Seuil, 2001) are trenchant studies arguing war (and the need for warriors) date far before the influences of civilization.

⁸⁶ Barry McCarthy, “Warrior Values: A Socio-Historical Survey,” in John Archer (ed.), *Male Violence* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 105-120.

⁸⁷ Cynthia H. Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You?: The Militarization of Women’s Lives* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), 14. See also McCarthy, “Warrior Values.”

⁸⁸ On the construction of hegemonic and heteronormative masculinities (in the media and elsewhere) see R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1995). Connell addresses the role and effect of the media on masculinity even more strongly in an article commenting on the effect of *Masculinities* ten years after its initial publication. R. W. Connell and James Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” in *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (December 2005): 829-859.

⁸⁹ Connell, *Masculinities*, 213. See also Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire, and the Imagining of Masculinities* (Routledge: New York, 1994) and George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

been preponderant.⁹⁰ During the Second World War, masculinized warrior ideals were acclaimed in public forums such as the House of Commons and the front page of the *New York Times*.

Regarding Rommel specifically, there are three masculine military ideals that are often attributed to him, and all three originated in 1942. First, Rommel often commanded from the front. This practice was impractical and anachronistic as a modern battlefield requires effective and constant communication from a centralized command post with the supreme commander at it (Rommel was very fortunate to have highly skilled staff officers to ensure the smooth functioning of the *Afrikakorps* when he was absent⁹¹). Yet, commanding at the front made an indelible, if romanticized, impression. The contrast between generals exhibiting bravery by leading from the front and the perceived chickenhearted at a desk hundreds of miles from danger “*afraid* to visit the line and see what’s actually happening there” [emphasis added] – as literary historian Paul Fussell put it – is difficult to overstate in military culture.⁹² Escaped British POWs witnessed this firsthand and the US war correspondent Denny unambiguously wrote that Rommel “was all over the field in person. In this war the generals of armored units frequently are in the van of the attack in their tanks.” Denny was correct about Rommel, but wrong about other generals. When the *New York Times* headlined on March 4, 1943 that “Rommel Led at Front” during the Battle of Kasserine Pass, the article text noted that General Eisenhower was there as well, such that “the two top men in the Tunisian campaign were at the front during this critical fighting.”⁹³

⁹⁰ Goldstein, *War and Gender*.

⁹¹ Samuel W. Mitcham Jr., *Rommel’s Desert Commanders: The Men Who Served the Desert Fox, North Africa, 1941-1942* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2007).

⁹² Quote taken from Paul Fussell, *The Boys Crusade: The American Infantry in Northwestern Europe* (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 9-10.

⁹³ “Rommel Led at Front,” *New York Times*, March 4, 1943, 6.

However, Eisenhower was not near the front lines and his reluctance to take a more active role and relieve his incompetent subordinate Lloyd Fredendall was a grievous error. Indeed, his biographer Stephen A. Ambrose flatly admitted that the man most responsible for the US defeat in that battle was Eisenhower because he was “not tough enough.”⁹⁴

Second, the “Desert Fox” embodied martial skill. According to Barry McCarthy’s study of warrior values across the globe, “the warrior is physically robust, fit, and proficient in the use of his weapons; he is also a shrewd tactician and planner, not merely a berserk thug.”⁹⁵ And it is this particular quality that is most overdramatized in the Rommel myth. That Rommel was a shrewd battlefield tactician is something even his critics admitted. Yet this iconography of the “Desert Fox” has ignored the reality that the German general made mistakes and was short-sighted with the more mundane (and less glamorous) administrative and logistical responsibilities for command.⁹⁶ Instead, mass media representations of Rommel the battlefield commander spotlight Churchill’s “great general” remark or use Rommel as a gold standard for tactical excellence such as in the 1970 US motion picture *Patton*. George C. Scott, who plays the celebrated American general, excitedly exclaims after a victorious battle against the *Afrikakorps*: “Rommel ... you magnificent bastard, I read your BOOK!”⁹⁷ The remark was a direct reference to *Infanterie greift an* [*Infantry Attacks*], the book on infantry assault tactics Rommel had written in 1937, an acknowledgement of a

⁹⁴ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 94.

⁹⁵ McCarthy, “Warrior Values,” 106; Mosse, *The Image of Man*, Goldstein, *War and Gender*, chapter 5. From a practical perspective, blood-lust is ostensibly undesirable in soldiers as it interferes with discipline and control by authorities. The valorization of martial expertise over brute force is reflected in medieval jousting tournaments, icons such as the Japanese philosopher swordsman Miyamoto Musashi, whose renown in swordsmanship was such that he was supposedly undefeated in sixty-one duels, and in public festivals such as modern military parades

⁹⁶ Creveld, *Supplying War* is the classic study in this regard.

⁹⁷ *Patton*, directed by Franklin J. Schaffner, (Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation: 1970).

worthy adversary who literally wrote the book on combat that Patton himself had implemented.⁹⁸

Lastly, the Western Allies recognized Rommel as an honorable combatant even as a Nazi and an enemy. Whether harkening back to medieval ideals of chivalry or the modern manifestation of an “officer and a gentleman,”⁹⁹ there were contemporaries who acknowledged Rommel fought by the rules. The correspondent Denny was captured by the Axis forces in North Africa and wrote after his release in June 1942: “to give the devil his due, I must admit the German troops acted honorably.”¹⁰⁰ And there was the perspective of British correspondent Alexander Clifford, who was with the Eighth Army before, during, and after June 1942. In 1943, after the Allies had expelled the Axis forces from North Africa, he wrote his retrospective *Three Against Rommel* (the “three” referred to British commanders Wavell, Auchinleck, and Harold Alexander, who would replace Auchinleck on August 9, 1942). In it he remarked:

The search for heroes [of the desert war] is irresistible ... if the whole great drama has a single hero I think it must be Rommel. He was the most permanent, most prominent figure on the stage. His were the most brilliant coups, the most bitter disappointments. He came with no desert experience, and he never had more than four German divisions. He had to use Italian divisions which he knew he could not trust. And nearly always he fought supremely well.

It appears that his own officers and men admired him, but disliked him personally. The Eighth Army adored him ... At one time the British propaganda machine [tried] to discredit Rommel. But the Eighth Army would have none of it. They knew too much. And they could not be brought to hate him either. For the desert war was a clean, straight, dispassionate war with no Gestapo, no politics, no persecuted civilians, no ruined homes. There was

⁹⁸ Carlo D’Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 668.

⁹⁹ Article 133 of the United States Uniform Code of Military Justice prohibits “conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman.”

¹⁰⁰ Harold Denny, “Here’s How Nazis Treat Prisoners of War in Africa,” *Chicago Tribune*, 1.

nothing with which to work up an immediate, urgent hatred, and the Eighth Army went on admiring Rommel. It did no harm.¹⁰¹

Clifford astutely added, “sometimes they admired him a little too passionately, for he did make mistakes.”¹⁰² Such a sentiment applies to many of the people examined in this study, not just the British Eighth Army. The focus on military virtues in the “clean” war in the Western Desert campaign has been such that it has often been referred to as a “war without hate,” a phrase that served as the title for the German edition of Rommel’s memoir, *Krieg ohne Hass* (1950).

The interaction between Americans and German POWs is another window into how idealized conceptions and superficial attraction could cut across national and ideological boundaries and prompted contemporaries to attribute estimable qualities to wartime enemies. The experience of German POWs in the U.S. is particularly relevant as the prisoners were often associated with Rommel, even though he never accompanied them in captivity. The bulk of the first wave of prisoners in 1943 came from those captured in North Africa (some 135,000 of the eventual total of 371,000 German POWs held in the United States).¹⁰³ Even though the *Afrikakorps* was only one of numerous units that surrendered, many historians have presumed the soldiers who fought in North Africa to be from the *Afrikakorps* and commanded by Rommel. In spring 1945 when US historian Sydney B. Fay wrote the first wave of German POWs, he referred to them as “Erwin Rommel’s African Army.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Alexander Clifford, *Three Against Rommel: The Campaigns of Wavell, Auchinleck, and Alexander* (London: George G. Harrap, 1943), 360-361.

¹⁰² Clifford, *Three Against Rommel*, 360-361.

¹⁰³ Matthias Reiss, “Bronzed Bodies behind Barbed Wire: Masculinity and the Treatment of German Prisoners of War in the United States during World War II,” in *The Journal of Military History* 69, no. 2 (April 2005): 476.

¹⁰⁴ Sydney B. Fay, “German Prisoners of War,” *Current History* 8, no. 43 (March 1945): 193.

Characterizations of those prisoners since then have included “from Rommel’s once all-conquering command,”¹⁰⁵ “Rommel’s Elite,”¹⁰⁶ and “Erwin Rommel’s celebrated Afrika Korps.”¹⁰⁷ As one scholar of the POW experience aptly put it, “the stereotype of German POWs in the United States was – and still is – predominately shaped by them.”¹⁰⁸ These stereotypes were multilayered and ambiguous. In 1995, US scholar Matthew J. Schott characterized the perceptions Louisianans had of the POWs:

Consider the attitude toward the Afrika Korps when it first proudly marched into the Livingston and Ruston base camps, in midsummer 1943. Field Marshal Erwin Rommel’s legendary “Desert Foxes” still sang the hateful, anti-Semitic airs and exuded confidence in Hitler and German victory. United States officers and civilians nevertheless admired their smart appearance and perfect drill that put the GI recruits to shame. Americans and the Afrika Korps exchanged ethnic jokes, sometimes about blacks and Jews, but mostly about the Italian POWs, captured with the Afrika Korps.¹⁰⁹

Schott’s depiction reveals the tension between attraction and revulsion Americans had toward the Germans. It also shows how common frames of reference such as military drill, race, and “smart appearance” could prompt Americans to focus on the positive attributes the Germans, in their opinion, possessed.

With attributions such as “Erwin Rommel’s celebrated Afrika Korps” and “legendary Desert Foxes,” military idealization was palpable. Fay remarked that the prisoners from Africa “were a tough lot” because “they had waged a remarkably heroic though unsuccessful campaign.”¹¹⁰ Thirty years later, Historian Arnold P. Krammer wrote, “These elite members

¹⁰⁵ Terry Paul Wilson, “The Afrika Korps in Oklahoma: Fort Reno’s Prisoner of War Compound,” in *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 52, no. 3 (Fall 1974): 362.

¹⁰⁶ Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), 44.

¹⁰⁷ Calvin C. Smith, “The Response of Arkansas to Prisoners of War and Japanese Americans in Arkansas, 1942-1945,” in *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 53, no. 2, (Autumn 1994): 345.

¹⁰⁸ Reiss, “Bronzed Bodies behind Barbed Wire,” 476.

¹⁰⁹ Matthew J. Schott, “Prisoners Like Us: German POWs Encounter Louisiana’s African-Americans,” in *Louisiana History: The Journal of Louisiana Historical Association* 36, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 277-290.

¹¹⁰ Fay, “German Prisoners of War,” 193.

of the Afrika Korps [were] rigidly disciplined and admired by their fellow prisoners and American guards alike as the cream of the German military machine.”¹¹¹ Some US officers deemed the Germans more desirable than the Americans tasked with guarding them. As one general put it: “These prisoners of war are hardened veterans of the African Campaign; they’re just about as good soldiers as there are in the world, and what I’ve got to guard them with is a bunch of cripples.” Enlisted men shared this admiration. As one guard from a Texas camp recalled: “They were a well-disciplined bunch of guys, physically healthy, well-trained, and excellent soldiers. They still maintained the dignity and discipline that they had learned in the German Army, and I – we all – respected them.” There were enough signals of this sort and overall fascination with German soldiers from US servicemen that the Provost Marshal General, the highest officer responsible for law-enforcement within the US Army, was alarmed at a potential inferiority complex and asked for suggestions “as to how we can prevent our military personnel in close contact with prisoners of war from being overcome with admiration for their charges.”¹¹²

Race was an obvious bond between white Americans and the German POWs, particularly in the US South where institutional racism had deep roots. It is clear from the evidence that racial perceptions and attitudes went beyond simply sharing jokes. Contemporary Louisiana county agents’ reports extolled the disciplined Germans in generating a profitable harvest while denigrating the allegedly shiftless black laborers (who were actually more efficient according to Schott’s research). Not coincidentally, many

¹¹¹ Arnold P. Krammer, “German Prisoners of War in the United States,” *Military Affairs* 40, no. 2 (April 1976): 70.

¹¹² Taken from Reiss, “Bronzed Bodies behind Barbed Wire,” 489-492. It should be noted that the best army candidates were allotted to combat units, which meant a qualitative comparison between German captive and American guards would weigh heavily in the former’s favor.

German POWs recalled a kinship with the black laborers they often toiled with because the latter were treated as prisoners “just like us.”¹¹³ The Japanese POW experience offers a sharp contrast. As scholar Ron Robin has observed, most Americans did not think German POWs should shoulder full responsibility for the crimes of their nation, unlike their supposedly fanatical Japanese counterparts. This attitude was reflected in a War Department booklet published for supervisors of German POW laborers, which suggested that the Germans prisoners could be reeducated and positively influenced during their captivity.

Robin notes the difference in perception between Axis POWs:

While the Japanese could be written off as intractable fanatics and inscrutable orientals, this pamphlet hinted that German political deviancy was not the result of irredeemable personality or racial defects. Given correct and selective presentation of American values, the POWs could conceivably be transformed from adversaries to disciples.¹¹⁴

The contrast was best summed up by one commander tasked to guard both German and Japanese POWs when he contrasted the experience by proclaiming: “[h]andling these little yellow monkeys [i.e. Japanese POWs] is a lot different than handling German prisoners ... The German was far more desirable. They look you in the eye. The Jap doesn’t.”¹¹⁵

Scholar Matthias Reiss argues the German POWs’ “bronzed bodies” were pivotal for understanding their experience and the fraternization Americans had with the prisoners.¹¹⁶ If the Germans were ostensible enemies, they were still perceived as prototypical men, the modern stereotype of the masculine ideal of youthfulness, well-built on the outside and seemingly virtuous on the inside, as described by historian George L. Mosse.¹¹⁷ The *San*

¹¹³ Schott, “Prisoners Like Us.” See also Morton Sosna, “Stalag Dixie,” *Stanford Humanities Review* 2, no. 1 (1991): 38-64.

¹¹⁴ Ron Robin, *The Barbed-Wire College: Reeducating German POWs in the United States during World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 8.

¹¹⁵ Taken from Reiss, “Bronzed Bodies behind Barbed Wire,” 502.

¹¹⁶ Reiss, “Bronzed Bodies behind Barbed Wire.”

¹¹⁷ Mosse, *The Image of Man*.

San Francisco Chronicle referred to the German POWs as “mostly magnificent physical specimens.”¹¹⁸ The *Augusta Chronicle* marveled at their harvest of the peanut crop: “There are no weaklings in the group of war prisoners ... here. Each is a fine specimen of physical manhood.” The paper’s praise of the POWs captured the overall good relations between captives and hosts in the Georgian community.¹¹⁹ A Swiss delegate of the International YMCA described the German POWs he had met as “all very best, clean and well-shaved – physically supreme, muscular types” and found it impossible to “imagine that these nice blond lads with rosy cheeks had been war baiters and murderers a short while ago.” A reporter from Oklahoma depicted the Germans at Camp Gruber, Oklahoma, as “youngsters, bronzed and baked in the North African sun” who were “uniformly neat, excessively polite, splendidly disciplined, these young men are – frankly – hard to dislike.”¹²⁰ Schott’s case study of American-German encounters in wartime Louisiana similarly reveals that white Louisianans during and since the war exaggerated the industriousness of the “handsome blue-eyed blondes” in saving their harvest and that many of the POWs were seen as “nice folks like American soldiers themselves.”¹²¹

Tasked with guarding such “magnificent physical specimens,” the US Army’s worries quickly went from security to being pestered by reports of fraternization. As Colonel J. McD. Thompson summed up in April 1945: “It has been found that most trouble which occurs in dealing with prisoners of war is caused by the civilian element rather than a failure

¹¹⁸ “Nazis Have a Chance at Democracy,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 25, 1943, 12-13.

¹¹⁹ Taken from Kathy Roe Coker, “World War II Prisoners of War in Georgia: German Memories of Camp Gordon, 1943-1945,” in *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 76, no. 4 (Winter 1992): 855.

¹²⁰ Reiss, “Bronzed Bodies behind Barbed Wire,” 482.

¹²¹ Schott, “Prisoners Like Us,” 281. Coker, “World War II Prisoners of War in Georgia,” Sosna, “Stalag Dixie,”; Robert D. Billinger, Jr., *Hitler’s Soldiers in the Sunshine State: German POWs in Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000); Betty Cowley, *Stalag Wisconsin: Inside WWII Prisoner of War Camps* (Oregon, Wis: Badger Books, Inc., 2002) express similar sentiments.

of prisoners to observe rules and regulations.”¹²² This bland bureaucratic language, however, misses the essence of the American fascination – by civilians and soldiers – with the German men. Other reports use more revealing language such as “an uncontrollable desire to watch them and try to communicate with them” and “it is amazing how much curiosity there is on the part of civilians and unauthorized military personnel towards the prisoners.”¹²³ The army believed the initiative and impetus behind the fraternization lay with Americans, and some anecdotes imply that may be correct. As German POWs were sometimes employed as agricultural laborers working in proximity with Americans, this familiarity provided contexts that led to incidents such as one reported in September 1944 at Fort Riley Kansas, where:

local citizens had complained that farmers’ wives mended prisoners’ clothing, and made them cakes or cookies for work well done. The climax came yesterday when several women unloaded carloads of prisoners at a branch camp here, following a day of work on nearby farms. One woman drove up with a prisoner holding a child on his lap.¹²⁴

While officially banned, fraternization was tolerated and fairly widespread. POWs whistled and waved at the women they encountered on the roads and in workplaces. And many American women flirted back. How many sexual relationships occurred is impossible to determine, but it happened enough that the Army was sensitive to accusations that security was too lax and scholars who study the German POW experience have consistently found evidence that sexual relationships were not isolated occurrences.¹²⁵

The German POW experience demonstrates how common frames of reference and idealizations could elicit appreciation from Americans, both military personnel and civilians.

¹²² Taken from Coker, “World War II Prisoners of War in Georgia,” 858.

¹²³ Taken from Reiss, “Bronzed Bodies behind Barbed Wire,” 493.

¹²⁴ Taken from Margaret Ziffer, “Higher Education at Camp Concordia: Denazification in Kansas” in *Online Journal of Rural Research & Policy* 12, no. 4 (2017) <https://doi.org/10.4148/1936-0487.1088>

¹²⁵ Schott, “Prisoners Like Us,” 282-284; Reiss, “Bronzed Bodies behind Barbed Wire,” 494-497; Cowley, *Stalag Wisconsin*, 25-26; Billinger, *Sunshine State*, 26-28.

However this ought not to be exaggerated as the perception that the prisoners were “arrogant Nazis” did not go away. In 1945, when Fay referenced the “tough” POWs captured in Africa, he also believed “80-90 per cent of them were still fanatically Nazi-minded.”¹²⁶ This connection was not surprising as by 1945 it was widely reported that Rommel was a political general (this development will be documented in Chapter Four). The POW experience suggests a crucial difference was interaction, that is, Nazi stereotypes were easier to maintain when directed at abstract groups or individuals. Where proximity or familiarity between Allies and Germans became possible, the outward superficial virtues of the latter often were taken as indicators of their character. The interaction dynamic also would apply to the Commonwealth soldiers in the Eighth Army as they were fighting in a desert environment that saw relatively more face-to-face contact between combatants and thus make it easier for them to admire “our friend Rommel.” Moreover, it is something to keep in mind for future chapters when considering how Desmond Young and Nunnally Johnson returned from their trips to Germany feeling more confident of their sympathetic views of Rommel.

The six months between January and June 1942 represent the crucial period when portrayals of Rommel went from a nondescript German commander to emerge as the “Desert Fox.” While British and US commentators acknowledged that Rommel was a standard of comparison, the evidence does not support that this was done as a part of a strategy to deflect attention away from the failures of the British army. It was done to spotlight what the British were doing wrong. And it ought to be emphasized that this narrative centered on respect for Rommel’s abilities was not the only one disseminated by the Allied media. The British

¹²⁶ Fay, “German Prisoners of War,” 193.

harped on missed opportunities and inadequate equipment. A Gallup Poll indicated that just as many Americans attributed the defeat to these explanations as to Rommel's strategy.

Churchill at the House of Commons did not even entertain these excuses.

The "Desert Fox" nom de guerre arose from an organic process that was rooted in the dynamic and unpredictable nature of desert warfare. The British Eighth Army was a force capable of winning and Allied newspapers reported it was in a superior position. Then, suddenly, the bottom fell out. People had to come to terms with what Churchill put it in his memoirs, "Defeat is one thing; disgrace is another."¹²⁷ Military experts and civilians drew upon military axioms to reconcile what appeared to be a dramatic reversal of fortune for a second time – recall that in late January, Allied newspapers had written the Axis off before they rebounded the first time. Rommel (and the Germans) seemed bold, smart, tough, adaptable, and were skillful practitioners of their weapons. The British were perceived as passive, hesitant, stuck in tradition, not tough enough, and clumsy with their tanks. And the small scale of the combatants in the Western Desert made it seem that the victories were wholly Rommel's. The mystique was palpable enough that the US Army translated and published *Infanterie greift an* in 1944 and Patton read it.¹²⁸

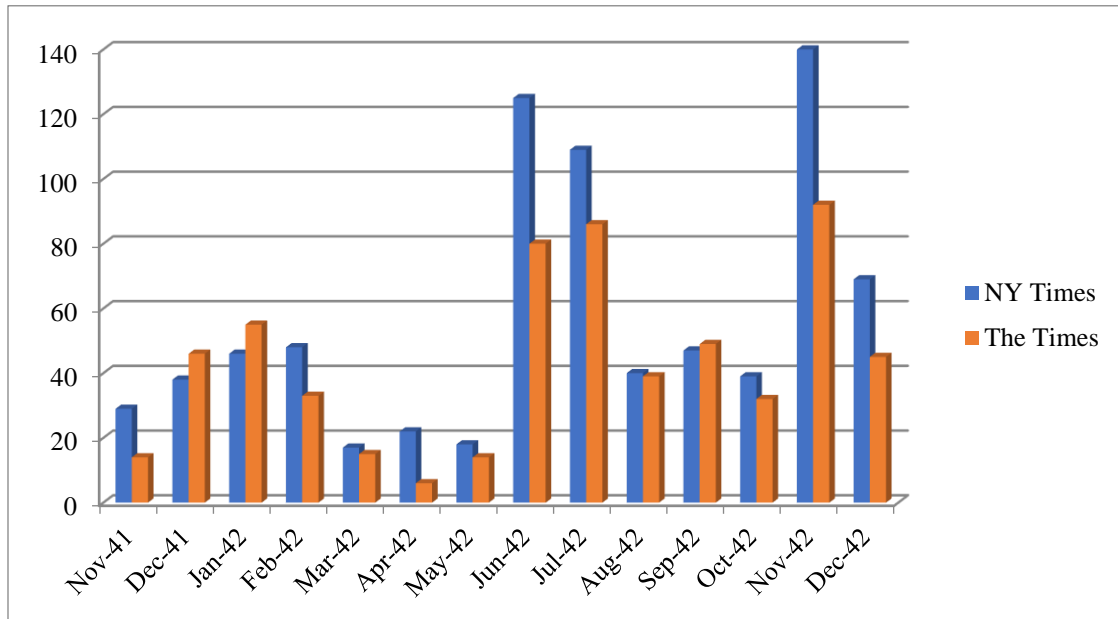
As will be demonstrated in the next chapter, Rommel had gained too much prestige within Great Britain and the United States. Stories began to circulate in the US South that he had stayed at modest hotels and eaten at local restaurants during the 1930s when he allegedly visited to study Civil War battlefields – a local legend which still had currency as late as the

¹²⁷ Churchill, *Hinge of Fate*, 383.

¹²⁸ Erwin Rommel, *Infantry Attacks*, trans. Colonel G. E. Kiddé (Washington: The Infantry Journal, 1944). Interestingly, the Associate Editor for the *Infantry Journal* attempted to demystify Rommel in the Foreword by writing, "He is a tough and resourceful leader, but as General Montgomery has twice clearly proved, he can be outgeneraled and outfought."

1980s.¹²⁹ One sign of the higher level of visibility Rommel had in Great Britain and especially the United States was the increased media attention he received after May 1942:

References to Rommel November 1941 - December 1942



Hitherto Rommel was a news item only during times of battle. Indeed, *The Times* practically ignored the German commander during the two months before Gazala. When contrasted with a similar lull in combat that occurred after the Axis advance into Egypt was halted toward the end of July and before the famous Allied victory at El Alamein in November 1942, Rommel’s stature was such that he received nearly as much coverage as during the peak of the “Crusader” fighting in January when Churchill’s remark was such a purported *cause célèbre*. But this was not just a quantitative change. Numerous Allied commentators now personalized the Nazi behind the German uniform by referring to him as a “Hitler

¹²⁹ “Gen. Rommel Visit in W.Va. Area,” *Washington Post*, July 10, 1942, 3; “A Rommel Myth,” *The Manchester Guardian*, July 19, 1942, 3; Charles Chappell, “Lawrence Wells of Oxford: An Interview,” *Mississippi Quarterly* 48 (Spring 1995): 319-336.

favorite” who enjoyed “kicking Englishmen.” Rommel had become such a “Magnificent Bastard” that Allied observers began to emphasize the bastard part in their commentary.

Chapter 3

Rommel and the Beast: Nazifying the “Desert Fox”

The increased Allied attention on Rommel did not go unnoticed in Berlin. One recorded conversation at Führer Headquarters on July 9, 1942 indicates that Hitler attributed the Rommel myth much as *Wikipedia* does today:

People frequently ask how is it that Rommel enjoys so great a world-wide reputation. Not a little is due to Churchill’s speeches in the House of Commons, in which, for tactical reasons of policy, the British Prime Minister always portrays Rommel as a military genius. Churchill’s reasons for doing so, of course, is that he does not want to admit that the British are getting a damned good hiding from the Italians in Egypt and Libya.¹

Hitler was mistaken for the same reasons as modern commentators who adhere to this speculation: he did not actually read Churchill’s full speeches, he accepted incomplete hearsay as true (in this case perhaps from a June 22, 1942 intervention by Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels),² and his biases led him to believe Churchill would do such a thing. Hitler thought such a tactic was folly and commented:

[Rommel’s] prestige impossible to exaggerate ... This shows how dangerous it is for a responsible person to portray his opponent in the manner in which Churchill has portrayed Rommel. The mere name suddenly begins to acquire a value equal to several divisions. Imagine what would happen if we went on lauding [Soviet General] Timoshenko to the skies; in the end our own soldiers would come to regard him as a superman.³

This is precisely why Churchill’s July 2 speech did *not* portray Rommel as a genius and made it clear that the British expectation was still victory. It is also why so many British commentators – which neither Hitler nor *Wikipedia* acknowledges – comforted themselves

¹ *Hitler’s Table Talk 1941-44: His Private Conversations* trans. Norman Cameron and R.H. Stevens (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), 573-574.

² *Hitler’s Table Talk*, 528.

³ *Hitler’s Table Talk*, 574. Hitler also noted that Mussolini was spreading praise for Rommel, which disproved the notion that Churchill had praised him because he hoped to sow discord between the German and Italian militaries.

by incorrectly attributing the defeats to being outnumbered, possessing poor equipment, or blaming their own generals. Another conversation (to Rommel coincidentally), suggests why Hitler accepted at face value that the British Prime Minister would use such dubious tactics: “Churchill is the very type of corrupt journalist. There’s not a worse prostitute in politics. ... He’s an utterly repulsive creature.”⁴

Hitler was correct in that Rommel was receiving inordinate attention on the Allied side. He was wrong about the reasons. Nevertheless, the image of the “Desert Fox” was there, and it was politically and militarily dangerous that an enemy general had such prestige. Allied public commenters thus responded predictably: they sought to tear down what they were already calling a myth. This was precisely what Auchinleck wanted to do before the Battle of Gazala in his often-misquoted order that remarked about Rommel’s unpleasant character.

During the summer of 1942, an additional image of Rommel began to emerge beyond the narrow military scope that had previously defined him: the disreputable Nazi. Investigating this development reveals that many of these representations are best regarded as propaganda. Rommel’s stature thus had two components, both of which possessed an element of truth but exaggerated the historical person: the “Desert Fox” and the “Favorite of Hitler.” Since July 1942, both would have adherents and the contours of Rommel’s reputation were shaped by the one public opinion leaned toward. This chapter examines the emergence of the “Hitler Favorite” reputation and concludes it reflected a parallel development in British and US societies that became noticeably anti-German by

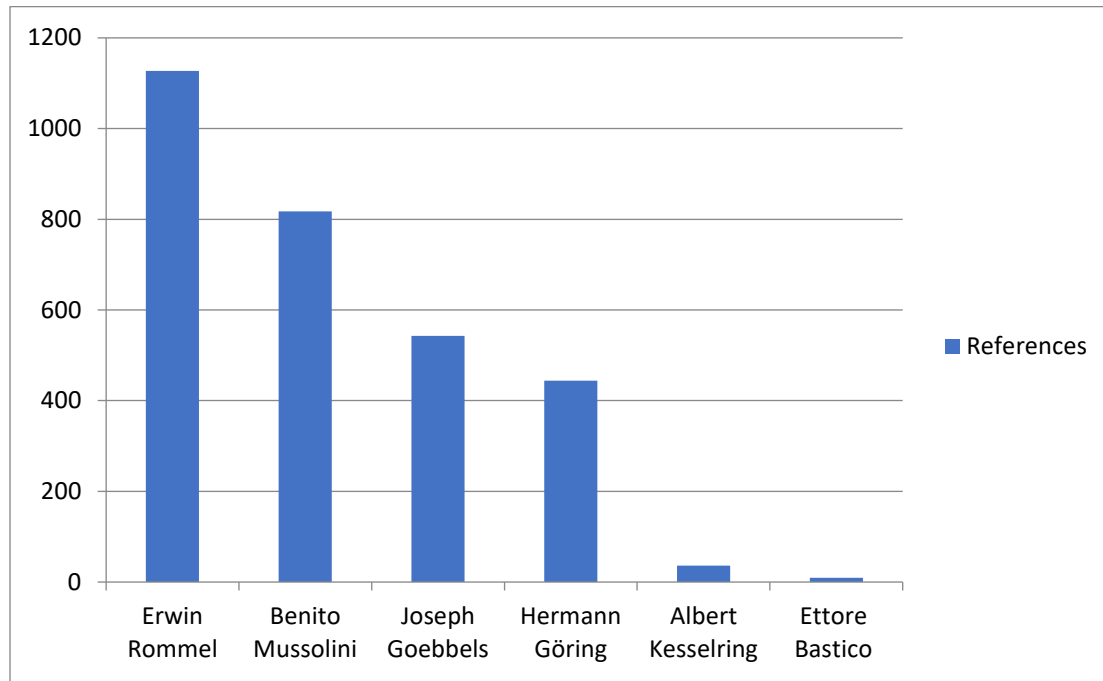
⁴ *Hitler’s Table Talk*, 318.

1945. As this view became predominant, there are indicators that more Americans and Britons accepted it and thus prompted a shift away from the “Desert Fox.”

Rommel the Hitler Favorite: The Nazification of Rommel

By the summer of 1942 “Rommel” had become virtually synonymous for “Axis forces in Africa.” The fame and prestige the “Desert Fox” garnered from his military accomplishments in Africa – unintentionally amplified by inaccurate Allied reporting – had made him if not the second most recognizable figure in the Third Reich (excepting Hitler) then certainly the face of the *Wehrmacht*. Rommel’s relative perceived importance is reflected in how often the *New York Times* referred to him specifically by name, compared to other Axis military and political figures.

References in the *New York Times* for African Campaign: Dec 1941-May 1943⁵



Even the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, a notorious political leader of an enemy nation, did not garner as much ink as Rommel did during the African campaign. The German marshal also dwarfed Göring and Goebbels at this time, two of the most identifiable political figures in the Third Reich who were referenced consistently during the entire war. The

⁵ Dates are from December 2, 1941 to the surrender of Axis forces in Africa on May 14, 1943. I chose December 2 because it was the date Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, Rommel's nominal superior, was assigned as theater commander for German forces in the Mediterranean. The date is close to the beginning of Rommel's meteoric rise and does not bias a direct comparison with his superior, Kesselring. A good argument could be made to make the end date on March 9, 1943, when Rommel was recalled from duty due to illness. However, Rommel's departure was not made public until after the African campaign ended so many Allied journalists still assumed he was in command. My selected dates are thus a bit conservative and may have a slight bias against Rommel. One other complication is that any numerical reference (such as Google Ngrams) is tricky with Rommel because simply entering "Rommel" into a database search will yield other Rommels as the name is not uncommon (besides missing references for say "Desert Fox"). During the Second World War, "Rommel" will include results for Ed Rommel, an umpire in Major League Baseball from 1938-1959, who is listed in the box score in every game he worked in. Most of the time, US papers include a person's forename the first time they are mentioned in an article (some British papers by contrast only use the last name). Thus, searching for "Erwin Rommel" or "General Rommel" is necessary whereas "Hitler," "Mussolini," "Kesselring," etc., suffice as false hits are anomalous. This still is not perfect as Rommel was promoted to Field Marshal in June 1942, yet afterward he was sometimes referred to as "General Rommel" and sometimes as "Field Marshal Rommel." I have gone with the very conservative route and just used "General Rommel" with the understanding that articles that just say Rommel or Desert Fox, etc., will not be included. In short, there are most likely more Rommel references than I am listing.

German theater commander in the Mediterranean and thus Rommel's ostensible superior, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, an astute commander with a strong personality, was all but ignored by the *New York Times*. Italian Field Marshal Ettore Bastico, the Italian High Command representative who was technically in command of Axis forces in North Africa, was also overlooked. The "Desert Fox" had relegated his ostensible military superiors to virtual non-entities in the Allied public sphere.

Almost immediately after the fall of Tobruk, representations of Rommel as a Nazi thug and "Hitler favorite" began to eclipse the military imagery of the tank commander with dust goggles. An excellent illustration of this shift and the reasons behind it are summed in an aptly titled editorial "Rommel and the Beast" that appeared on June 26, 1942 in the *New York Times*:

But we had better not concentrate our thoughts on this colorful military personality. Whether Rommel fights fair or foul his every advance expands the area within which the Nazis' sneaks, thieves and butchers are free to operate. In his train march all the foul camp followers of Berlin. Behind his tanks freedom and decency die ... civilization terminates.⁶

The beginning of the editorial neatly underscores the point made in the previous chapter about Rommel's military charisma: "The German General Rommel, who is now threatening Egypt, seems to be one of those soldier's soldiers who win respect even from their enemies ... He leads tank battles before lunch, air battles after lunch and in the evening, like an umpire in a sham battle, explains to prisoners why they lost."⁷ The *New York Times* then warned of the dangers of thinking of him as "one of those honest old German soldiers,

⁶ "Rommel and the Beast," *New York Times*, June 26, 1942, 20.

⁷ This particular anecdote has its origins with *The New York Times* correspondent Harold Denny who was briefly captured by the Germans and reported when he came back to the United States in June 1942 that he heard Rommel delighted in lecturing British prisoners on tactics. The story became a prominent staple of Allied reporting during the war and is often found in postwar Rommel biographies.

simple, essentially kindhearted, and nonpolitical” because “his fine talents, like so many German talents, are devoted exclusively to smearing this earth with the mark of the beast.”⁸ In short, the “beast” was an intrinsic part of the “Desert Fox,” that is whether or not Rommel was apolitical or fought chivalrously, his victories allowed National Socialism to flourish.

Many other representations during the summer of 1942 were more to the point and specifically identified Rommel as a fervent and disreputable Nazi despite his military talents. The *Chicago Tribune* admitted he won his title of “Fox” by his victories in the desert and that he “is a foremost advocate of tanks and he has a bag of tricks.” These affirmative words were juxtaposed with a subtitle that made Rommel’s intimate connection to the Nazi dictator unmistakable: “Hitler Confidante Since Early Days of Nazis.”⁹ Henry Harris of the *Boston Globe* called Rommel a “genius” and compared his generalship to famous commanders of the past such as Napoleon Bonaparte. Harris believed part of Rommel’s military skill was a consequence of his politics, specifically to the “gang warfare” he had waged as “a Nazi street fighter.” This implied that the “Desert Fox” was less the product of the traditional German military than of his Nazi connections. Or, as Harris put it, Rommel “was personally attached to Hitler, a Nazi Party General more than a German Army General.”¹⁰ In July 1942, *Newsweek* similarly reported:

The Nazi leader is a cad ... He rose to power with Hitler and in the process gloried in actions that would certainly have landed him in jail in the United States or Britain. Unfortunately, this rough and violent man is also one of the best tacticians that the war has produced.

⁸ “Rommel and the Beast,” *New York Times*, June 26, 1942, 20.

⁹ “Rommel, Crafty Panzer General, Called ‘the Fox,’” *Chicago Tribune*, July 5, 1942, 5.

¹⁰ Henry Harris, “Can British Prevent Egypt Falling to Military Genius of Rommel?” *Boston Globe*, June 28, 1942, D5.

To highlight the Hitler connection, *Newsweek* wrote that Rommel had “the honor of sleeping in a cot across Hitler’s bedroom door. He smashed unfriendly heads, blew up meetings....”¹¹

The *Daily Mirror* printed an excerpt from US journalist William D. Bayles’s book *Postmarked Berlin*, which depicted Rommel as a “policeman, Nazi Party member, Hitler tough, saboteur, Schutzstaffel (SS) leader and politician ... In every sense of the word Rommel is a Hitler General ... Of all the German and British generals, he is the only one who has shown true military genius.”¹² Gone were the implications that Rommel was a cog in an efficient German army.

If there were some public qualifications regarding the “Desert Fox’s” military genius by Allied commentators, there was little dispute about Rommel’s Nazi politics. The day after Tobruk fell, *Christian Science Monitor* journalist Edward D. Kleinlerer wrote that he had encountered Rommel planning “Plan Süd” (Plan South) during a 1937 African vacation. As Rommel had never been in Africa before his assignment with the *Afrikakorps*, Kleinlerer must have been remembering a different German than Rommel.¹³ Thus, Kleinlerer’s article is more indicative of his negative experiences and beliefs about Nazi Germany than specifically about Rommel. The columnist noted Rommel had a “frigid presence” and was “another of Adolf Hitler’s companions, those nobodies who have become a law unto themselves, ruthless, cruel, morbid, pagan.” Rommel had risen from his days as a policeman because:

[He sided with] Nazi roughnecks in street brawls. He was fired from the force in disgrace and attached himself to Hitler as a terrorist. He broke up political opposition meetings, smashed heads, beat up people, and dynamited halls

¹¹ *Newsweek*, July 6, 1942, 20.

¹² William D. Bayles, “How Rommel Trained His Men for the Desert,” *Daily Mirror*, July 2, 1942, 4.

¹³ Kleinlerer identified features about Rommel that were wrong such as writing that Rommel was tall when he was short and stocky. Also Rommel was not a general in 1937.

unfriendly to the Führer. His ruthlessness endeared him to Hitler, who made the future Marshal his bodyguard.¹⁴

This is likely another instance in which Kleinlerer conflated Hitler's early SA leaders and bodyguards like Bruni Gesche or Wilhem Brückner with what he heard about Rommel. On July 2, 1942, Robert Kapp of the *Washington Post* admitted Rommel was courageous and that the British had not concealed their admiration for his military genius on the battlefield. However, Kapp emphasized that the German marshal's most defining feature was militarism and repeated the story: "Policeman Rommel, who was a big and rough bully boy type, evinced a tendency to side with the Storm Troopers in the street brawls of the early twenties," and whose ruthlessness was "such that he won the complete admiration of Hitler. The future Fuehrer made Rommel his bodyguard."¹⁵ On the other side of the Atlantic, a letter to the editor in *The Manchester Guardian* also highlighted Rommel's purported Nazi connection and distanced him from the "other Germany." "Rommel is not, like Hindenburg and Ludendorff, from the General staff. He is the typical S.A. [*Sturm Abteilung* or stormtroopers; Hitler's infamous brownshirt followers] bully ... the only high Army commander who has come from the party." The letter then emphasized that Rommel left the army and "became one of the first Storm Troop leaders," as he found his Tübingen studies "less congenial than helping Hitler."¹⁶ In emphasizing the "beast" and distancing Rommel from the imagery of traditional German soldiers, these articles were meant to spotlight his Nazi credentials.

¹⁴ Edward D. Kleinlerer, "Rommel His Own Spy as African 'Tourist,'" *Christian Science Monitor*, June 22, 1942, 1.

¹⁵ Robert Kapp, "Erwin Rommel of Africa," *Washington Post*, July 2, 1942, 15.

¹⁶ Letter to Editor "The Rommel 'Myth,'" *The Manchester Guardian*, June 29, 1942, 4.

This emphasis on the National Socialist aspect can also be seen in the sudden interest shown by mainstream periodicals, which had largely ignored the relatively nondescript military general of just a few months prior. *The War Illustrated*, a popular British weekly picture magazine edited by journalist Sir John Hammerton, was unwilling to acknowledge Rommel as a military genius because the German marshal was “pitted against opponents whose arms were insufficient [and] whose leadership was contemptible.” His accomplishments were deemed “credible,” but the periodical declared that the “Rommel myth is *ersatz* ... a fabricated myth” created by the “exuberant fancy of Dr. Goebbels’s professional liars.” What differentiated Rommel, according to *The War Illustrated*, was his politics: “Rommel is not a typical product of the German general staff tradition. He is a typical S.A. tough; he is almost the only Army leader of high rank who has graduated from the ranks of the Party” and “derived his National Socialist ideology from direct personal relationship with the Fuehrer ... In him are embodied its core of dogma, the untiring drive of the New Reich.”¹⁷ The popular US weekly magazine *Time* featured Rommel for its cover story “Rommel Africanus” after the fall of Tobruk on July 13, 1942. Notwithstanding the gaudy title harking back to the Roman Consul Scipio who defeated Hannibal on African soil, *Time* deemphasized Rommel’s mystique by describing a practical general who produced results:

He had performed no miracle. At every stage of the battle he had merely fought intelligently, fought hard, seen what the next thing was to do, done it today, instead of tomorrow. He had merely shown what can be accomplished by common battle sense and the energy to begin the next tough job before its predecessor is finished.

¹⁷ “Rommel: The Man and the Myth,” in *The War Illustrated*, edited by Sir John Hammerton, vol. 6 no. 135, (August 21, 1942): 147.

The German general was thus not represented as an extraordinary military figure, but rather “like all good generals” was one who recognized “simple sense-making military things” and “extemporize[d]” whereas his British opponents did not. Like most of the other Allied portrayals, *Time* deemed Rommel’s distinguishing features his politics and disreputable character. He was “vain, arrogant and autocratic,” a ruthless leader whose character was to “kick an Englishman in the stomach,” and someone who enjoyed giving lectures “on the beauties of Nazism.” Rommel’s “frustrated longing for war turned him very early to the Nazis. He met Hitler in Württemberg, became a storm troop leader, joined a murderous raid against socialists and communists of Coburg,” an event that cemented the partnership between the two men. Rommel had since loyally served the German Dictator, “the only man on earth whom [he] looks up to,” and enjoyed “the honor of sleeping in front of Hitler’s door.”¹⁸

These are specific claims and many of them – the stories of Nazi street fighter, leaving Tübingen to be an S.A. leader, Hitler Confidante since early day, et al., were the same as disseminated by Goebbels’s Propaganda Ministry as shown in the anomalous political articles in Chapter One. Even the bizarre claims of *Time*’s “Rommel Africanus” about sleeping in front of Hitler’s door and simulated tropical environments derived – almost word from word – from William Bayles’s December 1941 *Picture Post* article.¹⁹ Virtually all of them were false or were distortions. But why would these journalists doubt them? Rommel was obviously an important and elite military figure and these stories were from Germany’s own media. These same Allied journalists reacted with incredulity, ridicule, and derision to most everything else that came from Goebbels’s mouth or pen. That did not

¹⁸ “Rommel Africanus,” *Time*, July 13, 1942, 22-24.

¹⁹ William Bayles, “Rommel,” *Picture Post*, December 6, 1941, 22-23.

happen here for most journalists because this particular fantasy made sense and, as argued later in this chapter, validated the Allies own anti-German propaganda.

Revisiting the recollection of Hanson Baldwin gives insight as to why the “Hitler Favorite” portrayal eclipsed that of the German strategist. Baldwin was part of the minority who publicly doubted that Rommel was fervent devotee of Hitler. It was a train of logic that was consistent with his dedication to relying on trustworthy sources and matched his desire to print objective columns, regardless if they contained unpleasant truths. Yet while Baldwin was elite at his craft and his contemporary perspectives were far more perceptive than those of the aforementioned Bayles, enough readers of the US newspaper of record sent mail accusing him of bias and even rebuking him of being “Goebbels’s mouthpiece” that he was left to conclude that, “many Americans believe only what they want to believe.”²⁰ Many people’s critical faculties drop noticeably when encountering information that conforms to what they are inclined to believe, even from dubious sources.

One last point worth emphasizing is that contemporary sources were *already* calling him a myth. The postwar hagiographies did not so much create the “Rommel legend” as they built upon perceptions and portrayals from 1942. And it is evident that the motivation behind the spike in media coverage of Rommel was to bust that legend. Tobruk fell on June 21. Many of the admissions of Rommel’s military skills examined in the previous chapter were published in the immediate aftermath. Only after the shocking defeat and the subsequent paeans did the British and US collective mass media stress the connections between Rommel and National Socialism. The *New York Times*’ “Rommel and the Beast” article, which cautioned against focusing on the “colorful military personality,” was printed on June 26.

²⁰ Davies, *Baldwin of the Times*, 115-116.

Subsequently a series of articles stressing Rommel's connection to Hitler were published. "Personally attached to Hitler, a Nazi Party General more than a German Army General," appeared in the *Boston Globe* on June 28.²¹ "The typical S.A. bully," was in the *Manchester Guardian* on June 29. "Won the complete admiration of Hitler," headlined the *Washington Post* on July 2.²² "The Nazi leader is a cad," asserted by *Newsweek* on July 6.²³ The *Time* feature "Rommel Africanus," which asserted the German general "performed no miracle" and enjoyed "the honor of sleeping in front of Hitler's door," was published on July 13.²⁴ The explicitly titled "Rommel: The Man and the Myth," was released in *The War Illustrated* on August 21, 1942. The chronology is clear. The view of Rommel as a good German strategist emerged in January 1942 (coinciding with Churchill's "great general" remark) and reached its apex after the British defeat at Gazala. It was in the immediate aftermath that the view of Rommel as a Hitler devotee was widely distributed. Late June 1942 was a tipping point for the reputation of Rommel.

Determining historical causality is never easy when there is no evidence of a trigger that would neatly explain why events unfolded as they did. It does appear that the sudden emphasis on Rommel's Nazi connections was a collective spontaneous reaction to the sudden upsurge of Rommel's prestige. It ought to be recalled that the fall of Tobruk came as a veritable shock – *The Times* had "complete confidence" the British would master the battle just six days prior and even Hitler did not anticipate the opportunity offered by the "Goddess

²¹ Henry Harris, "Can British Prevent Egypt Falling to Military Genius of Rommel?" *Boston Globe*, June 28, 1942, D5.

²² Robert Kapp, "Erwin Rommel of Africa," *Washington Post*, July 2, 1942, 15.

²³ *Newsweek*, July 6, 1942, 20.

²⁴ "Rommel Africanus," *Time*, July 13, 1942, 22-24.

of victory.” Because military historians have since calculated that the Axis drive into Egypt was unsustainable logistically,²⁵ it is easy for modern commentators to forget the danger Allied contemporaries felt. President Roosevelt stripped 300 tanks from the US 1st Armored division and directed them to Egypt. When his cousin and confidante Margaret “Daisy” Suckley visited him shortly after the British defeat, she wrote that the President

was depressed over the situation. If Egypt is taken, it means Arabia, Syria, Afghanistan, etc., i.e. the Japs and Germans control everything across from the Atlantic to the Pacific – that means all the oil wells, etc., of those regions.

When she asked whether victory was certain, he replied, “Not necessarily.”²⁶

The German press certainly took the opportunity to brag when the Tobruk fortress fell.²⁷ The confluence of these factors in late June probably explains why these portrayals of Rommel as a Nazi brute were then given wide distribution even though this information was available for over one year before. The *New York Times* was correct. It would be better if the Allies did not concentrate on the colorful military personality during a wartime crisis and many journalists took that sentiment to heart.

The key point to take away is that many Allied public commentators chose to prioritize the “Rommel and the Beast” representation and believed there was value in disseminating it. Alternative nonpolitical biographical information was available to Allied journalists. Yet, from July 1942 up through Rommel’s death in October 1944 and into the postwar period, the Nazi-centric claims that Rommel kicked Englishmen in the stomach and slept in front of Hitler’s door were preponderant. Recalling the *Das Reich* episode from Chapter One, Goebbels assuaged Rommel’s ire and put a stop to “vulgarity of the

²⁵ Creveld, *Supplying War*; Kitchen, *Rommel’s Desert War*; Barr, *Pendulum of War*.

²⁶ Geoffrey C. Ward, *Closest Companion: The Unknown Story of the Intimate Friendship between Franklin Roosevelt and Margaret Suckley* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 167.

²⁷ For example, *Völkischer Beobachter*, “Rommels herrlicher Sieg: Tobruk!,” June 22, 1942, 1.

propaganda being produced about him.”²⁸ Increasingly, German press articles from then highlighted Rommel’s military background, often printing far-fetched accounts of how his unconventional tactics produced extraordinary results. One example of the new focus came a few months later in November. For the occasion of Rommel’s birthday, his hometown paper celebrated the “great soldier’s life” by going into much detail about military exploits in both World Wars, noting Rommel’s continuous military service between the wars, and that he did not become acquainted with Hitler until 1933.²⁹ Goebbels found it useful to spotlight the cultivated image of Rommel as a “modern general,” unlike the traditional General Staff officers, of whom he had a low opinion.³⁰ Even in defeat, Rommel was portrayed as a military hero. Soon after the Axis mass surrender in North Africa in May 1943, the Propaganda Ministry radio broadcast “27 Months in Africa” reported how Rommel’s daredevil tactics and ruses allowed his inferior force to hold off the British Empire for 27 months.³¹ There was certainly a lot of sensationalist propaganda in the German media to choose from about Rommel. Allied reporters ignored the military fantasies and mostly opted to transmit the Nazi themes rather than the biographical facts of Rommel’s continuous service in the German army.

The veracity of Rommel’s professional and nonpolitical background was hardly a secret in Great Britain and the United States. His uninterrupted military tenure was

²⁸ Taylor, *The Goebbels Diaries*, entry for June 7, 1941, 399.

²⁹ “Stationen eines grossen Soldatenslebens: Die Vaterstadt Heidenheim gedenkt mit Stolz ihres berühmten Sohnes,” *Heidenheim und Umgebung*, November 15, 1941. Other examples can be found throughout the *LCER* collection.

³⁰ Goebbels’s divergent reactions to Rommel and Erich Manstein being awarded military decorations from Hitler within the same week during March 1943 is revealing. Especially as Rommel’s was a consolation for being ushered into semi-retirement whereas Manstein’s was for restoring the collapsing Eastern front after Stalingrad. Lochner, *The Goebbels Diaries: 1942-1943*, entry for March 12, 1943, 295 and entry for March 16, 1943, 300.

³¹ “27 Monate Kampf in Afrika,” NA RG 242 T84/276.

accessible enough for Simon Fraser, a British commando (a special forces soldier trained for operations behind enemy lines) and the 15th Lord Lovet, to argue in the British Parliament on October 1942 that Rommel's rise was not due to any political favor, rather by "working his way slowly through the arduous process that eventually brings a man to the top and makes him a Field-Marshal. He has now thirty-two years of uninterrupted service in the German Army behind him."³² Curt Riess, a dissident German journalist who wrote a damning condemnation of the German generals in 1942, titled *The Self Betrayed*, was exactly right when he wrote that Rommel became a legend and "then came the fictional part of the story" [emphasis added]. Regarding the Allied propaganda about Rommel's Nazi connections, Riess wrote: "Not a word of all that was true. Rommel had never left the Army and had never been a member of the SA or the SS. He had *not* met Hitler in the early days and certainly had *not* been interested in Nazism" [emphasis in original].³³ If Riess, an ostensibly hostile source, was able in 1942 to obtain credible sources to satisfy him about Rommel's apolitical background, this information could not have been difficult to acquire or believe. The same could be said for Fraser (a soldier, not a journalist with extensive sources) and his conviction to make such an utterance in the British Parliament. There were others who deemed the stories of Rommel as a longstanding Nazi dubious. In July 1943, Army historian Harvey A. DeWeerd found it highly improbable that Rommel had engaged in any Nazi Party activities.³⁴ Hanson Baldwin of the *New York Times* wrote several months before Rommel's death in 1944 that contrary to many reports Rommel was not a fanatical Nazi.³⁵ This did not

³² Hansard, the Official Report of debates in Parliament, "Lord Strabolgi's Magazine Article," October 1, 1942, http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1942/oct/01/lord-strabolgis-magazine-article#S5LV0124P0_19421001_HOL_7, (accessed May 11, 2012).

³³ Curt Riess, *The Self Betrayed: Glory and Doom of the German Generals* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons: 1942), 258-259.

³⁴ Captain Harvey A. DeWeerd, "The Rommel Legend," *Infantry Journal*, 53 (July 1943): 16-23.

³⁵ Hanson W. Baldwin, "The Germans Fight On," *New York Times*, July 23, 1944, 7.

prevent the same paper from proclaiming in Rommel's obituary that he had slept outside Hitler's door and led murderous raids as a Storm Troop leader.³⁶ Non-politicized portrayals of Rommel were uncommon after summer 1942, but there are enough from trustworthy sources to conclude that this information was accessible.

There were two views of Rommel that emerged in 1942: the good German military strategist from the beginning of January, and a Hitler devotee from the Nazi portrayals that emerged during the summer. Thus, there was an element of choice in what was disseminated, and it is significant that the false biographical information of leading Nazi stormtrooper raids in the 1920s and sleeping outside Hitler's door were preponderant by the time of Rommel's death in October 1944. This was no doubt an echo-chamber. Alternative sources on Rommel were accessible, but required a little digging to find; most Americans and Britons were probably swept along by what they heard and read. It is interesting to note that some people who did have better access to information or were more diligent in forming their assessments – such as Hanson Baldwin, Curt Reiss, Simon Fraser, and more generally some in British Eighth Army who witnessed first-hand the fighting in the Western Desert was clean – did not see him as a committed Nazi. That is something to keep in mind in later chapters when alternative views become widely circulated. In any event, most Americans and Britons during the war were reliant on hearsay and their inchoate feelings probably leaned toward the general “climate” of things. Thus, the partiality favoring sources that depicted Rommel as representative of National Socialism reflected deteriorating Allied attitudes toward Germany, which as the war dragged on, made fewer distinctions between Germans and Nazis.

³⁶ “Death of Rommel Revealed by Nazis,” *New York Times*, October 16, 1944, 1.

American and British Wartime Attitudes toward Germans

One of the central arguments in this study is that there is a correlation between British and US attitudes toward Germany and representations of Rommel, so it is necessary to look a little more closely into that general “climate” of public opinion. The investigation below reveals during the war, the view that Germans were persistent international troublemakers and willing agents of National Socialism become increasingly predominant in the public spheres of Great Britain and the United States. Epitomized by British diplomat Sir Robert Vansittart’s bestseller *Black Record: Germans Past and Present* (1941),³⁷ this “Luther to Hitler” thesis did not make distinctions between the Nazi leaders and German people. That being said, there are indicators that the prevalence of the “Black Record” narrative was over-representative of Allied public opinion, which was bifurcated and complex to say the least. Scholars generally agree that during the Second World War, neither U.S. nor British society displayed the anti-German hysteria that had been rife from 1914 to 1918.³⁸ Poll data suggest that most Americans consistently maintained a distinction between Hitler’s government and the German people and there were some voices such as the influential columnist Dorothy Thompson who steadfastly advocated that there has been “opposition from every single class in Germany” to the Nazis, who were “oppressors of Germany.”³⁹ So there were sectors of

³⁷ Sir Robert Vansittart, *Black Record: Germans Past and Present* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1941).

³⁸ Michaela Hoenicke Moore, *Know Your Enemy: The American Debate on Nazism, 1933-1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); John Morton Blum, *V Was For Victory: Politics and American Culture During World War II* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1976); Allan M. Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978); Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (New York: Free Press, 1987); Richard Milton, *Best of Enemies: Britain and Germany 100 Years of Truth and Lies* (London: Icon Books, Ltd. 2007); James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State, and Propaganda* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1998); John Ramsden, *Don't Mention the War: The British and Germans Since 1890* (London: Little, Brown, 2006).

³⁹ William J. Bosch, *Judgment on Nuremberg, American Attitudes Toward the Major German War-Crimes Trials* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1970), 90; Peter Kurth, *American Cassandra: The Life of Dorothy Thompson* (Boston: Little Brown, 1990). It is no coincidence that Thompson was a leading foreign journalist in

Allied published opinion that mediated anti-German narratives if not outright contested them. What likely happened was the general “climate” probably nudged the majority middle between the Vansittart and Thompson positions, that is, those people who did not have strong opinions and relied on hearsay, toward nebulous anti-German attitudes. It is worth looking a little deeper as it is not too difficult to see how that majority middle might have been nudged back the other way when May 1945 brought about a very different context, namely peaceful contact between Allies and Germans as well as a more suitable media environment for those who rejected the “Luther-to-Hitler” thesis.

The Roosevelt administration believed a “cautious crusade” was the best approach to ensure that public opinion did not constrain policy.⁴⁰ London held a similar view and in March 1940 circulated a memorandum stressing the need for complete victory, but identified the enemy as “the Gestapo, the concentration camp, Nazi vengeance ... to serve ruthless party ends.”⁴¹ However, both governments tacitly tolerated – and at times contributed to – narratives from the private sector that stridently argued Germany’s “Black Record.” The US War Department enlisted three-time Academy Award winner Frank Capra to film the *Why We Fight* series, which asserted, “The symbols and the leaders change, but Germany’s maniacal urge to impose its will on others continues from generation to generation.”⁴² *Why We Fight* proved so successful that at least 54 million Americans saw the series before the end of the war.⁴³ Capturing the discordance of the message Washington officially wished its

Germany from 1928 to 1934, and had herself interviewed Hitler in 1931. See also “Vansittart, Dorothy Thompson Argue the Hard Peace Question” *Newsweek*, October 9, 1944, 104-11.

⁴⁰ Steven Casey, *Cautious Crusade. Franklin D. Roosevelt, American Public Opinion, and the War Against Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁴¹ “Principles and Objectives of British Wartime Propaganda,” *BBC*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/hawhaw/8928.shtml?page=1>, (accessed June 11, 2012).

⁴² *Prelude to War*, directed by Frank Capra (1942: U.S War Department, Office of War Information).

⁴³ Peter C. Rollins, “Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight* Film Series and Our American Dream,” *Journal of American Culture* 19, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 81-86.

citizenry to receive and the anti-German theme in *Why We Fight*, one government official worried that it “makes a terrific attack on emotions ... It won’t help in the business of making a saner world after the armistice.”⁴⁴ London’s decision to imprison and deport thousands of “enemy aliens” – ironically many Germans hostile to National Socialism – and its preference for not publicizing or even engaging in debates about war policy did little to disabuse the notion that Vansittart spoke for Whitehall.⁴⁵

Washington also created its own Germans-as-Nazis production in the *Pocket Guide to Germany*. This booklet, written and published in 1944, was prepared for US GIs to explain in plain language the justification for the war and to offer what were deemed essential details about Germans and German culture. It forcefully presented two themes: that the lenient treatment of Germany in 1918 was mistaken and that the German people were guilty and responsible for Nazi aggression. The *Pocket Guide* observed that National Socialism “was a cruel new version of an old story – the story of how Germany, throughout history, organized her people time and again to become conquerors.”⁴⁶ It addressed the ethnic and cultural similarities Germans shared with white Americans as superficial:

The German youth is a nice looking chap, much like the average fellow you grew up with back home. You may ask yourself how a guy who looks pretty much like us could believe and do all the things we know he believed and did. The difference is inside him – in his character.⁴⁷

The *Pocket Guide* referred to a “German disease” that impelled them to aggression but reassured that GIs of German descent were immune because “the Germans who emigrated to

⁴⁴ Taken from Moore, *Know Your Enemy*, 164-165.

⁴⁵ Early in 1944, six out of ten Londoners gave “unqualified verbal approval” to the strategic bombing offensive and only one thought it ought to be stopped. Ramsden, *Don’t Mention the War*, chapter 5 for the poll citation and a general account of Vansittart’s influence and British wartime attitudes.

⁴⁶ United States. Army Services Forces. Information and Education Division, *Pocket Guide to Germany* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1944), 26.

⁴⁷ United States, *Pocket Guide to Germany*, 9.

America were the Germans who loved freedom and hated tyranny.”⁴⁸ To underscore this message, a sticker was attached on the front cover that reminded soldiers of the US policy against fraternization with Germans: “Keep faith with the American soldiers who have died to eliminate the German warmakers. DO NOT FRATERNIZE.” In emphasizing the presumably innate traits of Germans and warning soldiers of the “honest mistakes of an older generation,” the *Pocket Guide* argued that Germany’s aggression was rooted in its national culture and made no distinction between Nazis and the German people.

The *Pocket Guide* embodied a trend of anti-German public discourse that became increasingly predominant by the end of the war. When Germany’s defeat appeared likely in 1944, the anti-German pressure group the Society for the Prevention of World War III (SPWW3) formed and dedicated itself to the purpose of securing a harsh peace for Germany. It warned Americans in a full page advertisement in the *New York Times* that “We have been fooled once by so-called German ‘democracy’ ... It is time to teach Germany and the German people the only lesson they apply to others, the only lesson they understand: Force.”⁴⁹ The SPWW3 also distributed 100,000 free copies of its book, *Know Your Enemy*, to disseminate the notion that Germans of all political persuasions had always been “in their aggressive militarism and fanatic war spirit ... a permanent threat to all peaceful nations.”⁵⁰ The popular newsreel *The March of Time* released its October 1944 episode “What to Do with Germany?” it similarly concluded that “Germany’s crimes are the direct responsibility of the German people.”⁵¹ The liberation of the concentration camps and subsequent Allied

⁴⁸ United States, *Pocket Guide to Germany*, 10, 13-14.

⁴⁹ “It is High Time to Call a Spade a Spade,” *New York Times*, April 22, 1944, 7.

⁵⁰ Casey, “The Campaign to Sell a Harsh Peace for Germany.”

⁵¹ “What to Do with Germany?” *March of Time*, vol. 11, no. 2 (Time Inc., October 1944). The left-wing British *Daily Mirror* expressed similar sentiments in the beginning on 1942 in “What We Stand For,” January 17, 1942, 3.

“media blitz” reporting of systematic murder had an undeniable effect.⁵² In April 1945, an *Evening Standard* headline declared, “All Germans Are Guilty,” and the *Daily Express* asked, “How can the German people even begin to atone?” after the liberation of Belsen demonstrated “the depths of the sadistic brutality to which the German has reverted.”⁵³ Historian John Ramsden writes that by 1945, “there was every intention in the British mind of being ‘bestly to the Germans’ for years to come.”⁵⁴

The message that Germans were persistent international troublemakers and willing agents of National Socialism was thus quite prevalent in the wartime discourse of the Allied nations, especially by war’s end and in its immediate aftermath. As one 1945 study of US correspondents in occupied Germany concluded, “Their stereotype is, essentially, an identification of the entire German nation with a fanatical, arrogant, treacherous ‘Nazi type.’”⁵⁵ This development parallels the Nazification of Rommel portrayals since June/July 1942 that saw the transition from soldierly motifs to brutish stereotypes such as kicking English soldiers.

How Allied citizens received these Germans-as-Nazis portrayals is another matter. In the US case, traditional scholarship has asserted this collective condemnation of Germany resonated with public opinion such that historian Hans W. Gatzke wrote in 1980, “The image of the innately and incurably bad German was thus perpetuated, and its influence is still felt

⁵² Marcuse, *Legacies of Dachau*, 52-55. See also Norbert Frei, “Wir waren blind, ungläubig und langsam’: Buchenwald, Dachau und die amerikanischen Medien im Frühjahr 1945,” *VfZ* 35 (1987): 385-401.

⁵³ “All Germans Are Guilty,” *Evening Standard*, April 11, 1945; *Daily Express*, April 19, 1945.

⁵⁴ John Ramsden, *Don’t Mention the War: The British and the Germans since 1890* (London: Little, Brown, 2006), 209-210.

⁵⁵ Ferdinand A. Hermens, “The Danger of Stereotypes in Viewing Germany,” in *Public Opinion Quarterly* 9, no. 4 (Winter 1945-1946): 418-419.

today.”⁵⁶ Recent research into wartime anti-German propaganda in the United States has persuasively challenged this former orthodoxy. These scholars point to a wartime discourse on Germany that was fluid and at times contradictory and that public views of Germany were not clearly defined.⁵⁷ Even amidst the bitter fighting, the prominent US war correspondent Ernie Pyle assured his audience that the German military had fought “a pretty clean war.”⁵⁸ Contemporary reports illustrate that for most of the war Americans on the whole did not perceive the Germans as an inherently bad: a government report of August 1942 noted that American views were characterized by a “lack of crystallization [and] a high degree of suggestibility” and opinion polls show that even by the end of 1944, only 37 percent of respondents believed “the German people will always want to go to war.”⁵⁹ The loud criticism of the September 1944 announcement of the Morgenthau Plan, the common name for the US Treasury secretary’s punitive postwar proposal to divide Germany into smaller states and dismantle its heavy industry, suggests there was a gap between the anti-German published rhetoric and US public opinion.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Hans W. Gatzke, *Germany and the United States: “A Special Relationship?”* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 138; Carolyn Eisenberg, *Drawing the Line: The American Decision to Divide Germany* (Cambridge, 1996).

⁵⁷ Moore, *Know Your Enemy*, Petra Goedde, *GIs and Germans: Culture, Gender, and Foreign Relations, 1945-1949* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Casey, “The Campaign to Sell a Harsh Peace for Germany to the American Public, 1944-1948.” Deborah Lipstadt’s study of the US press and the Holocaust suggests a pre-1945 public skepticism (or disinterest) about press reports of the atrocities committed by Germans during the war. *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust, 1933-1945* (Free Press: New York, 1986).

⁵⁸ Taken from Gerald F. Linderman, *The World Within War: America’s Combat Experience in World War II* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 91. David French, “‘You Cannot Hate the Bastard Who is Trying to Kill You...’ Combat and Ideology in the British Army in the War Against Germany, 1939-45,” in *Twentieth Century British History* 11, no. 1 (2000): 1-22 argues that British soldiers by and large were not able to maintain a hatred for the enemy and that combat between them and German troops was relatively clean.

⁵⁹ Moore, *Know Your Enemy*, 137; Harry H. Field and Louise M. Van Patten, “If the American People Made the Peace,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (Winter 1944-1945): 506.

⁶⁰ On Morgenthau’s plan and American public opinion, see Moore, *Know Your Enemy*, 293-321; Michael R. Beschloss, *The Conquerors: Roosevelt, Truman and the Destruction of Hitler’s Germany, 1941 - 1945* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002).

In August 1945 (three months after VE day), *Chicago Sun* columnist Kenesaw M. Landis II mocked the stereotypes used by Allied media correspondents in occupied Germany by writing:

If a German was found holding his head up, he was denounced as arrogant. If he held it down, he was a whiner. If he smiled, he was trying to undermine our morale. If he held his face straight, he was sullenly plotting revenge. If he attacked Hitler, he was a Nazi in disguise. If he didn't attack Hitler, he was a Nazi without remorse.⁶¹

This represented a growing critique by advocates who believed anti-German hysteria was impeding rational policy and the everyday practicalities of administering occupied Germany. Although drowned out during the war, this development was already underway: as soon as US GIs set foot inside Germany in 1944, many of them disregarded what the *Pocket Guide* had told them and handed out chocolate to German youths, dated German women, and came away with a more favorable view of Germany than the Allied countries they had liberated.⁶² Journalist Julian Bach wryly noted in May 1945, “the GI reaction to Germany can be put this way: He likes Germany because he does not like France.”⁶³ The anti-German climate was built upon a context of wartime passions and stereotypes more so than a thorough historical understanding of the relationship between Nazi criminality and German society, what historian John L. Schell already in 1959 aptly characterized as “an ignorant animus against Germany.”⁶⁴ It is thus not surprising to see fissures in that foundation after personal contact between Americans and Germans and when policies became aimed at peace rather than war.

⁶¹ Taken from Hermens, “The Danger of Stereotypes in Viewing Germany,” 421. See also the logic of non-fraternization explained in *New York Times* after the war in Europe was over: “Ban on Fraternization Will Be Kept in U.S. Army’s Zone of Germany,” *New York Times*, July 10, 1945, 4.

⁶² Goedde, *GIs and Germans*.

⁶³ Julian Bach Jr., “America’s Germany,” *Life Magazine*, May 13, 1945, 104-114.

⁶⁴ John L. Schnell, *Wartime Origins of the East-West Dilemma Over Germany* (New Orleans: The Hauser Press, 1959), 13. Schnell’s work is dated, however recent research has demonstrated his perceptive and unorthodox conclusions were much closer to the mark than those of his contemporaries.

Recognizing this diversity of attitudes towards Germany is crucial for better understanding what appear to be dramatic transformations in the reputation of Rommel. He went from “Desert Fox” in June 1942 to “Hitler Favorite” by the time of his death in October 1944 and back to “Desert Fox” in the early 1950s. Rather than seeing these as distinctive phases in which Americans and Britons studiously swung between these two extremes, these two views of Rommel were intertwined with some minority of advocates steadfastly believing in one or the other. It was the vast majority in-between, who did not hold strong opinions and thus were inclined to lean one way or the other, that shaped public narratives of Rommel. The shift during the Second World War did not come about because of a thorough historical understanding of the Third Reich, rather it was the context of wartime passions and the preponderance of vague anti-German views that prompted people to accept at face value the stories that Rommel kicked English soldiers and slept outside Hitler’s door. There was a superficial character to that shift, and it is important to note that Allied attitudes toward Germany were multilayered and fluid. As the next chapter will show, the myth of “Desert Fox” was not entirely snuffed out when Germany’s “Black Record” was at the forefront of the news and many people’s minds. That persistence marked and defined the revival of Rommel’s reputation when the British and US publics shifted to a more favorable disposition toward Germans.

Chapter 4

Hitler Favorite and Last Knight

This chapter explores the duality of Rommel's reputation from the emergence of the "Hitler Favorite" view after July 1942 until the end of the war in 1945. Mostly it is a story of Rommel's declining military prestige in Allied representations and, as alluded to in the previous chapter, how he became more and more associated with Nazi politics and Nazi failure. With the waning military fortunes of the German army, the mystique of the "Desert Fox" dropped sharply once the Allies had concluded their victorious African campaign in May 1943. By 1944, judging strictly from Allied newspapers, his reputation had sunk to such a degree that many commentaries asserted that he was more of a potential political menace than a military threat. Yet underneath this echo-chamber there were perceptible signals that some people in Great Britain and the United States still saw Rommel as embodying iconic military virtues. It was a perspective that often correlated with a worldview that esteemed military traditions or held the belief that Germans could and should be differentiated from the Third Reich. Positive military imagery of Rommel was thus relegated to the private thoughts of amenable individuals, suppressed rather than supplanted. These images were two sides of the same coin; perceptions of him had become multilayered rather than strictly changed.

The "Desert Fox" Debunked: El Alamein

However much Allied commentators dubbed Rommel a Nazi thug and tried to devalue his military reputation, they were not able to effectively dispel the military mystique of the "Desert Fox" until the Eighth Army actually attacked and pushed him backwards. The third and final battle fought at El Alamein in October-November 1942, the famous British

victory popularly known as The Battle of El Alamein, provided such an occasion. Begun on October 23, 1942, the Allied offensive led by Montgomery pounded, plodded, and slogged its way to a decisive victory against the Axis forces by November 4. Although Rommel managed to successfully withdraw the core of his battered army over one thousand miles to Tunisia, it set events in motion that culminated in the elimination of the Axis presence in Africa roughly six months later in May 1943. In the UK after the battle, many church bells rang for the first time since the beginning of the war. Churchill later wrote in *The Hinge of Fate* his oft quoted verdict: “It may almost be said [the ‘almost’ often gets dropped]: ‘Before Alamein we never had a victory. After Alamein, we never had a defeat.’” Rommel himself immediately appreciated the magnitude of the Axis defeat. He wrote multiple letters to his wife during this time that the Axis would lose North Africa and flew back to Hitler’s headquarters and personally asked him to withdraw the *Afrikakorps* from Africa before the foreseeable Allied victory in that theater of operations.¹ Traditionally considered by the British perspective as the turning point in the war, El Alamein served as the springboard for Allied commentators to chip away at the considerable military allure that Rommel had attained during the summer of 1942.

Allied citizens were told this was a decisive victory. If Allied advances on a map did not look remarkable, the text in these articles accentuated successes and assured the Allies were winning: it was a “methodical, sledgehammer offensive” in which the Allies were “littering the desert with burned-out Axis tanks” and rounding up “dazed Germans and

¹ Erwin Rommel letter to Lucie Rommel November 14, 1942, NA RG 242 T84 roll 274; Erwin Rommel letter to Lucie Rommel November 27, 1942, NA RG 242 T84 roll 275; Erwin Rommel letter to Lucie Rommel December 28, 1942, NA RG 242 T84 roll 274; Erwin Rommel letter to Lucie Rommel January 19, 1943, NA RG 242 T84 roll 274. Hitler ordered his stenographers to not transcribe the conference, so accounts of the meeting vary. Rommel, *Rommel Papers*, 359-360. Linge, *Bis zum Untergang*, 21-22. Heckmann, *Rommel’s War in Africa*, 349-350. “Selection of Military Conferences with Hitler and Mussolini from September 1942 to March 1943” in *LCER*, reel 11.

Italians clinging to smashed positions.”² Once the Axis withdrew, the Allied media dropped any semblance of caution and broadcast the enemy’s imminent doom. Correspondents once again prematurely saw Rommel’s destruction by taking their cue from a confident Montgomery who declared El Alamein a “complete and absolute victory” and that “The Boche is finished in North Africa.” Thus, once again the British military has some responsibility for the erroneous assessments that appeared in Allied news outlets. “No doubt remains that a major victory in North Africa,” *The Times* proclaimed, “has been achieved at last. Rommel is in headlong retreat ... the enemy’s losses are crippling ... Our military correspondent called them catastrophic.” A few days later Britons read “[Rommel’s Army] is a scattered rabble fleeing blindly ... it is virtually impossible for more than a small fraction of the *Afrika Korps* to escape the net which is rapidly closing in around them as they twist and turn in vain in their effort to get away,” and that “the disintegration of the Axis army is proceeding rapidly.”³ US papers remarked, “there was no doubt Rommel’s army had been largely destroyed,” “Rommel in wild rout,” and “the Axis army in Egypt is ‘busted and virtually helpless.’”⁴ Even the normally moderate Baldwin portrayed Rommel’s army as

² British Headquarters opted to deliberately deemphasize successes while the battle was ongoing. However, war correspondents and editors were not adopting a more cautious approach. “Allied Progress in Desert Battle,” *The Times*, October 28, 1942, 4; “Enemy’s Moral Shaken,” *The Times*, October 31, 1942, 4; “A Tough Fight,” *The Manchester Guardian*, October 29, 1942, 4; “Important Advance by Eighth Army,” *The Times*, November 4, 1942, 4; “Allies Batter Steadily Ahead on Egyptian Front,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 31, 1942, 1; Don Whitehead, “British Win First Round in Desert; Major Test Looms,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, October 29, 1942, 3; James MacDonald, “Egypt Drive Gains,” *New York Times*, October 31, 1942, 1; “Egypt Counter-Attacks Fail to Dislodge British,” *Boston Globe*, November 2, 1942, 4; “British Win First Round in Desert Battle of Tanks,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 29, 1942, 11; “Still Advancing: Panzers Badly Battered,” *Daily Express*, October 29, 1942, 1.

³ “Victory in Egypt,” *The Times*, November 6, 1942, 5; “Eighth Army Advancing on Whole Front,” *The Times*, November 6, 1942, 4; “The Eighth Army’s Victory,” *The Manchester Guardian*, November 9, 1942, 4; “Panzer Retreat Turned To Rout,” *The Times*, November 9, 1942, 4. See also “Rommel’s Army in Full Retreat,” *The Times*, November 5, 1942, 4; “General Montgomery, G.O.C. 8th Army, Said Yesterday,” *Daily Mirror*, November 7, 1942, 1; “The Eighth Army Rolls On,” *The Times*, November 7, 1942, 4 calls Rommel’s army “broken.” Interestingly the adjacent column, “Pursuit of Rommel Continues,” describes the spirit of Rommel troops as “not yet so broken.”

⁴ “Axis Forces in Disorderly Rout in Egypt,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 1942, 1; James MacDonald, “British Sweep On,” *New York Times*, November 5, 1942, 1; Paul Kern Lee, “British Exult Over Victory,” *The*

“badly beaten,” with its “shattered remnants” in full flight from the British.⁵ This was thus the third time that the Allied press had proclaimed the *Afrikakorps* destroyed.⁶

In mid-December 1942 *The Times* characterized the tenor of Allied reporting, which attempted to break Rommel’s mystique:

The legend of Rommel as an invincible genius of generalship was decisively exploded in the battle of El Alamein, where he was outmaneuvered as surely as his troops were outfought. His exaggerated reputation being demolished, however, his solid professional competence remains ... The retreating army may claim to have withdrawn ‘according to plan,’ although it is a plan dictated by defeat ... German forces have deliberately declined battle ... [German propagandists] are claiming that Rommel has once more eluded and outwitted his adversary. There is no question of outwitting. It was always open to the enemy to surrender territory sooner rather than later.⁷

In their explication of military events, it is significant that contemporary military commentators were already calling Rommel a myth. British newspapers applauded the lessons learned from the previous summer, namely the excellent performance of its military leadership and the delivery of up-to-date weaponry to its soldiers. “Our leaders have done brilliantly,” “the plain fact is that Rommel has been out-generaled and his men out-fought,” “Both the strategy and the tactics of this signal victory have been superb,” and “Given a gun capable of taking on the Germans on equal terms we have won decisively in virtually every encounter” were the themes emphasized in the British press.⁸ *The Daily Mirror* ridiculed the

Baltimore Sun, November 6, 1942, 15; “Rommel in Wild Rout,” *Boston Globe*, November 6, 1942, 1; “‘Complete Victory’ In Egypt”, *Chicago Tribune*, November 6, 1942, 1; “Rommel Force, Cut to 25,000, Pursued Inside Libya,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 1942, D; Frank L. Martine, “British Chase Fleeing Enemy Into Libya,” *Washington Post*, November 10, 1942, 1; “Rommel’s Army Clogs Roads in Confused Rout,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, November 16, 1942, 1.

⁵ Hanson W Baldwin, “Rommel Not Eliminated,” *New York Times*, November 11, 1942, 9.

⁶ The argument could be made that this time the Allied reporting was comparatively on target. El Alamein was a decisive victory and most military historians believe that Montgomery, had he acted more boldly, could have cut off Rommel’s flight and thus eliminated the entirety of the Axis armies in Egypt.

⁷ “Rommel’s New Retreat,” *The Times*, December 15, 1942, 5.

⁸ “Victory in Egypt” *The Times*, November 6, 1942, 5; “The Eighth Army’s Victory,” *The Manchester Guardian*, November 9, 1942, 4; “The Build-Up that Was Given to Rommel: A Boomerang for German Propaganda,” *Picture Post*, November 28, 1942, 8. See also Morley Richards, “If Rommel Were an Englishman...,” *Daily Express*, January 15, 1943, 2

stature to which Goebbels had elevated Rommel and welcomed the return to a saner perspective:

There were many people in this country so obsessed with the advertised magic of Rommel that they turned him into a myth. Besides this giant our own generals were pigmies! Thank goodness the scene has changed. There are new idols today and they are British idols – the men of the Eighth Army and their gallant leaders. They have performed a two-fold service. They have routed Rommel in a fair fight and they have destroyed the legend of German invincibility.⁹

US commentators also downplayed Rommel's escape and celebrated the accomplishment of British troops.¹⁰ *The Atlanta Constitution* unequivocally asserted that Montgomery had "outplayed" Rommel and that the German marshal's "faulty tactics which were largely responsible for his disastrous failure to hold [the Alamein position] quite eclipsed the prestige he had won as a miracle man."¹¹ And some Allied press reveled at the occasion to mock the German marshal; the *Christian Science Monitor* noted that his alleged cleverness was now needed "to speed up in reverse."¹² Far from supposedly exploiting a Rommel myth to elevate the stature of the El Alamein victory, Allied commentators sought to demystify the allure of the "Desert Fox."

⁹ "New Idols for Old," *Daily Mirror*, November 24, 1942, 2.

¹⁰ C.V.R. Thompson "U.S. Papers Put British Troops Top of the Bill," *Daily Express*, November 17, 1942, 2.

¹¹ Colonel Frederick Palmer, "Rommel Was Overconfident," *The Atlanta Constitution*, December 20, 1942, 9D.

¹² "Rommel Debunked," *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 12, 1942, 7. See also "Nazi Version of the Retreat," *The Manchester Guardian*, November 6, 1942, 5; "Rommel 'Masterpiece' Hailed," *New York Times*, November 6, 1942, 2; Robert Powell, "Nazis Portray Rommel Run as 'Strategic,'" *Christian Science Monitor*, November 14, 1942, 1; "Axis Publicists also Reel under Blows of Eighth Army," *The Washington Post*, November 6, 1942, 2; Cartoon, *Daily Express*, November 17, 1942, 2; "Reds Taunt Fleeing Nazis about Rommel," *The Atlanta Constitution*, November 29, 1942, 7A; Henry Harris, "Earl's Son and Bishop's Son too Smart for Rommel, too Resourceful," *Boston Globe*, November 8, 1942, C2; "San Diegan Recalls Rout of Rommel in Last War," *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 1942, 24; "Italians Taken at Halfaya Comment about Rommel," *New York Times*, November 14, 1942, 2.

There are, however, certain aspects of the British victory that have tarnished its luster once the military events of the Second World War were more critically assessed in the 1950s and 1960s. Montgomery's forces were notably superior in numbers and had plentiful supplies, and El Alamein was not an elegant battle. Until Rommel ordered a retreat on November 4, it was a static slugfest characterized by high casualties, frustrated Commonwealth attacks, and methodical advances that were measured by yards. As such, it is sometimes thought that the Allies (and Montgomery) only won because they possessed significant numerical superiority and could afford to simply hammer the Axis into submission via costly attacks. Ernest Hemingway's 1950 jibe at the British commander by calling a 15:1 very dry Martini a "Montgomery" (i.e. ratio of combat forces) was hyperbole, nevertheless it represents of the opinion of many military subsequent commentators – and especially admirers of Rommel.¹³ Most importantly, the German marshal's ability to escape from El Alamein meant the Axis forces still constituted a danger in that theater, one that became apparent with the US defeat at Kasserine Pass the following February. Numerous retrospective observers have criticized Montgomery for not vigorously pursuing and destroying Rommel's *Panzerarmee* during the initial battle. As Barnett colorfully put it: "Montgomery's pursuit after Second Alamein showed all the bustling confidence of an archdeacon entering a *maison clos*."¹⁴ These reevaluations and the implication that Rommel

¹³ Hemingway first made reference to it in his 1950 novel *Across the River and into the Trees*. Hemingway had a personal reason to dislike Montgomery. See Jeffrey Meyers, *Hemingway: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 470-477. On the drink's name's enduring popularity, see Anastasia R. Miller and Jared M. Brown, *Shaken Not Stirred: A Celebration of the Martini*, (HarperCollins: New York, 1997), 51-52. Correlli Barnett's *The Desert Generals* (1960) was written with an axe to grind, yet it still is the best place to start for understanding the position of Montgomery's critics. My own assessment is as follows: it is fair to say Montgomery was a cautious commander whose penchant for waiting for significant superiority before attacking meant he was not adept at exploiting potential decisive advances. However, it also must be acknowledged that Montgomery's strategy nevertheless consistently produced victories in the African theater.

¹⁴ Barnett, *The Desert Generals*, 251.

was defeated due to events beyond his control will be important for understanding his postwar reputation.

Kasserine Pass: Spinning Defeat into Victory

In February 1943 when Rommel successfully extricated the core of the shattered Axis army from El Alamein¹⁵ and arrived in Tunisia, he was in a similar position as a year earlier after the British “Crusader” offensive: operating a consolidated and veteran army against advancing Allied troops far from their own supply base, this time the US II Corps commanded by Major General Lloyd Fredendall. As historian Martin Blumenson has remarked about the series of engagements between these two forces known as the Battle of Kasserine Pass, it was an unmitigated military embarrassment, a “disaster for the US Army,” which prompted (eventually successful) sweeping changes in its doctrine and command system.¹⁶ This author’s own grandfather, a veteran of the Second World War, more colloquially summed up the prevailing assessment Americans currently have of Kasserine when he declared, “Rommel kicked our ass.”¹⁷

But Kasserine Pass was not portrayed that way. The US press coverage read like wartime spin. Newspapers were upbeat during the opening engagements with bold headlines such as “Rommel Repulsed” and wrote of the enemy’s heavy casualties, when in fact the Axis forces were neither repulsed nor suffered any appreciable casualties.¹⁸ When successful Axis attacks prompted many inexperienced US troops to abandon their positions, US

¹⁵ Total Axis casualties from El Alamein were roughly 30% personnel and a much greater percentage of armor and heavy weapons.

¹⁶ Martin Blumenson, “Kasserine Pass” in Charles E. Heller and William A. Stofft (eds.) *America’s First Battles: 1776-1965* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 227-265.

¹⁷ Author’s recollection. When I asked my grandfather about Kasserine Pass in 2011, he used the same phrase.

¹⁸ Frank L. Kluckhohn “U.S. Tanks Tackle Rommel’s to Save Encircled Infantry,” *New York Times*, February 16, 1943, 1; Drew Middleton, “Rommel Repulsed,” *New York Times*, February 17, 1943, 1; “U.S. Forces Block Nazis; Eisenhower at Front Lines,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, February 17, 1943, 1.

Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson admitted this was a “sharp reverse,” but contended that it “should not be exaggerated” as it was just one setback in a “far-reaching invasion which has already secured much substantial success.” Like the British a year earlier, US newspapers attributed the Axis success mostly to fortunate circumstances such as reinforcements, inopportune timing, Germany’s new “huge Mark VI tanks,” superior “to anything the Allies had on the front,” and other excuses such as US troops being “thinly scattered because of the sketchy transport available to them.” The military reversal was treated as ephemeral and the German *Blitzkrieg* tactics were deemed “simple.”¹⁹ If the *New York Times* grudgingly admitted, “German forces registered a clear-cut local victory,” it still tried to reassure readers by printing, “the Germans would have to knock out five of our tanks to the loss of one of their own to be winning the offensive,” and that the enemy attack “bodes ill” for the Germans because US troops were “fighting mad.”²⁰ US readers would have had to read between the lines to determine that fighting at Kasserine Pass was not going well.

After the battle had ended, US columnists emphasized that the Allies had kept possession of the battlefield and incorrectly portrayed it as a blow that had sent Rommel reeling. This was classic spin. Indeed, whereas one US historian soberly characterized the debacle stating, “The Kasserine defeat is a classic study of how not to conduct a battle,” during the war the press gloated with misleading headlines such as “Germans in Peril” and

¹⁹ “Setback Is Viewed as Local Retreat,” *New York Times*, February 18, 1943, 3; Polyzoides, “Tunisia Blow Termed Bad, but Not Critical,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 18, 1943, 2; Charles Hurd “Stimson Reports ‘A Sharp Reverse,’” *New York Times*, February 19, 1943, 1; “Our Men in Tunisia Meet Famed German ‘Blitz,’” *New York Times*, February 21, 1943, E3; “A Serious Local Setback,” *The Times*, February 19, 1943, 4; “Tunisian Set-Back,” *The Manchester Guardian*, February 20, 1943, 4; Frank L. Kluckhohn, “How Germans Took Pass at Kasserine,” *New York Times*, February 22, 1942, 8; Daniel De Luce, “German Drive Slacken; Yanks Stabilize Line Near Algeria,” *The Washington Post*, February 20, 1943, 1.

²⁰ “War News Summarized,” *New York Times*, February 18, 1943, 1; “Devers Says Our Men Win in Tank Battles,” *New York Times*, February 20, 1943, 4; Harold V. Boyle, “That Tunisia Punch Bodes Ill for Foe,” *New York Times*, February 20, 1943, 4; Drew Middleton, “Germans Advance,” *New York Times*, February 22, 1943, 1.

“Rommel Flight, Full Story!”²¹ Many American editors and war correspondents assessed Kasserine as a “decisive victory” for the Allies or that the “enemy on verge of rout” and the “flower of German tank forces destroyed.” They praised the “magnificent courage of the average soldier” who outfought “Field Marshal General Erwin Rommel’s prized armored divisions,” and that “the German and Italian infantry was no match in the showdown struggle for the American boys.” When the *New York Times* stated the battle “turned the roads through the Kasserine gap into a smoldering hell of twisted and broken trucks and burned-out husks of tanks,” it was speciously referring to German wreckage when the Allies had lost more than five times the men and matériel than the Axis attackers. Washington affirmed these overly sanguine assessments when Secretary of War Stimson characterized Kasserine as a “clean-cut repulse” dealt to the enemy [!] and praised the “fine reaction” of US ground forces, which “came back with a vigor which the Germans were unable to withstand.”²² The US commander Fredendall, who was quietly relieved for his ineptitude and mismanagement, was publicly portrayed as a hero whose “brilliant counterpointing” and decisive leadership “saved the situation” and who came through “when the chips were down.”²³ In short, most reports suggested that after initial setbacks, American forces came back with a vengeance and routed Rommel and the Axis attackers, which simply did not happen.

²¹ John Shy, “First Battles in Retrospect,” in Charles E. Heller and William A. Stofft (eds.) *America’s First Battles: 1776-1965* (University Press of Kansas: 1986), 330; “Germans in Peril,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 25, 1943, 1; “Rommel Flight; Full Story!” *Chicago Tribune*, February 25, 1943, 1; The British *Daily Mirror* also reported Kasserine Pass as a victory in “Tunisia Huns in Full Flight,” *Daily Mirror*, February 25, 1943, 1.

²² As Stimson’s speech came after the newspapers reported Kasserine as a victory, it is not clear if the responsibility for the mischaracterization of the battle rests with Washington. As the US was in possession of the battlefield after its defeat, it was easy not to admit such a tactical defeat had taken place. See Charles Hurd, “‘Clean-Cut Repulse’ in Tunisia Dealt to Foe, Stimson Asserts,” *New York Times*, February 26, 1943, 1.

²³ Frank L. Kluckhohn, “Two Major Lessons Found in Survey of Tunisian Battle,” *New York Times*, February 27, 1943, 1; Drew Middleton, “Allied Press Foe,” *New York Times*, February 25, 1943, 1; Frank L. Kluckhohn, “Germans Turn and Streak for Coast as Allies Strike,” February 25, 1943, *New York Times*, 1; John Thompson, “Tribune Writer, Tells Why Axis Gamble Failed,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 25, 1943, 1; “Allies Halt Rommel Drive After Fierce 3-Day Battle,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, February 24, 1943, 1; Wes Gallagher, “Allies Shell Foe Pouring out through Tunisia Gap,” *The Washington Post*, February 25, 1943, 1.

There was some accurate and sober commentary available. In the British *Daily Express*, C.V.R. Thompson offered a biting assessment that condemned the defects in American leadership, lamented the poor equipment fielded by the US Army (interestingly Rommel had the opposite impression²⁴), and blasted the level of overconfidence amongst American troops.²⁵ *Time* was more forthcoming in acknowledging that “U.S. troops had been thoroughly defeated” and assessing the Kasserine battle as “downright embarrassing.”²⁶ The US Army was also under no illusions. Key officers such as Dwight D. Eisenhower, Walter Bedell Smith, Omar Bradley, and George Patton recognized that Allied losses were far greater than those of the Axis, Fredendall was unsuited for command and thus promptly sacked, significant reforms were necessary, and they admitted being embarrassed at the overall level of incompetence.²⁷ Yet, these trenchant observations were lost in the public narrative that celebrated a “clean-cut repulse” dealt to Rommel. Indeed, commenting on the overall accuracy of the information disseminated to US GIs, the correspondent at *Time* mused, “It seems to me that somebody back home must be feeding these boys an awful lot of stupid propaganda.”²⁸

Notwithstanding this correct assessment, it was the spin of an American victory at Kasserine Pass that was orthodox opinion, at least until the postwar era. It was not until February 1948 – five years later – that the *New York Times* contemplated the possibility that

²⁴ Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, 404. It is fair to say the United States never reached the performance standard of the highest quality German equipment (particularly in main battle tanks), but much of the armaments used by the US Army was still quite good and had more flexibility than German models. US equipment tended to be noticeably easier to produce and maintain, which meant even its standard infantry divisions would have potent maneuverability and require less maintenance compared to their German counterparts.

²⁵ C.V.R. Thompson, “America Makes No Alibis About Tunisia,” *Daily Express*, February 24, 1943, 4.

²⁶ “Wounds in the Mountains,” *Time*, March 1, 1943, 17; “World Battlefield: How the Yanks Fought,” *Time*, April 19, 1943.

²⁷ Carlo D’Este, *Eisenhower: A Soldier’s Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 2002), 391-404.

²⁸ “World Battlefield: How the Yanks Fought,” *Time*, April 19, 1943.

Rommel was not “routed” at Kasserine Pass, in a report about a British-authored memoir.²⁹ As defeat was spun into victory, there was no need for US commentators to acknowledge the distinctive skill of the “Desert Fox.” Most papers typically referred to him just as “Marshal Rommel” or acknowledged his earlier successes with guarded language.³⁰ As far as readers of say the *Chicago Tribune* were told about Kasserine, the incompetent Fredendall – someone whose own army considered an embarrassment – was touted as the hero and the battle was another defeat for Rommel.

On 13 May 1943, the campaign in Africa ended in complete Allied strategic victory with the surrender of some 225,000 Axis troops in what Germans sardonically called Tunisgrad. Rommel was not among the captives. He had been relieved of his duties on March 8, 1943. Although it seems logical Germany recalled Rommel to avoid a public relations embarrassment of having the war’s most publicized general captured by the Allies, this is incorrect. Rommel was physically sick, psychologically strained, and believed that Axis presence in Africa was doomed to failure. Hitler and many others who encountered Rommel, such as Göring and Kesselring, were struck by how pessimistic and unnerved the German commander was. They believed Rommel’s military assessment was borne from despondency and exhaustion, and in this appraisal, they were correct (although their own erroneous military evaluations were colored by an unrealistic optimism). All the principal actors on the Axis side – Hitler, the German High Command, Mussolini, *Comando Supremo*

²⁹ “Rout of Rommel at Kasserine Pass Denied in Reports by Alexander,” *New York Times*, February 6, 1943, 15.

³⁰ Drew Middleton, “Rommel Repulsed,” *New York Times*, February 17, 1943, 1; Frank L. Kluckhohn, “Rommel’s Crack Armored Division Halted by American Combat Team,” *New York Times*, February 23, 1943, 1; “Rommel Strikes,” *New York Times*, February 21, 1943, E1; Col. Frederick Palmer, “Odds Favor Allies Despite Rommel’s Notable Successes,” *Boston Globe*, February 22, 1943, 3.

(Italian High Command), and Field Marshal Kesselring – believed it vital and possible to hold the Tunisian bridgehead and invested significant forces to do so. The Axis needed an energetic commander to oversee operations. Rommel had to go. *Comando Supremo* and Kesselring persuaded Hitler to grant Rommel a “cure holiday” and replaced him with the capable Italian General Giovanni Messe. In sum, Rommel was dismissed because Hitler believed Africa could be defended, not because the German dictator foresaw defeat.³¹

Rommel’s dismissal is a key development when considering historical and biographical details: Hitler and Rommel once had unwavering mutual faith in each other but at that point were diametrically at odds over the war’s direction. The beginning of the separation can be pinned down to Rommel’s request to withdraw from the El Alamein position on November 3, 1942 and Hitler’s initial refusal, which he justified with the phrase “victory or death” to stress the importance that the Axis remain in Egypt. After dithering for nearly a day, Rommel eventually disobeyed and withdrew anyway, and the German dictator quickly sanctioned the move. But neither man ever forgot what both perceived was an unwarranted intrusion in their spheres of authority. This became apparent during the summer of 1944, after the British and US troops had broken out of the D-Day bridgeheads and were racing across France, when both men concurrently recorded their insistence that the other had made a grievous error at El Alamein that set in motion a chain of events leading to Germany’s precarious military situation. Writing his memoirs, Rommel called November 3, 1942 a “memorable day in history” that set a precedent when his role as a military commander was subject to unwanted “interference” from Hitler’s headquarters.³² At an

³¹ Heiber and Glantz, *Hitler and His Generals*, 46-47; Ciano, *Diary*, entries for January 5, 1943, January 21, 1943, and January 22, 1943, 566, 573; “Aus Schreiben Hitler an Mussolini, Hauptquartier, den 14.3.1943” in *LCER*, reel 7; Lochner, *The Goebbels Diaries*, 369.

³² Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, 317-334, 507-524.

August military conference, Hitler still insisted that a tenacious defense of the El Alamein line was the only way to save the situation. He then berated Rommel further by remarking, “he did the worst that could be done in such a case for a soldier: He looked for non-military solutions.”³³ Hitler and Rommel would eventually reconcile to a degree, but the unqualified trust between them was severed and their mutual misgivings persisted. Hitler hereafter always placed Rommel in subordinate leadership positions.³⁴ And by 1944 Rommel had opened himself more to “non-military solutions” such as circumventing the German dictator’s orders or removing him altogether.

Yet as Berlin maintained the fiction that the German marshal was still in command, Allied contemporaries remained in the dark. The Nazi leadership tied Axis fortunes in Africa to the German marshal so much that the Propaganda Ministry opted to muzzle Rommel’s dismissal as it would be too difficult to explain to German citizens why the war-hero of the African campaign was no longer on the scene. This tactic had a certain logic as Berlin was confident its Tunisian bridgehead was tenable. However, as the Axis position quickly deteriorated, Goebbels had to resort to damage control and recognized this was not an easy task. As he wrote in his diary, “a military authority such as Rommel enjoys just can’t be created at will and then taken away at will.”³⁵

The Propaganda Minister was correct about the difficulty of creating such military reputations. Managing them also proved insuperable. Goebbels’s tactics were counterproductive. Germany’s decision to sustain an illusionary Rommel command

³³ Heiber and Glantz, *Hitler and His Generals*, 465.

³⁴ Hitler chose Kesselring over Rommel to command the Italian Theater of operations in October 1943, reaffirmed Rundstedt’s authority as supreme commander over Rommel in France in January 1944, and replaced Rundstedt with Field Marshal Günther von Kluge instead of Rommel in July 1944.

³⁵ Lochner, *The Goebbels Diaries: 1942-1943*, entry for May 10, 1943, 369. Original in Elke Fröhlich (ed.), *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels Teil II Diktate 1941-1945*, Band 8 April-Juni 1943 (Munich: K.G. Saur, 1993), 266

backfired as some Allied commentators attributed the rapid Axis deterioration to Rommel. *The Manchester Guardian* mused: “The military reputation of Rommel may be subject to a severe revision by those who – some of them even in the camp of his enemies – thought that he was an extraordinarily gifted strategist.”³⁶ Goebbels himself recognized the tone of the Allied press when he recorded in his diary on April 11, “The enemy press is now getting after Rommel in an infamous and shameless way.”³⁷ Attempting to deflect blame elsewhere, he issued a communiqué stating Rommel had not been in North Africa for months so that “Mussolini must pay dearly for being so insistent about Rommel’s recall.”³⁸ The high hopes he had placed in it were mixed. Nearly two weeks later, the Propaganda Minister lamented in his diary about a precipitous drop in morale throughout Germany and that “The communiqué about Rommel, too, has not absolutely convinced certain sections of our people.”³⁹ Moreover, Allied commentators were accusing Rommel of cowardice: “But the erstwhile Desert Fox probably suspected disaster was coming and saved his own skin by playing sick and returning to Berlin.”⁴⁰ Eisenhower still believed this when he wrote his war memoir in 1948, “Rommel himself escaped before the final debacle, apparently seeing the inevitable and earnestly desiring to save his own skin. The myth of his and Nazi invincibility had been completely destroyed.”⁴¹

³⁶ “Flaws in Axis Strategy,” *The Manchester Guardian*, March 9, 1943, 5.

³⁷ Lochner, *The Goebbels Diaries*, entry for April 11, 1942, 324.

³⁸ Lochner, *The Goebbels Diaries: 1942-1943*, entry for May 10, 1943, 369. See also Reuth, *End of a Legend*, 156-159. Rommel personally met with Mussolini after the El Alamein defeat and the Italian dictator (like others) was struck by how pessimistic and lethargic Rommel was. Mussolini previously thought highly of Rommel. Since Mussolini desired not to evacuate Africa, he was quickly convinced by Germans he was on good terms with (such as Albert Kesselring) of the logic to replace Rommel, in part because of his own vanity (an Italian general would lead the Axis forces in Africa and Mussolini was indignant how Rommel and the Germans got all the credit for the victories achieved in that theater). Goebbels here is conveniently forgetting that replacing Rommel was a German initiative.

³⁹ Lochner, *The Goebbels Diaries: 1942-1943*, entry for May 22, 1943, 389.

⁴⁰ Pierre J. Huss, “Nazi Plan Called for Defense of Tunisia Front Until October,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 15, 1943.

⁴¹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1948), 156.

Rommel's military reputation in Allied military circles during 1943 was probably best articulated by Captain Harvey A. DeWeerd's article "The Rommel Legend," which appeared in the July 1943 edition of *Infantry Journal*, a semi-official periodical published by the US Army. It is clear from the article that DeWeerd, a military historian temporarily commissioned into the US Army, was well versed in the British sources. This, combined with his references to what the German press printed, made his perspective on Rommel as comprehensive as any on the Allied side at that time. DeWeerd saw Rommel as "unquestionably a tactician and military organizer of real ability" but believed his considerable public stature was the consequence of Nazi "legend builders" who claimed the German marshal was everywhere doing everything. The article attempted to deemphasize the legend by stressing the fortunate circumstances that Rommel took advantage of, namely the lack of competent British leadership before Montgomery and that "until the Autumn of 1942 Rommel always enjoyed qualitative superiority in tank and antitank equipment." This analysis came close to the public British explanation for its defeats in 1942, as did his quotation of Moorehead's verdict that Rommel's exhibited genius was because "the Afrika Korps was a better fighting organization at that stage than the Eighth Army."⁴² There are acknowledgments of his skills as a tactician, but the luster that the "Desert Fox" had garnered a year earlier had waned noticeably.

As the African campaign, Rommel's campaign, was now over, Rommel would never again receive nearly as much attention from Allied commentators. His perceived military importance declined considerably as politics soon became the predominant prism through which Allied commentators portrayed him. This was, in a sense, an ironic development in

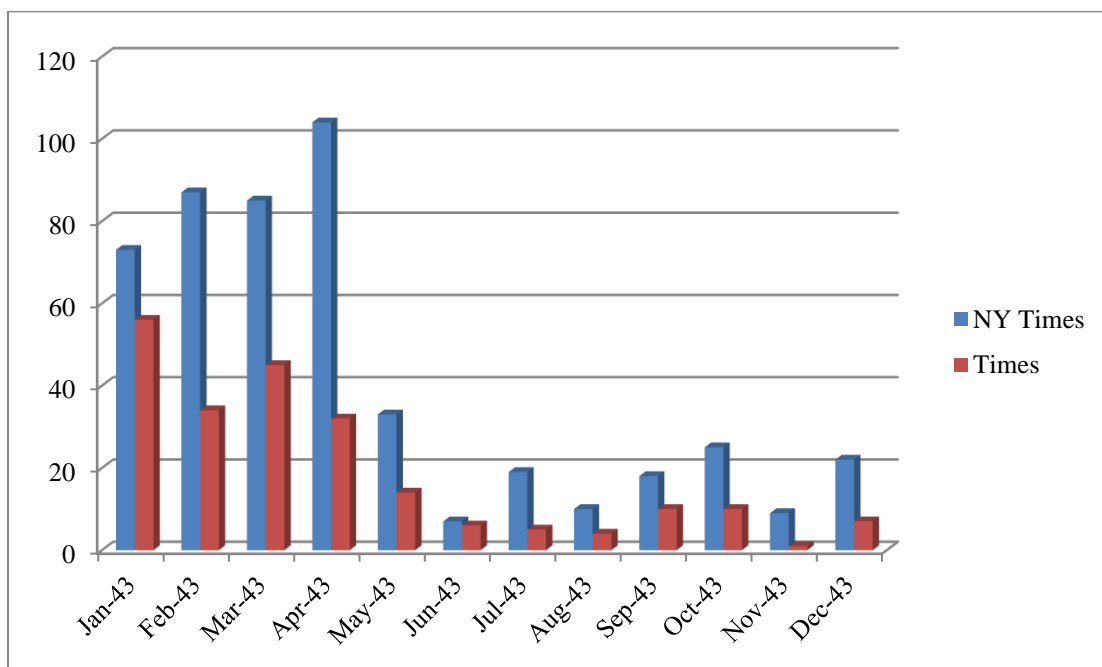
⁴² DeWeerd, "The Rommel Legend."

that as Germany’s military prospects precipitously declined Rommel himself also began to place more importance upon the political realm and on “non-military solutions,” which set Rommel on a path that would end with in his death in October 1944.

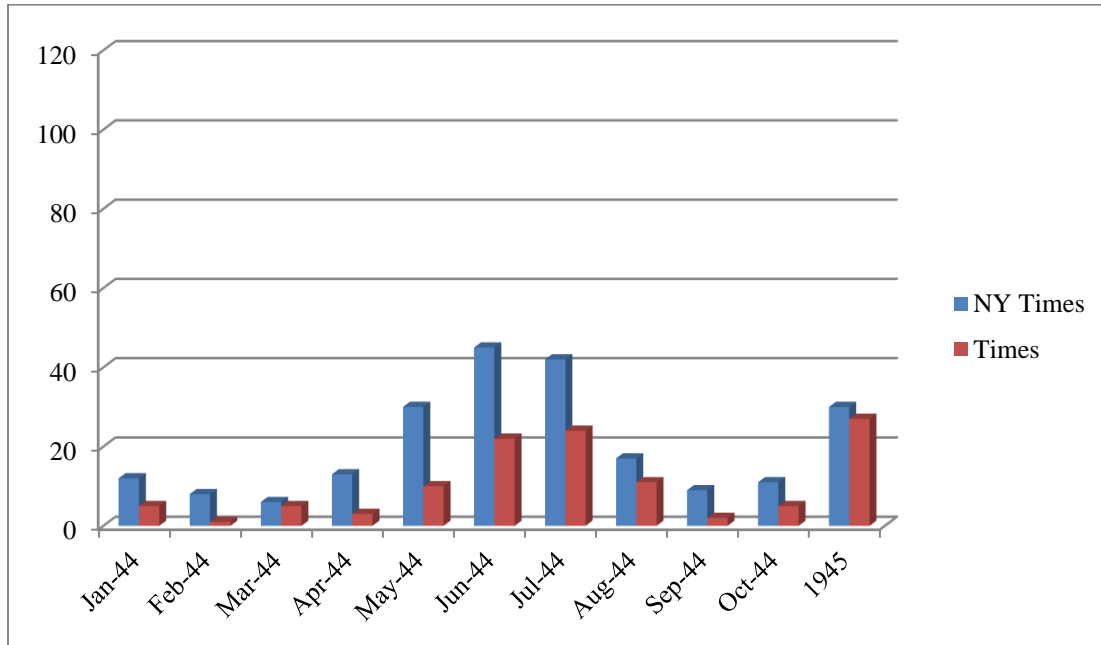
The Eclipse of the Military Vector: May 1943 – 1945

Once the Allies completed their successful campaign in Africa, reporting and news on Rommel fell dramatically.

Articles in which Rommel appeared during 1943

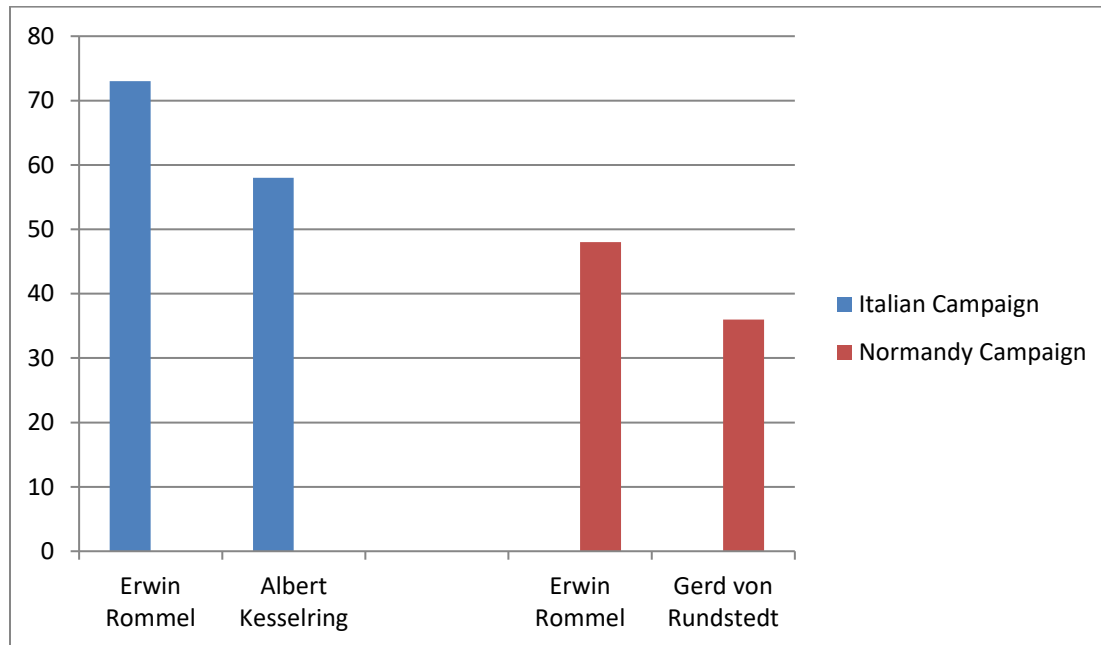


Articles in which Rommel appeared during 1944-1945



Not even his role as anti-invasion chief in France after December 1943 – an appointment the Germans heavily publicized – rekindled interest in the “Desert Fox” military phenomenon of two summers prior. A quantitative comparison of the *New York Times* reporting with the other high ranking German field marshals further suggests that Rommel was viewed less distinctively.

References to German Commanders for late war European campaigns⁴³



This development has some explanation regarding military aesthetics. As historian Samuel B. Hynes has noted, the clash between the two small elite forces in the Western Desert without civilians but ample freedom of movement made it a tactician's paradise, "the romance of tank war."⁴⁴ This setting was replaced by the more mundane European landscape where huge armies in excess of a million men battled. Also, the greater competency and numbers of the British and American forces arrayed against the *Wehrmacht* ensured the initiative and most of the military successes – and glory – lay with the Allies. With the German armies, although fighting tenaciously and effectively, in almost constant retreat

⁴³ Italian campaign dates are from the invasion of Sicily on July 9, 1943 until the day after Rommel's appointment as an anti-invasion chief on November 22, 1943. I chose the day after to account for that news appearing in the papers. While both Kesselring and Rommel were stationed in Italy, command responsibility was divided between them until Kesselring assumed supreme command upon Rommel's appointment to France. Normandy Campaign dates are from June 6, 1944 until July 7, 1944, when news of Rundstedt's dismissal as Commander in Chief West was reported by Allied journalists.

⁴⁴ Samuel Hynes, *The Solders' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 139-143.

against Allied forces, the *Wehrmacht* could not deliver the ripostes that had earned Rommel his nom de guerre.⁴⁵

The military distinctiveness that had once characterized portrayals of Rommel all but ceased. The three-time Oscar nominated 1943 motion picture *Five Graves to Cairo*, the first time Rommel was portrayed on Hollywood's Silver Screen, is an early and suggestive example. The spy-thriller film takes place in the summer of 1942 when the Axis advanced into Egypt in the wake of the Commonwealth defeat at Tobruk. It emphasizes the ideological importance of the military conflict in Africa and thus underlines the point made in the summer of 1942 by the *New York Times* that however colorful a military personality Rommel was, the Nazi beast he fought for still smeared the earth. This was hardly surprising given the director, Billy Wilder, was a Jewish refugee who fled Hitler's Germany. The film clearly defined Germans as villains; they shoot their Italian allies for stealing water, there are references to "bodies piled up" at Tobruk, and by the end of the film one of the film's major characters, the French chambermaid Mouche, comes to accept that the stakes of Allied victory are more important than the well-being of her own brother. Rommel, played by Austrian actor Erich von Stroheim, is portrayed more as an obnoxious braggart than as a genius. On screen, Stroheim only responds when referred to as "Your Excellency" and admits the key to capturing Cairo is not his military strategy, rather a series of hidden supply dumps the Germans secretly stashed in the Western Desert before the war. What distinguishes the film's depiction of Rommel as a Nazi and not merely as a loud-mouthed

⁴⁵ Much of this was due to the chaotic German command structure and excellent Allied campaign of misinformation that stymied an effective response to the D-Day invasion. The decisive counterattack that Rommel and Rundstedt recognized was necessary to defeat the Allied landing would not come until December in what is generally known as the Battle of the Bulge, but by then it was too little, too late, too ineffective, and Rommel was already dead.

egoist is the fate of Mouche. His rejection of her impassioned pleas to aid her brother, a nineteen-year-old conscript and a wounded military prisoner of war held in a concentration camp, suggests that for Wilder's Hollywood Rommel, Nazi ideology took precedence over traditional military notions of chivalry. What clinches the matter is how Rommel presided over the brutal manner by which the Nazis killed Mouche. When a German officer is found dead, Mouche is accused of the shooting and faces a court martial. At the trial, evidence is brought that proves Mouche's innocence and she is acquitted of murder. But audiences learn of her fate when one character sadly relates:

They found her guilty of spreading enemy rumors. She kept on screaming in his face, "The British will be back! The British will be back!" They beat her and beat her. Then they led her out. One bullet would have been enough.⁴⁶

The film's characterization of Rommel as a miscreant rather than a soldier is unequivocal. As *New York Times* film critic Bosley Crowther remarked of Stroheim's performance: "it is still a shade on the terrifying side ... Just as whenever he appears in this picture ... he gives you the creeps and the shivers. Boy, what a nasty Hun!"⁴⁷

Whatever distinctive military treatment the Allied press corps occasionally gave to Rommel during his heyday in Africa was over. Snide observations were more prevalent. *The Times* boasted of a German soldier's riddle that went: "What is the difference between Rommel and a watch? The watch always goes forward and says Ticktack. Rommel always goes backward and says Taktik."⁴⁸ And some Allied soldiers were unambiguous in their criticisms. In early 1944, British General Hugh Gatehouse asserted to a Chicago audience that Rommel did not deserve the sobriquet "Desert Fox" because "He never won a fight

⁴⁶ *Five Graves to Cairo*, directed by Billy Wilder (1943; Paramount Pictures).

⁴⁷ Bosley Crowther, "'Five Graves to Cairo,' Drama of World Conflict," *New York Times*, May 27, 1943, 21.

⁴⁸ "A German Soldier's Riddle," *The Times*, October 28, 1943, 4. For another joke at Rommel's expense Nat Barrows, "Danes 'Hang Around' Rommel's Hotel to see Monty Follow," *Boston Globe*, February 5, 1944, 1.

against experienced British troops,” and he was “one of the biggest fools against whom we’ve fought.”⁴⁹

Rommel became more and more represented as a political menace rather than as a formidable military general. Indeed, most Allied commentators portrayed his late 1943 appointment to defend France from the expected Allied invasion as a political move rather than a military one. It is perhaps ironic (given the historiography of Rommel’s association to the German Resistance) that contemporaries saw him as a stabilizing force for the Nazi Party to forestall a potential “anti-Hitler peace plot.” In a potential confrontation between “the Prussian militarists and the Nazi regime of upstarts,” it was theorized that “the man to exercise control [of the army] is by all counts Marshal Rommel, Hitler’s own favorite and especial protégé.”⁵⁰ The Allies believed that Gerd von Rundstedt was the military threat, whom the *Saturday Evening Post* dubbed the Allies’ “real enemy No 1” in contrast to “the much lesser exploits of Field Marshal Rommel or List or the men in the Luftwaffe.”⁵¹

Consider a *New York Times* biographical piece “The Man We Have to Beat” in February 1944 that featured a half page portrait of Rommel strutting with his field marshal’s baton. Willi Frischauer, a former Austrian journalist who fled the Nazi takeover, wrote the article and in it claimed to have met the German marshal in 1935, which was most probably

⁴⁹ “Rommel a Fool Not a Fox, Says British General,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 17, 1944, 6.

⁵⁰ Drew Middleton, “Rommel Assigned to Halt Invaders,” *New York Times*, December 20, 1943, 8; “Opinion,” *Daily Express*, February 4, 1944; “Rommel May Be Given Job of Thwarting Plot,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 15, 1943, 4; Polyzoides, “Struggle for Supremacy in Germany Under Way,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 18, 1944, 8; “Opinion,” *Daily Express*, February 4, 1944; G.H. Archambault, “Rommel to Strive for French Chaos,” *New York Times*, December 27, 1943, 3; “Rommel May Be Given Job of Thwarting Plot,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 15, 1943, 4; Robert Bunnelle, “London Hears Hitler Decides to Defy Junkers, Pick Rommel,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, December 15, 1943, 18; “Hitler Appoints Rommel Top Anti-Invasion Chief,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, January 23, 1944.

⁵¹ Curt Riess, “Marshal von Rundstedt: German Darlan?,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, October 2, 1943, 20.

another instance of a conflated memory.⁵² The headline left little room for equivocation: “Favorite of Hitler and a Political Soldier.” The article intimately linked Rommel, a “cocksure egoist,” with Adolf Hitler as both “wanted rearmament as a means to new army jobs, to promotion, revenge, war and glory.” Frischauer referred to Rommel as an “enthusiastic apostle of Nazi principles” and repeated the then familiar stories of Rommel joining the Nazi Party and training the SS secret police force. Notwithstanding the title of the article, the Austrian émigré did not think Rommel posed a significant military obstacle since his bloated reputation as a “glamour boy” of the *Wehrmacht* was a “myth” fabricated by German propagandists who “made capital even out of defeat.” Frischauer assured readers that the British army “will once again prove superior if less spectacular” and implied that the greatest danger from this “poseur” was political should the *Wehrmacht* crumble: “Rommel has the confidence of the crack S.S. units with whom he now has manned the key defense posts [T]hough he may quarrel with his conservative colleagues in the High Command, he has Hitler’s authority behind him.”⁵³

The most eye-catching change was that during the Normandy campaign of June-July 1944, Allied commentators no longer typically equated the German Army in France with “Rommel.” This was a noteworthy difference from reporting in North Africa because Rommel was again the commander of the German forces engaged against the Allied invaders. In fact, Rommel did not make many headlines announcing the D-Day landings and

⁵² Frischauer described Rommel in 1936 as young for his rank, lively, clad in a monocle, and on his way to Cairo. Rommel as an *Oberstleutnant* (lieutenant colonel) did not have a high rank then, was not a lively socialite, did not wear a monocle (I have seen only one picture of Rommel with a monocle, from 1912 when he graduated from the *Königliche Kriegsschule*), and never visited Africa (another popular legend during the war). Rommel, who was a nobody in 1936 and disliked hobnobbing, would have had no motivation to meet Frischauer or vice-versa.

⁵³ Willi Frischauer, “Rommel – The Man We Have to Beat,” *New York Times*, February 6, 1944, SM9. For a similar article linking Rommel and Hitler, see “Rommel Seen as Symbol of Der Fuehrer,” *The Washington Post*, February 20, 1944, M2.

sometimes he was not even mentioned in the article. When he was referenced, it was often to show the limited options available to him due to the crushing pressure Allied forces were imposing upon the Germans.⁵⁴ On June 17, the US Army newspaper *Stars and Stripes* plainly depicted Rundstedt as a more dangerous military opponent than Rommel. It noted that Rundstedt was “the ablest strategist in the German Army,” in contrast to Rommel, “the ‘Fox’ [who] was outfoxed by Gen. Sir Bernard Montgomery and driven into the sea of Cape Bon, Tunisia, by Allied forces.”⁵⁵ In early July 1944, Moorehead’s aptly titled article “It’s Not the Old Rommel Any More” revealed how far Rommel’s military prestige had sunk:

Rommel is not getting his divisions up to the line intact, nor is he sending them into the fighting en masse ... Rommel is committing his formations piecemeal ... I hate the easy way many officers in the Army have of saying that Rommel is no good, but on this month’s evidence it is not the old Rommel any more.⁵⁶

Moorehead was waxing nostalgic about the romanticized memories of the African campaign and was disappointed that the Allies in Normandy failed to appreciate the military dynamism the “Desert Fox” had exhibited two years prior. Moorehead himself recognized why: the preponderance of Allied military power, in particular the ability for its air forces to interdict

⁵⁴ “25 Rommel Attacks Fail,” *Boston Globe*, July 3, 1944, 1; “Allied Armies Land in France in the Havre-Cherbourg Area; Great Invasion is Underway,” *New York Times*, June 6, 1944, 1; Raymond Daniell, “Eisenhower Acts,” *New York Times*, June 6, 1944, 1; Drew Middleton, “All Landings Win,” *New York Times*, June 7, 1944, 1; “Rommel Looks Tired,” *New York Times*, June 10, 1944, 2; “British Attacking Around Caen,” *The Times*, June 14, 1944, 8; “Nine Counter-Attacks in a Day,” *The Manchester Guardian*, July 3, 1944, 5; “Fight For Caen Still Raging,” *The Times*, July 1, 1944, 4; Wes Gallagher, “Allies Drive Ahead on Whole Front; Hint Early Blows at Other Coasts,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, June 9, 1944, 1; “Nazis’ Normandy Losses Set at 70,000; British Advance Gains 7 Miles,” *The Baltimore Sun*, June 28, 1944, 1; “The 8th Army Is There,” *Daily Express*, June 9, 1944, 1; “‘Birdcage’ Victory Menaces Caen and St. Lo,” *Daily Mirror*, June 15, 1944, 1; Mallory Browne, “Nazis Threw Everything in at Caen but Failed to Halt Ever-Growing Power of Allies,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 10, 1944, 1; The *Daily Express* was a conspicuous exception in my research in that it still sometimes referred to the German army as “Rommel.” See Morley Richards, “Every Rommel Attack Fails,” *Daily Express*, July 3, 1944, 1 and “Caen Falls – And Rommel Is Now in Retreat,” *Daily Express*, July 10, 1944, 1.

⁵⁵ “Two Canny Officers Direct Nazis’ Western Defenses,” *Mediterranean Algiers Stars and Stripes*, June 17, 1944, 2.

⁵⁶ Alan Moorehead, “It’s Not the Old Rommel Any More,” *Daily Express*, July 3, 1944, 1.

German armor, made it virtually impossible for any German commander to reach those expectations.

Rommel's death on October 14, 1944 and the resultant obituaries in Allied newspapers reveal how far portrayals had shifted from German strategist to politicized Nazi. They were the culmination of the "Hitler Favorite" trend that had begun over two years earlier. The *New York Times's* obituary, which ran in many other papers, began: "Field Marshal Gen. Erwin Rommel, foremost Nazi soldier, who almost won Egypt for Adolf Hitler, has died." The paper underscored the political in the subheadings "Highly Politicized Officer" and "Headed Hitler's Police," accompanied by such familiar but false contemporary stories as: "He joined the Nazi party, became a Storm Troop leader and took part in a murderous raid against Socialists and Communists of Coburg, a raid which Hitler, in 'Mein Kampf,' signalized as the turning point in his career," and "Rommel thereafter headed Hitler's personal police, the SS (Elite Guards), and traveled with the Fuehrer, sleeping in front of Hitler's bedroom door." The obituary did not go into much detail in the military realm; it noted he "took charge in Libya" and that his boasts were smashed by Montgomery's "sledge-hammer blows." It only printed the following vague and qualified acknowledgment of his military abilities:

A ruthless, colorful master of tank warfare tactics ... His desert victories and Nazi propaganda applauding them made him a legendary figure to the Germans and even when Gen. Sir Bernard L. Montgomery smashed him at El Alamein and drove him back to the final rout of the Africa Corps in Tunisia, German propagandists painted the retreat so skillfully that he lost no favor.⁵⁷

Time similarly framed him as a Nazi general possessing more military style than substance. The periodical contended that he "rose with Hitler from the street brawls

⁵⁷ "Death of Rommel Revealed by Nazis," *New York Times*, October 16, 1944, 1.

of pre-Nazi Germany” to become the Führer’s “top-drawer hooligan.” If Rommel was credited with “restor[ing] the art of bluff and ambush to modern war,” his status as a first-rate strategist was in doubt because “his color gave him an appeal that other generals of possibly more ability (e.g. Rundstedt, Kesselring) completely lacked.”⁵⁸ The *Daily Mirror* remarked that Rommel was a “fanatical follower of Hitler” who had his military career “wrecked” by British generals Alexander and Montgomery.⁵⁹ In sum, Rommel embodied a Nazi career rather than any military ideal.⁶⁰

The Nazi theme was equally evident in *The Manchester Guardian*’s obituary. It projected Hitler’s love of war in *Mein Kampf* onto Rommel and depicted the German marshal as a “fanatical Nazi” who used his position as a policeman to “persecute the Democrats and Republicans.” According to the paper, Rommel “devoted all his time to the Nazi Party, and he became a close and intimate friend of Hitler ... He often boasted that he was the first Nazi to make a breach in the Conservatism of the *Reichswehr* [the German army during the Weimar Republic].” The obituary was silent on Rommel’s aptitude as a commander. It remarked that he advanced to El Alamein, from where he was compelled to retreat after being attacked by Montgomery’s forces.⁶¹

The perspective of Alan Moorehead, the Australian war correspondent from the *Daily Express* whose articles have often been cited in this study, offers an interesting illustration of why Rommel had been recast as a symbol of Nazi Germany – and Nazi failure – by October

⁵⁸ *Time*, October 23, 1944, 29.

⁵⁹ “The Career Monty Wrecked Is now Ended: Rommel is Dead,” *Daily Mirror*, October 16, 1944, 1.

⁶⁰ There were some US obituaries that were not as overtly politicized as the *New York Times*. “Will the Legend Survive the Man?” *The Baltimore Sun*, October 17, 1944, 12 is perhaps the most notable. The *Sun* questioned how history would ultimately judge the military reputation of Rommel rather than take the typical tack of asserting that his legend was busted as the *New York Times* did. Even though the *Sun* explored this military aspect, it did state the German marshal was “from the outset a loyal Nazi party man” and thus still conforms to the overall theme of my analysis.

⁶¹ “Obituary,” *The Manchester Guardian*, October 16, 1944, 6.

1944. “I can hardly describe the effect – pride, perhaps, or satisfaction, but certainly a feeling of strange regret,” Moorehead began. He then lamented that Montgomery would never speak with his El Alamein opponent, and because that moment would never happen, “one felt a sense of incompleteness, a great story finishing without a great ending.” This aptly illustrates the romanticized military aspects that characterized portrayals of Rommel before July 1942. If the war in the Western Desert was a chivalrous duel, to Moorehead it was somehow “incomplete” without the two respective knights acknowledging each other in person afterward. Moorehead continued by repeating his assertion made in the Normandy campaign that Rommel’s “touch had gone ... Rommel stayed in the field just long enough to see how wrong, how utterly outclassed he was.” At the end of his retrospective, Moorehead remarked why the news was greeted with satisfaction:

Here in this headquarters ... it is seen that the death of Rommel is an excellent thing since he might easily have been the man to resurrect the German Army after the armistice. He would have been a dangerously popular figure in peace.⁶²

Because his presence during a potential peace with postwar Germany was deemed a dangerous *terra incognita*, it was fortunate this otherwise colorful soldier who many of the men in that headquarters knew never mistreated a Commonwealth prisoner had died. Sentimentality had little place in the minds of many by late 1944.

The “Last Knight”: Romanticized Representations of Rommel, 1942 – 1945

“[Field Marshal Rommel] was a brute and a braggart, typical of the men who thrust their way up the leadership of the Nazi movement ... For our part we may admit that he was a brave soldier and a fine tactician, but there is little else in his character to

⁶² Alan Moorehead, “Rommel’s Picture Is by Monty’s Desk,” *Daily Express*, October 17, 1944, 4. Generally speaking there were nuances in British obituaries as there were in the U.S. *The Times* is perhaps the one obituary that gave Rommel’s military career actual consideration, nevertheless, like all the other obituaries in the mainstream press, it too mentioned his “gangster methods,” which brought him Hitler’s favor, and the tale that “he became a storm-troop leader, attached to Hitler’s bodyguard, and organized the campaign of terror in Coburg.” See “Soldier and Nazi,” *The Times*, October 16, 1944, 3.

justify the strange hero-worship with which he has sometimes been regarded. We are indeed a strange people.”

– *The Manchester Guardian* on Rommel’s death, October 1944.⁶³

The Manchester Guardian was mistaken to believe the British were a strange people.

Rommel’s reputation since the summer of 1942 had a dualism, a military and political component that made the “Desert Fox” and the “Hitler favorite” two sides of the same man. He was both the honorable soldier who refused to carry out criminal orders and the willing servant of the regime that issued those criminal orders. It is paradoxical, and it is not intuitive. In making sense of events, most people have gravitated toward one or the other. However preponderant one of those views may have been in public narratives at a given time, the other has persisted. Investigating the 1942-1945 period illustrates that the undercurrent of positive Rommel attitudes was more than “strange hero-worship.” People mediated public narratives according to their own personal experiences and beliefs. They could, for example, deduce from their military experiences that Rommel was not the archetypal Nazi as laid out in the *New York Times* and thus historically significant. Their perspectives were encased in idiosyncratic logic that was intrinsic enough to endure and remain despite the opposite prevailing narrative.

Consider this 2004 recollection offered by former British officer R. Woodridge, who in 1944 fell into the category of those to be executed according to Hitler’s “Commando Order” decree:

I was captured on May 1944 following a reconnaissance raid on a French beach and to determine the nature of the coastal defenses. During the interrogations that followed I was repeatedly warned that because I had no means of identification that I was regarded as a saboteur, and that saboteurs were shot.

On May 20, when my blindfold was removed, I found myself in the guard room of a French chateau being welcomed by a German lieutenant with

⁶³ “Rommel,” *The Manchester Guardian*, October 16, 1944, 4.

tea and sandwiches. I was taken to a room in the château where, behind a desk, stood Rommel. He asked me: was I an engineer officer? I declined to answer – I was in fact a sapper officer. He also asked: was there anything I required? I replied that I could do with a pint of beer, packet of cigarettes and a good meal. Later I was taken to the officers' mess and served with a hot meal plus the beers and fags.

Field Marshal Rommel was an officer and a gentleman.⁶⁴

Woodridge's perception of Rommel as an officer and a gentleman was a highly specific circumstance as he could directly tie his survival to him. Nevertheless, the example of Rommel abiding by The Hague Conventions of war (which Germany signed in 1929) has resonated with many people because of historical context: so many high ranking German officers either contravened or turned a blind eye to those conventions that Rommel seemed exceptional, perhaps even significant.

In 1994 former British General Sir David Fraser reminisced about his time as a junior officer fighting in France after D-Day:

I remember people saying to each other, "He seems a good chap that Rommel – wish we had a few like him." He appeared very much one who led from the front. His name was on every soldier's lips. He was rough and tough, but somehow human.⁶⁵

Fraser respected Rommel. He most likely felt the German marshal was "rough and tough" because of the emphasis Allied commentators put upon Nazifying Rommel's character, but Fraser, as well as an indeterminate number of his military peers, admired Rommel as a valiant soldier, a human, and a "good chap." It was why he titled his 1993 biography of Rommel *Knight's Cross*, named for the highest German military honor (roughly equivalent to the British Victoria Cross and US Medal of Honor), that had its tradition based in duty,

⁶⁴ R. Wooldridge, MC, Derby, *The Times*, July 26, 2004, 26.

⁶⁵ Jon Elson, "His Name Was on Every Soldier's Lips," *New York Times*, March 6, 1994, BR6.

patriotism, sacrifice, and heroism dating back to the Napoleonic Wars.⁶⁶ Earlier, I argued that Desmond Young's 1950 portrayal of Rommel's prestige on the streets of Cairo in 1941 was faulty because it did not match contemporary evidence. I do, however, feel that Fraser's recollection of Rommel represented a part of British and US societies that genuinely admired the German marshal. Even if Rommel was not quite "on every soldier's lips" as Fraser contended, there is enough evidence that shows a perceptible and genuine esteem for Rommel as a person on the Allied side that stemmed from how the German marshal conducted himself in the military sphere.

Fraser never encountered or fought against Rommel, yet "remembered" him in a manner incongruous with the dominant Rommel narrative circulating in wartime Great Britain's public sphere. Fraser acquired these memories by interacting with and sharing anecdotes with some of his military peers who also felt Rommel was a "good chap" and from his own way of making sense of Nazi Germany. Fraser grew up in a family that counted German colonel – eventual general and opponent – Leo Geyr von Schweppenburg as a friend. Throughout his life, Fraser was able to recognize the noble qualities of Germany amidst the Nazi regime and Nazi legacy. This was even the case as late as September 1944 with the SS when he wrote a letter home respecting their fighting abilities. Fraser remarked in his memoir:

In fact the Waffen SS, against whom we fought, were a completely separate part of the organization from the concentration camp guards, the Gestapo and the like. They were very well-disciplined, well-trained, well-led and outstanding soldiers; and they deserved to be treated as such by their enemies except in particular and rare cases.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Communication with author. A Knight's Cross was the highest degree of the Iron Cross. A recipient had to earn the Iron Cross Second Class and then Iron Class First class and then to perform "special combat decisive acts of bravery" to be eligible for Knight's Cross.

⁶⁷ David Fraser, *Wars and Shadows: Memoirs of General Sir David Fraser* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), 226-227.

Recalling the discussion of the importance of military ethos in Chapter Two is particularly relevant here. In another episode Fraser recounts that even after decades he could still recall the face of one dead young German soldier: “A friend of mine has told me that on every day of remembrance he says a prayer ‘for all the men I killed’. This is absolutely right. In most wars one is closer in spirit to the enemy than to non-combatants on one’s own side.”⁶⁸ In order to understand Rommel’s reputation, it is crucial to recognize that intelligent and educated people who wholeheartedly believed in the Allied cause such as Fraser made distinctions between who was and was not responsible for Nazi criminality.

A critical point to this study is that there is no monolithic collective memory. When Fraser’s recollection of Rommel is contrasted with Edward D. Kleinlerer’s (referenced earlier in this study as someone who in 1942 incorrectly attributed his memory of meeting another German general to Rommel⁶⁹), we see a very different depiction:

Rommel is an old Nazi, and it is as a party man, rather than a wehrmacht [sic] (German army) man that he holds Hitler’s deepest confidence ... I remember the iciness of that face, a face that is a mask, empty of emotion, bleak. Something in his manner makes you bristle, even though he fails to look at you.⁷⁰

These were in fundamental opposition. There are many reasons multiple collective memories might exist within a single community; differences in age, gender, politics, religion, race, level of education, and a host of other factors would account for neighbors possessing very different historical perceptions of the same event. A theme that emerges in

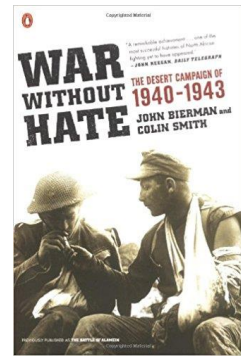
⁶⁸ Fraser, *Wars and Shadows*, 211.

⁶⁹ Edward D. Kleinlerer, “Rommel His Own Spy as African ‘Tourist,’” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 22, 1942, 1.

⁷⁰ Edward D. Kleinlerer, “Axis’ Desperate Play for Time Focused on Rommel in Italy,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, September 16, 1943, 6. As the date of this article was September 1943, it is possible that Kleinlerer saw the *Five Graves to Cairo* film (released May 1943) and thus a case of confirmation bias.

this study is that with regard to competing perceptions of Rommel, one pivotal difference has been an individual's perception of Nazi-era Germans. Those who believed that Germans were fundamentally intertwined with and thus responsible for National Socialism typically argued Rommel was and is someone unworthy of remembrance because of his association and culpability for the crimes of the Nazi Regime, regardless of his chivalrous conduct or possible/putative role in the German Resistance. Rommel's reputation has multiple images, he was (and is) a "good chap" to some, but a "Hitler favorite" to others. This dualism reflects arguments in American and British societies about how much ordinary German citizens share responsibility for the crimes of the Third Reich.

There has been a prevalent notion since the Second World War among Americans, Britons, and Germans that the campaign in the Western Desert between the *Afrikakorps* and the Eighth Army was a "war without hate." Indeed, the phrase served as the title for the German edition of Rommel's memoirs, *Krieg ohne Hass* (1950), and still resonates powerfully in the twenty-first century with John Bierman and Colin Smith's acclaimed *War Without Hate: The Desert Campaign of 1940-1943* (2004), whose cover best symbolizes it with a wounded German soldier "Jerry" lighting a cigarette for his British "Tommy" counterpart.⁷¹ Many histories of the Western Desert campaign have anecdotes like this one from a 2002 history of the Battle of El Alamein:



Even after the bloodiest encounters around the perimeter both sides managed to maintain a rough-hewn regard for the other's casualties. Sergeant Bill Tuitt, a timber-mill foreman from South Australia who had been put in charge of his battalion's stretcher-bearers, made frequent forays into no man's land,

⁷¹ John Bierman and Colin Smith, *War Without Hate: The Desert Campaign of 1940-1943* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).

under a flag of truce, to recover the dead and wounded. On one occasion he and his party were given a shouted warning by a German that they were approaching a minefield.

We could see the bodies of thirteen of our chaps lying there. A couple of Jerries came out with a mine-detector and guided a lieutenant and a doctor out to us ... They brought out four wounded and let the truck come up to take them away. Then they carried out the bodies of fifteen dead and helped us with those still on the minefield. When the last of our dead had been brought to us, the lieutenant ... lowered his flag and I lowered mine. I saluted him and he saluted back, but gave me the salute of the Reichswehr, not of the Nazis.⁷²

Common anecdotes from the memories on both sides abound: Rommel visiting a British field hospital,⁷³ mutual understandings between both sides, amiable exchanges between POW and captor,⁷⁴ both sides adopting the same German song “Lili Marleen,”⁷⁵ Rommel destroying orders to execute Jews and other prisoners,⁷⁶ and a genuine respect for each side, whether

⁷² John Bierman and Colin Smith, *The Battle of Alamein: Turning Point, World War II* (New York: Viking, 2002), 82-83.

⁷³ Major P.W. Rainier reported the Rommel visit in “Pipeline to Victory,” *Reader’s Digest*, March 1944; it also appears in Rommel’s memoirs. Rommel, *Rommel Papers*, 164. This is almost certainly true. The battles in the Western Desert were so fluid and so vast that it was not uncommon for areas to change hands numerous times in just a few days. It was understood by both side that field hospitals, which had to be relatively close to the front lines and whose continual movement would impede their function, would be unmolested and allowed to continue their work (often accommodating wounded from both sides).

⁷⁴ Young, *Rommel*, 149-160; Schmidt, *With Rommel*, 241-249; Ronald Lewin, *The Life and Death of the Afrika Korps* (New York: Quadrangle, 1977), 20-22.

⁷⁵ Bierman and Smith, *War Without Hate*, 84-85.

⁷⁶ According to most accounts, during the Battle of Gazala, the fortress at Bir Hacheim was defended by troops under General Maire-Peirre Koenig fighting under the Free French flag who were a hodgepodge of legionnaires of mixed origins, including a “Jewish battalion” and some Germans who had fled when the Nazis came to power. My inquiries to the Israeli Defense Force about a Jewish battalion have received no response, so I cannot be certain one officially existed. However, it is quite clear Rome and Berlin believed Jews and others marked for extermination were among the defenders. Count Ciano attributed Bir Hacheim’s resilient defense to renegade “Frenchmen, Italians, Germans, Jews” fighting there. Galeazzo Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries, 1939-1943* edited by Hugh Gibson (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1946) entry for June 11, 1942, 497. Goebbels also mentioned in his diary that German communist prisoners were to be “without exception shot” and Hitler officially decreed political enemies there were to be “shot without further ado.” Rommel destroyed these orders and one of the defenders captured at Bir Hacheim who was to be executed by these orders reported that he and his comrades were treated decently by German troops and that there had been no shootings. Siegfried Westphal, *Erinnerungen* (Mainz: v. Hase und Koehler, 1975), 162; Heckmann, *Rommel’s War in Africa*, 262. If there was not a Jewish Battalion there, there was talk of one and Hitler ordered certain prisoners to be eliminated, an order Rommel did not transmit. Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, Fernschreiben an Panzerarmee Afrika, 9.6.1942, Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv Freiburg RW 4/V659D. Elke Fröhlich (ed.), *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels Teil II Diktate 1941-1945*, Band 4 April-Juni 1942 (München: K.G. Saur, 1993), entry for June 10, 1942, 485.

Rommel proclaiming he would be proud to lead British soldiers into battle or the British saluting men of the German 90th Light Division after its surrender.⁷⁷ Nor did there appear to be overt Jew-hatred from the *Afrikakorps*, though no question Rommel commanded many troops who were anti-Semitic. Isaac Levy, a Rabbi for the Eighth Army, relayed in an 2001 interview: “Since this a matter I must emphasize and I say this with great respect and great sense of responsibility ... at the least what I can say of the *Afrika Korps*, there were never signs or even any indications, that the soldiers were anti-Jewish.”⁷⁸

How apocryphal are these stories? One piece of contemporary evidence would indicate that there was some truth to them. In November 1941, British commandos led by Lieutenant Colonel Geoffrey Keyes raided Rommel’s headquarters to kill the German general.⁷⁹ The raiders attacked the wrong target and in the ensuing firefight Keyes was killed along with four Germans. Rommel ordered his chaplain to give a Christian burial to Keyes alongside the German soldiers. Salvoes were fired in salute to the dead, and Keyes’s parents were informed of their son’s fate and of the ceremony. In January 1945, Reuters reported the acknowledgments of Keyes’s father, Admiral of the Fleet Lord Keyes:

I shall always regret that I never had the opportunity to thank Rommel for his generous behaviour to my son. Rommel paid my son a great honour. He went to kill Rommel and, although he failed in his mission, he killed four of the German commander’s staff officers.

Rommel not only gave orders that my son be laid before the altar of an Italian church with the four officers, but also paid public tribute to his leadership and bravery, and accorded him a full military funeral.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Rommel, *Rommel Papers*, 185; Hans-Otto Behrendt, *Rommel’s Intelligence in the Desert Campaign, 1941-1943* (London: W. Kimber, 1985), 224; Bierman and Smith, *Battle of Alamein*, 407-408.

⁷⁸ Remy, *Mythos Rommel*, 96, interview conducted on December 8, 2001.

⁷⁹ This would seem to indicate the British believed Rommel was more militarily significant than the scant attention he received in the press during 1941. However, the purpose of the raid was to paralyze the German leadership in conjunction with the “Crusader” offensive rather than to eliminate Rommel specifically.

⁸⁰ Taken from George Catlin, Vera Brittain, and Sheila Hodges, *Above All Nations: An Anthology* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1945), 17.

Lord Keyes's feelings notwithstanding, while the *News Chronicle* carried the story, none of the major papers I consulted printed it.

More generally regarding the Western Desert, the anecdotes of tacit agreements, gentlemen's cease-fires, and civil conduct toward prisoners are too ubiquitous and consistent to disregard completely as romanticized memories. David French's study on the lack of hatred exhibited by British soldiers to the German enemy is worth considering.⁸¹ Moreover, there were contemporary admissions on the Allied side that the *Afrikakorps* treated prisoners correctly, such as granting the same medical treatment to Commonwealth soldiers as its own, and that the German unit fought cleanly.⁸² Moorehead wrote in 1944:

Those British who escaped – and there were dozens every other day – all brought back the same story: 'The Germans behaved extraordinarily well. They gave us food and water at once. There was no third degree – nothing like that at all ... British wounded were given exact same treatment as Germans.' It was not long before one was hearing here and there in the British lines, 'Well, you must admit they treat the prisoners all right. They were damn nice to me.'⁸³

And there was Clifford's view in his 1943 retrospective *Three Against Rommel* that "the desert war was a clean, straight, dispassionate war."⁸⁴ There is a lot of circumstantial evidence that at least some people compartmentalized the campaign in the Western Desert from the broader conflict as a "war without hate" or a "gentlemen's war," as a German general put it to a *Manchester Guardian* correspondent in October 1945.⁸⁵

It is, however, still emblematic of what people would like to believe. Even if it can be granted there was a genuine respect between the Germans and British as they tried their

⁸¹ French, "You Cannot Hate the Bastard Who is Trying to Kill You..."

⁸² Harold Denny, "Here's How the Nazis Treat Prisoners of War in Africa," *Chicago Tribune*, June 4, 1942, 1.

⁸³ Alan Moorehead, *African Trilogy: The North African Campaign 1940-1943* (London: Cassel, 1998). 416. Moorehead did credit the Germans for a clean war in Africa, but contrasted this specific behavior with the "torture and murder and starvation" in occupied Europe.

⁸⁴ Clifford, *Three Against Rommel*, 360-361.

⁸⁵ "A German General Looks Back," *The Guardian*, October 26, 1945, 5.

hardest to destroy each other in the Western Desert, critics have questioned the wisdom of allowing such a perspective to obscure the hateful impulses behind the Second World War, a sentiment dating back to the contemporary argument made by the *New York Times*'s "Rommel and the Beast" article. Recent research by Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Martin Cüppers has brought to light that for all the military chivalry exhibited by the Eighth Army and the *Afrikakorps*, the Nazi regime was still keen on implementing its racial policies once it had attained victory in the Middle East.⁸⁶ That the scale of deportations and death was, while brutal, minimal compared to Europe has enabled the "war without hate" narrative to persist.⁸⁷ Indeed the very fact that war crimes were almost absent in the African campaign⁸⁸ and that there is praise for observing the Hague Conventions says something about the hateful nature of the Second World War and the chimera that war can be "pure," that is, without politics, civilian atrocities, wanton destruction, etc.

There was positive imagery of Rommel on the Allied side – even if it is retrospectively difficult to corroborate – and there were some on the Allied side who focused too much attention on the "Desert Fox" mystique. That was precisely why Auchinleck felt it necessary to order his troops to "stop harping on Rommel," and it was the impetus behind the Nazification of Rommel during the summer of 1942. It is, of course, impossible to know how prevalent these inchoate notions were before they crystallized into the romanticized

⁸⁶ Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Martin Cüppers, "Elimination of the Jewish National Home in Palestine: The Einsatzkommando of the Panzer Army Africa, 1942" in *Yad Vashem Studies* 35, no. 1 (2007): 111-141.

⁸⁷ Robert Satloff, an expert on Middle East affairs, claims about 2500 total Jewish deaths from a 1948 population of about 105,000, a death rate of about 2%. Some European countries in Nazi occupied Europe suffered death rates over 80% such as Poland, Lithuania, and Czechoslovakia. Robert Satloff, *Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Long Reach of the Holocaust into Arab Lands* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006).

⁸⁸ Both sides fought hard and tried earnestly to destroy each other, and, as in any war that brutalizes the human psyche, there were isolated instances of brutalities, such as the New Zealanders at Mersa Matruh. For New Zealand brutalities see J.L. Scoullar, *Battle for Egypt: The Summer of 1942* (Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45: Wellington, 1955), 101-11.

narratives after the war, but there must have been a community of believers widespread enough to not only endure while Allied commentators framed Rommel as a Nazi menace, but also gain new adherents such as Fraser (Fraser did not see combat until 1944). And there is something of a pattern: positive military experiences overshadowed the ostensible political and ideological aspects of the Nazi regime.

There is one final factor regarding perceptions of Rommel to consider: these were fluid and could (and did) rapidly change – often based on a single experience. One of the best contemporary and unmodified pieces of evidence of such a drastic change before the wartime hagiographies of the 1950s is an April 1945 editorial by *Manchester Guardian* columnist “Artifex,” a pseudonym of Canon Peter Green, who was well-known in the Social Gospel Movement. Written at the time of the death throes of the Third Reich and the discovery of the concentration camps, “Artifex” urged his audience to read *Above All Nations*, a compilation of stories by the anthropologist George Catlin whose intention was to “show that even amidst the illimitable degradation of modern warfare men of all nations can be decent and merciful to those who, at the very moment, are their mortal enemies.”⁸⁹ The principle that “Above all nations is humanity,” from which the book took its title, the author felt was imperative because he thought the consequence of a general punishment to the German people would be another world war. In the book, Green found solace in “acts of kindness done to enemies” and pointed to Rommel as an example:

When the battle in North Africa was swaying backward and forward, I read in a newspaper a character sketch of General Rommel which described him as the perfect type of the brutal German officer and attributed to him the saying that the only proper way to treat an Englishman was to kick him. The tribute to Rommel paid by Admiral of the Fleet Lord Keyes and the story of the General’s conduct in a captured British hospital suggest that he was a gallant

⁸⁹ Catlin, Foreword, *Above All Nations*.

officer and gentleman of whom any nation might be proud. It has been well said that in war truth is the first casualty.⁹⁰

This commentator publicly identified Rommel as a “gallant officer and gentleman” during a time when it was very unpopular to do so. He wanted to believe the best in Rommel. Green was a man whose politics did not differentiate peoples based on their nationality and wrote of the wisdom in not collectively punishing Germany: “If decent Germans – and whatever people may say there are decent Germans – can be brought to realize what crimes have been committed in their name there will be hope. If not there is none.”⁹¹ It was a perspective that stemmed from Green’s evangelic religious beliefs and mirrored the stance “Artifex” took during the First World War when he ridiculed the falsehoods in British propaganda.⁹² This willingness to assert that there were decent Nazi-era Germans who should not be punished or associated with the Third Reich’s crimes is a hallmark of those who were apt to envision the best in Rommel.

Considering the arc of Rommel’s reputation during the Second World War, the root of the positive imagery stemmed almost exclusively from the military sphere. How he fought elicited professional respect from opponents who perceived him as a gentleman officer whose skills as a leader were a standard of comparison, mostly because of the latter was conspicuously lacking on the Allied side in the Western Desert during the first half of 1942. How Rommel conducted himself as a soldier prompted some to go beyond admiring a professional abstraction and project the desirable military traits he exhibited onto his person.

⁹⁰ Artifex, “Above All Nations,” *The Manchester Guardian*, April 24, 1945, 3.

⁹¹ Artifex, “Above All Nations,” 3.

⁹² Harold Edwin Sheen, *Canon Peter Green: A Biography of a Great Parish Priest* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1965), 71-81.

Rommel was, is, and will often be highlighted as the exemplar of chivalry, a professionalism that distinguished him and his *Afrikakorps* from the “SS men” and massacres such as at Oradour-sur-Glane, to say nothing of the Eastern Front. It is true his adherence to military ethos was in large respect a product of fighting in the Western Desert that the Nazi hierarchy had little interest in and not on the Eastern Front where the German war machine conducted a systematic racial war of annihilation. Nevertheless, as German historian Wolf Heckmann – who was very critical of Rommel – has written:

Even at this distance from the dictator, that took courage; it would certainly have been more comfortable to follow the example of higher echelons – put one’s initials on the paper and let things take their course.⁹³

In disregarding Hitler’s orders and the Nazi regime’s wishes in this respect and in hearkening back to an ideal of what war ought to be, there was something tangible to the notion that Rommel was the proverbial “Last Knight” in the definitively ugly event of an ugly century. It is this embodiment of the honorable warrior ethos, not British commentators trying to justify defeats, not the assassination plot against Hitler, not the geopolitical need to rearm German soldiers, that has comprised the core of the Allied attraction to Rommel.

However, until several years after the war ended, this positive imagery was an undercurrent to the mainstream narrative in Great Britain and the United States. Rommel’s historical reputation among the Western Allies was at its nadir when he died on October 14, 1944. He was perceived as a political menace whose military accomplishments were deemed suspect. Even Montgomery, the man who attained his fame by defeating the “Desert Fox,” was saying in early 1945 that Rommel was yesterday’s news: “I used to think Rommel was

⁹³ Heckmann, *Rommel’s War in Africa*, 261-263.

good, but von Rundstedt could ‘knock him for six.’”⁹⁴ Yet in just six years, the adulatory Twentieth Century-Fox motion picture *The Desert Fox: The Story of Rommel* turned Rommel into a celluloid hero and did much to cement the romantic image of the “Last Knight.” The key to understanding how such a dramatic volte-face could occur in such a short time is that there was not a unitary collective memory of Rommel. The prevalence of the “Hitler Favorite” image was buttressed by a particular context, namely an anti-German climate based on wartime passions and false biographical details given wide circulation. During the war, the “Desert Fox” had a genuine appeal that stemmed from military idealizations, and it was upon this foundation that his good reputation of the 1950s was in large part based.

⁹⁴ “‘Writing Huns Off’ –Monty,” *Daily Mirror*, January 8, 1945, 1.

Chapter 5

Attitudes Toward Rommel's Association with July 20, 1944

“Neither then nor at any time afterwards was [Rommel] aware of the plan to kill Hitler.” [emphasis in original] – Desmond Young, *Rommel* (1950)

“[The] early legend of the resistance fighter was established in the first biography, which appeared in 1950. Its author was the British general Desmond Young.” – Ralf Georg Reuth, *Rommel: The End of a Legend* (2004)

A large part of the murkiness associated with the legend of Rommel the resistance fighter is the implicit assumption that resistance equates with the assassination attempt against Hitler on July 20, 1944, which I will refer to by its German name, the *Attentat*. The typical thinking goes is that the hagiographies of the early 1950s exaggerated Rommel's participation in the conspiracy of July 20 by the German Resistance and this was a crucial component of Rommel's positive reputation. This chapter subjects this deduction to scrutiny and concludes it is over-simplified: Rommel was assumed to be a conspirator as early as 1945-46 and his involvement in the anti-Hitler plot did not alter very many people's judgments of him. Rommel's evolving relationship with Hitler invited people to impute their own meanings to resolve the paradox that Rommel the Hitler opponent of 1944 was also Rommel the Hitler favorite before then. Rather than change their opinions of Rommel, what people tended to do was interpret his reported anti-Hitler stance in a manner that conformed to how they had already made sense of Rommel's place in history.

Framing resistance just in terms of the July 20 conspiracy is overly narrow and ignores a wide range of actions such as nonconformism and refusing to comply with the

regime's wishes that were arguably more effective.¹ Plus, to presume that Rommel's stature as a military icon is neatly interchangeable with the political action of trying to kill Hitler is fraught with difficulties, not least because the latter involved breaking a military oath. Indeed, as will be demonstrated in the chapters ahead, many of those who publicly acclaimed Rommel chose their words carefully to stress that the German marshal was an honorable soldier who defied Hitler, but left his association to July 20, 1944 indistinct. Many people who respected Rommel and believed he was not a National Socialist came to that assessment independent of the *Attentat*, whether through his refusal to carry out Hitler's criminal orders, his frank arguments with Hitler as the Reich crumbled, his adherence to the soldier's code, his death at the hands of the Nazi regime, and so forth. Rommel's purported role in the conspiracy against Hitler was not a crucial determinant of how most people made sense of his place or significance in history. Which is just as well because there has always been much ambiguity with Rommel's association about the German Resistance movement and multiple interpretations of it.

The Multiplicity of Images of Rommel as an Anti-Hitler Resistor

When considering the diverse reactions audiences had toward the *Attentat*, it becomes obvious that simply attributing Rommel's popularity to it is dubious. Few people during the war and its immediate aftermath, Germans or Allies, cared that Rommel was reportedly part of a group of high ranking German officers and civil servants who had tried to kill Hitler. The *Attentat* was largely viewed with suspicion by contemporary Americans and Britons.²

¹ Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 183-217 gives a useful overview of this concept.

² The Allies unequivocally branded the conspirators as another sect of militarists cut from the same cloth as Hitler. Robert Weldon Whalen, *Assassinating Hitler: Ethics and Resistance in Nazi Germany* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1993) is the best study for overall general attitudes. See also "The Concentration Camps," *The Manchester Guardian*, May 25, 1945, 4.

The German reaction was at best ambivalence; specifically veterans had, in the words of historian Jay Lockenour, an “overwhelmingly negative” attitude toward the coup.³ Friedrich Reck-Malleczewen, a conservative Prussian aristocrat murdered by the Nazis in early 1945, embodied the feelings of many Germans (and non-Germans) when he bitterly wrote in his diary, “Ah, now, really, gentlemen, this is a little late.”⁴ Cynicism aside, one reason many had misgivings about the *Attentat* was its ostensible inconsistency with military ethos (something the conspirators themselves debated at length). Here is how one Romanian soldier put it in 2011:

In the military you take an oath, one that is drilled into you to take very bloody seriously: That you will serve your nation and her people, protect the laws of your nation, respect the military rules to the letter and those of your commanders in peace and in war.

That oath is what one would call the very essence of a military man, why do you think Rommel did not participate in the plot despite knowing about it? Since it would have went against many things he stood for as general. Some people would want to look on those guys as heroes for trying to assassinate Hitler, I see them as traitors.⁵

Significantly, this post-millennium gamer identifies Rommel as an example of proper conduct for his purported *non* participation in that plot. Indeed, this was precisely the point of view publicly espoused by Rommel’s wife Lucie. Immediately after the war, Lucie

³ Roughly 30 percent of West Germans held the view that the German Resistance was responsible for Germany’s defeat. Quote taken from Jay Lockenour, “The Rift in Our Ranks: The German Officer Corps, the Twentieth of July, and the Path to Democracy,” *German Studies Review* 21, no. 3 (Oct 1998): 470. See also Whalen, *Assassinating Hitler* and David Large, “‘A Beacon in the German Darkness’: The Anti-Nazi Resistance Legacy in West German Politics,” in Michael Geyer and John Boyer (eds.), *Resistance Against the Third Reich, 1933-1990* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 243-256. Donald Abenheim, *Reforging the Iron Cross: The Search for Tradition in the West German Armed Forces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 136-147 is a good account of how the FRG’s official advocacy of the July 20 resistance was tempered by public statements from Bonn’s unofficial Defense Ministry and was “clearly ahead of the West German public.”

⁴ Friedrich Percyval Reck-Malleczewen, *Diary of a Man in Despair*, trans. Paul Rubens (London: Audiogrove Limited, 1995), entry for July 21, 1945, 195.

⁵ Costin Razvan, “Why Teyrn Loghain is the deepest character in Dragon Age,” page 334. *Bioware Social Network, Forum Home: Dragon Age: Origins & Awakening Official Campaign Quests and Storylines*. <http://social.bioware.com/forum/1/topic/47/index/4448814/334>, (accessed September 5, 2011).

distanced her husband from the *Attentat* to Western reporters and signed a legal deposition stating, “I would like to again declare that my husband did not participate in the preparations or the execution of 20 July, 1944, since he, as a soldier, rejected taking this path.”⁶ She maintained this stance for the rest of her life. Lucie knew her husband had dealings and shared sympathies with the German Resistance.⁷ It would have been very easy for her to directly associate her husband with July 20, 1944, yet she never did.

It is difficult to assess the veracity of Lucie’s testimony. She may have remembered what she wanted to remember, which was the assessment of the US Army Intelligence officer who took her initial story (described below). She may have suspected any association with the plot would not have boded well for her status in the postwar FRG, which was an easy deduction given the negative attitudes toward July 20 by both the Allies and the Germans. We may assume that her testimony was calculated (even if true). Lucie’s initial disclosure was that her husband had died of a heart attack in his bed, which was different from the official version announced the previous fall that he succumbed to head injuries in a motor car accident.⁸ She told this version because she felt it was the safest while her teenage son Manfred was still on active duty. After Allied forces had captured Manfred on April 27, she consented to releasing a revised version given to US intelligence officers that squared with what she signed in the deposition. As one officer recorded it:

[My husband] urged the Führer to stop further bloodshed and destruction and enter into negotiations with the enemy immediately. ... You are familiar with the July 20th attempt on Hitler’s life and the plan the conspirators had to succeed him. My husband knew nothing about the plan, I am sure, but they apparently decided that he would be the best man to negotiate with the Allies.

⁶ Lucie Rommel signed deposition, September 9, 1945, *LCER*, reel 4. “Frau Rommel Says Hitler Slew the ‘Fox,’” *New York Times*, May 12, 1945, 4. Lucie died in 1971 before mainstream narratives began to question Rommel’s participation in the plot.

⁷ Lucie Rommel letter to Karl Strölin, August 10, 1947, *LCER*, reel 7.

⁸ “Heart Attack Killed Rommel, Says Wife,” *New York Times*, April 27, 1945, 4.

You see, they knew my husband's opinion on the futility of further war and they also knew he was well respected abroad. So they chose him, and it leaked out.⁹

Manfred's testimony on the day he was captured, similarly attributed the conspirators, specifically Hans Speidel, as implicating his father.¹⁰ These statements are puzzling in that the Rommels and Speidel had a cordial relationship after the war and it would have been out of character for Lucie and her strong personality to be so acquiescent to someone she believed was responsible for her husband's death.¹¹ Rommel may not have known about the specific plot to kill Hitler, but Lucie's statement exaggerated her husband's distance from those events: she herself had already spoken to Strölin about the benefits of a fundamental reorganization of Germany's political leadership and it was she who helped initiate a February 1944 meeting in which Rommel supposedly announced his intention to "rescue Germany."¹² Memory is social and in the process of interacting and coming to terms with Erwin Rommel's death, Lucie and Manfred may have come to believe what they had told Allied interrogators. In the final analysis, Lucie's version was very charitable to Erwin

⁹ Charles F. Marshall, *Discovering the Rommel Murder: The Life and Death of the Desert Fox* (Mechanicsburg PA: Stackpole Books, 2002), 1, 2, 183-197. Marshall retrospectively cites his diary and the notes he took at the time.

¹⁰ Imperial War Museum: London, Papers of FM Bernard Law Montgomery, 1/91. The deposition was sold at a 2012 auction and can be found in a *Daily Mail* story: "Death of the Desert Fox," *Daily Mail*, December 30, 2012 available at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2254904/Letter-reveals-Rommels-son-account-general-fathers-moments-ordered-commit-suicide-Hitler.html>, (accessed June 30, 2016).

¹¹ People have suggested that she did so because she wanted to ensure her husband's good reputation. This is the sort of speculation that is easy to make from a distance – how many of these same people willingly socialized with someone they deemed responsible for their spouse's death? David Irving, back when his reputation was creditable, in his very influential 1977 *Trail of the Fox* advanced the same thesis that Manfred signed in his deposition back in 1945: Rommel did not know of the plot and Speidel had implicated him to save his own skin. Even though Rommel's reputation had long been saved and numerous Rommel enthusiasts agreed with Irving, Manfred criticized the book stating, "General Speidel's account corresponds to my recollections and those of my mother. My father never doubted Speidel's loyalty for one second." See "General Denies Betraying Rommel," *The Times*, March 2, 1978, 5.

¹² Manfred Rommel Interview, *LCER*, reel 3; Letter from Lucia-Maria Rommel to Karl Strölin, August 10, 1947 in *LCER*, reel 7.

Rommel. He does his duty, breaks no oaths, and is a victim of both Hitler and unsavory cloak and dagger intrigue.

One irony in this story is that although Lucie consistently denied his involvement in the *Attentat*, the German marshal became intrinsically linked with it anyway. Her testimony was buried under numerous reports of her husband's role in the resistance and his death at the hands of Hitler that emerged soon after the European war was over. Almost immediately after Rommel's death, there were rumors. On the day of Rommel's funeral in October 1944, Swedish dispatches cited that "informed sources ... linked the death of Rommel to those of other members of the Nazi hierarchy who were executed as a result of the attempt on Hitler's life in July," information that prompted *Stars and Stripes* to headline "Fuehrer to Shed Crocodile Tears at Rommel's Funeral."¹³ The BBC broadcast the resistance narrative in March 1945, before the war's conclusion, when it asserted that Rommel "was one of the July conspirators against the Nazi leaders and would have asked the Allies for an armistice if the assassination plot had succeeded." As picked up and reported in numerous US newspapers, the BBC report mused about the possibility that it was the Nazi hierarchy that eliminated Rommel, not that his death resulted from an air attack as had been reported.¹⁴ The *Chicago Tribune* actually identified him as the "Leader of the Plot."¹⁵ Soon after the war in Europe ended, numerous testimonies affirmed the perception that Rommel had been in on the conspiracy. Fritz Bayerlein, who had served as a staff officer for Rommel during the African campaign and who was stationed in Normandy after D-Day, told Allied officers Rommel

¹³ "Fuehrer to Shed Crocodile Tears at Rommel's Funeral," *Mediterranean Besancon Stars and Stripes*, October 19, 1944, 4.

¹⁴ "Rommel Role Seen in Anti-Hitler Plot," *New York Times*, March 11, 1945, 29. See also "Rommel in Hitler Plot, BBC Reports," *The Baltimore Sun*, 3; "Probe Hints Rommel Agreed to July Putsch Against Hitler," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 20, 1945, 15; "Rommel Was in Plot Against Adolf Hitler," *Mediterranean Naples Stars and Stripes*, March 12, 1945, 1.

¹⁵ "Rommel Called Leader of the Plot," *Chicago Tribune*, March 11, 1945, 4.

committed suicide to avoid execution at a People's Court for his presumed role in the plot.¹⁶ Peripheral members of the resistance movement (those few who survived Hitler's purges), or at least those claiming to have worked against Hitler, relayed similar stories of Rommel's involvement when interrogated. In September 1945, the US Military Government Detachment of Frankfurt released a document stating, "Definite evidence that Rommel, Germany's 'desert fox' and Hitler's favorite General, had turned against his Fuehrer and was a participant in the 20 July assassination plot" and characterized that Rommel had "agreed to take part in a leading manner."¹⁷ A subsequent Associated Press story made the front pages of newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* the next day.¹⁸ In October 1945, a *Manchester Guardian* correspondent reported that he "had already learned from another source close to Rommel's family that the Field Marshal had carried poison for [suicide], as he had indeed been concerned in the plot."¹⁹ Also in October 1945, a US Army document summarizing the Nuremberg Pretrial Interrogation of Alfred Jodl read, "Questioned about the fate of Rommel, Jodl renders the *familiar* version of Rommel's implication in the 20 July plot and his ensuing enforced suicide"²⁰ [emphasis added]. Even if the author's use of the word "familiar" reflects his or her privileged knowledge of relevant testimonies, the point still stands that even casual followers of current events in their local newspaper would have come across multiple mentions of Rommel the conspirator in 1945.

The Nuremberg trials provided a public forum for testimony regarding Rommel's forced suicide and purported role in the conspiracy. In January 1946 Chief of the Armed

¹⁶ "Rommel Took Own Life, His Chief of Staff Says," *New York Times*, June 26, 1945, 5.

¹⁷ "U.S. Forces, European Theatre Public Relations Division release no. 282," September 4, 1945, *LCER*, reel 9.

¹⁸ "U.S. Army Finds Rommel Joined Foes of Hitler," *New York Times*, September 5, 1945, 1; "U.S. Army Finds Rommel Joined Foes of Hitler," *Chicago Tribune*, September 5, 1945, 1.

¹⁹ "A German General Looks Back," *The Guardian*, October 26, 1945, 5

²⁰ "Summary of Verbatim Nuremberg Pretrial Interrogation of Alfred Jodl," October 2, 1945, *LCER*, reel 4.

Forces High Command Wilhelm Keitel testified that he had acted on Hitler's orders to present Rommel the choice of suicide by poison or trial by People's Court. According to Keitel, Hitler was reluctant to make such an order. However, because Hitler had read a statement that had Rommel uttering, "Tell them in Berlin (the bomb plotters) that they can count on me," it was imperative to eliminate him. Keitel further explained that since Rommel did not deny or try to justify the statement, it was a safe assumption of his guilt and a deserved punishment.²¹ The United Press distributed the story, reaching newspapers such as the Army's *Stars and Stripes*.²² On March 23, 1946, a Gestapo officer offered further details on Rommel's actual death via cyanide. The secret police made detailed preparations to arrest the German marshal if he refused the poison and to coerce doctors to endorse the fiction of a death by car accident because "the time has come when Rommel must fall." This testimony was duly circulated by western reporters, including a young Walter Cronkite of the *Los Angeles Times*.²³ Specific acknowledgment of Rommel's participation in the plot came from Hans Bernd Gisevius, one of the few surviving conspirators, one month later in April. Gisevius characterized Rommel as a "Johnny-come-lately" who only joined after military disaster, but nevertheless identified him as an active participant who thought Himmler and Göring should be eliminated as well.²⁴ The *New York Times* reported on June 6 General

²¹ "Keitel Helped Rommel End Life He Says," *Washington Post*, January 21, 1946, 4; "Keitel Arranged Plans for Rommel 'Suicide,'" *Los Angeles Times*, January 27, 1946, 8. Keitel's recorded testimony can be found in United States. Office of Chief of Counsel for the Prosecution of Axis Criminality, *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1946), 1256-1271.

²² Ann Stringer, "Rommel Committed Suicide on Direct Order from Hitler," *Mediterranean Rome Stars and Stripes*, January 22, 1946, 5.

²³ Walter Cronkite, "Rommel's Final Moments Told by Gestapo Officer," *Los Angeles Times*, March 24, 1946, 7.

²⁴ "German Condemns Hitler Hierarchy," *New York Times*, April 26, 1946, 6.

Jodl's testimony that Rommel had openly confronted Hitler about the futility of continuing the war, which infuriated the Führer.²⁵

Rommel's forced suicide and connection with the July 20 plot were again news items when General Ernst Maisel, one of the two generals who delivered Hitler's offer of trial or suicide (the other, General Wilhelm Burgdorf, was killed during the war), took the docket in a denazification trial in 1947. Legally the court ruled what anyone following events over the past two years would have already known: that the wartime story of Rommel's death due to an Allied air attack was fiction and that the German marshal had been coerced to commit suicide as part of post *Attentat* purges. Although the prosecution argued that the Nazis plotted Rommel's death because he was *suspected* of aiding the conspiracy, this subtlety was lost in much of the British and US press coverage that implied Rommel was an active participant in the plot. *The Times* reported that "Rommel, who apparently was to have taken over command of the armed forces had the attempt succeeded, was invited to draw the necessary conclusion. He agreed ... [and] died by his own hand on orders from Hitler..."²⁶ The *New York Times* similarly framed the story and stated "the 'Desert Fox' committed suicide by poison after the discovery of his connection with the 1944 plot against Adolf Hitler's life."²⁷ Maisel was eventually convicted in 1949 as a category II offender, the second most implicated (the prosecution had asked for category I), for helping the Nazi regime force Rommel to commit suicide. He was sentenced to two years hard labor.²⁸

Whatever Rommel's level of involvement in the *Attentat* may have been, a number of reputable publications represented him as a member of the anti-Hitler resistance after the

²⁵ "Jodl Says Army Urged Peace in '44," *New York Times*, June 6, 1946, 7.

²⁶ "Rommel's Death," *The Times*, November 14, 1947, 3.

²⁷ "Death of Rommel Now Called Suicide," *New York Times*, November 13, 1947, 10.

²⁸ "General Ruled a Nazi," *New York Times*, July 5, 1949, 5.

war. Not that there was no ambiguity. As the 1950 epigraph by Desmond Young indicates, Rommel's first biographer did not believe the German general knew about the *Attentat* (although he does claim Rommel associated with the conspirators and told them he was committed to make peace with the Western Allies interpedently of Hitler). And there was Lucie's perspective or that of a correspondent from *The Times* who believed Rommel was at most a passive participant who had imprecise knowledge of the conspiracy.²⁹ However collective memory simplifies and is impatient with such ambiguities, so at any given time there was a prevailing sentiment that framed Rommel as either a genuine anti-Hitler resistor or not. This was a parallel development to public views of Germany during the war. There were the committed minorities and those who were intellectually invested in the accuracy of Erwin Rommel's place in history and kept their own image, but the majority middle sloshed back and forth following the general climate of things. Public opinion is a tricky concept to gauge because it marginalizes dissenting opinions. In any event the key point is that in the war's immediate aftermath there were many reports that connected Rommel with the July 20 conspiracy against Hitler that arose from journalistic inquiries and judicial proceedings.

Why so many people believed these reports when Rommel's own wife insisted he was not involved warrants explanation. What probably proved decisive was the sheer number of reports and testimonies from ostensibly reliable sources that connected Rommel with the *Attentat*. Through the Nuremberg trial process, the testimony of many of the principal actors of July 20 – Hitler (via others), Jodl, Keitel, Gisevius – all unequivocally characterized Rommel as a member of the conspiracy. There was no proverbial smoking

²⁹ "The Plot Against Hitler," *The Times*, March 14, 1946, 5 and "A Failure of Character," *The Times*, March 15, 1946, 5.

gun, however circumstantial evidence – which nobody disputed – heavily implicated the German marshal and lent credence to this testimony: he had clashed furiously with Hitler over the direction of the war, he had had several meetings with conspirators and was sympathetic with their overall agenda, he had agreed to work with a post-Hitler regime, and by late June and early July 1944 he was making open – and highly risky – inquiries whether his orders would be obeyed if they conflicted with those of Hitler’s to people who were not his friends, even to the likes of S.S. General Josef “Sepp” Dietrich.³⁰ For most observers during this time period, the question was not whether Rommel was involved in the conspiracy, rather how deep he was in it and what his motives were.

The experience of Captain Charles F. Marshall, a US Army intelligence officer, is enlightening in this respect. He was the intelligence officer who first interrogated Lucie and his May 2, 1945 story in the *Beachhead News* was consistent with what she would sign in a deposition four months later:

The German leaders falsely implicated Rommel in the Hitler plot because he warned the Chancellor shortly after the Allies’ invasion of France that further resistance was useless and recommended immediate negotiations.³¹

Marshall was fascinated with the tale and continued researching the topic after the war while stationed in Germany. One year later, he found it odd that Lucie so vociferously denied her husband was involved in the *Attentat*. Marshall believed Lucie was naively using the unsavory method of assassination to disassociate her husband from the entire affair. As he wrote over forty years later:

³⁰ “Eidesstaatliche Erklärung,” by Helmuth Lang, *LCER*, reel 11. Manfred relayed the same to David Irving in the mid-1970s in *LCER*, reel 3.

³¹ Charles F. Marshall, *Discovering the Rommel Murder: The Life and Death of the Desert Fox* (Mechanicsburg PA: Stackpole Books, 2002), 1, 2, 183-197. Marshall’s story was picked up by civilian papers shortly thereafter, for example “Frau Rommel Says Hitler Slew the ‘Fox,’” *New York Times*, May 12, 1945, 4.

Mrs. Rommel's denial was based on the German officer's oath of loyalty to Hitler. Although she was aware of her husband's acute disdain for the Führer, she refused to believe that he would have agreed to the attempt on the Führer's life. The fact of the matter is that in the course of the convoluted plotting, involving numerous groups, Rommel wanted Hitler taken alive, not killed, and tried for his crimes in a court.³²

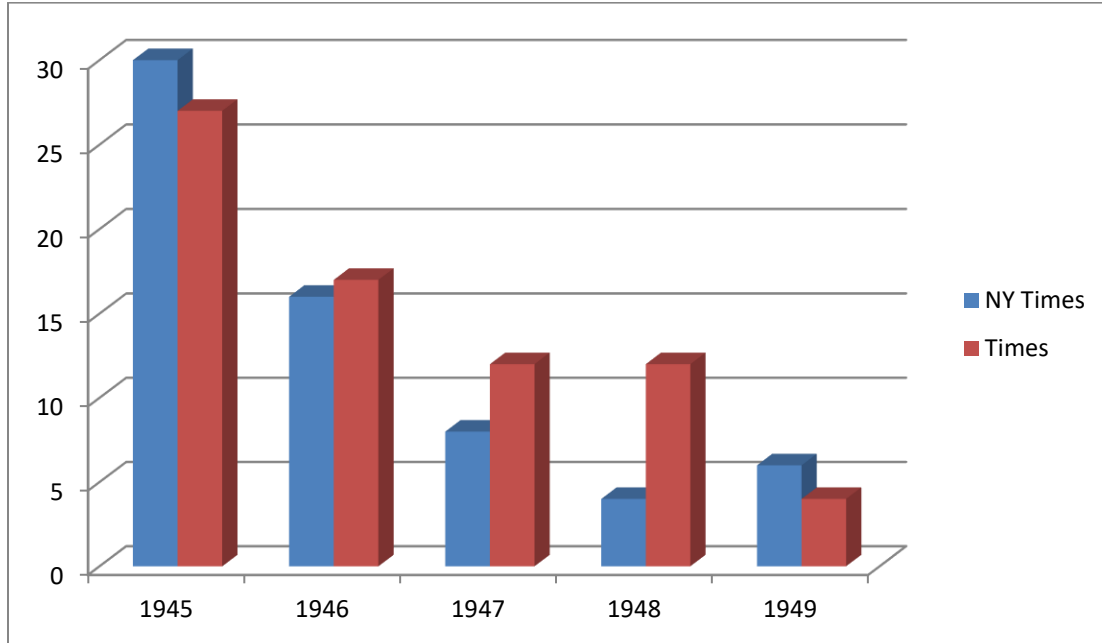
Marshall thus came to believe that although Rommel disagreed with the explicit means of killing Hitler, he nevertheless was enmeshed in a diverse group of resistors who worked to end the Nazi regime. This line of thinking was similar to the one that the critical British historian John Wheeler-Bennett asserted in 1954.³³

It can thus be said with confidence that Rommel was quickly perceived as an anti-Hitler conspirator in mainstream narratives after the war. Yet this did not generate much interest in the United States or Great Britain, let alone alter perceptions that he was a political solidier of the National Socialist creed. Newspaper coverage of Rommel was uneven and tapered off quickly in the late 1940s.

³² Marshall, *Discovering the Rommel Murder*, 225.

³³ John Wheeler-Bennett, *Nemesis of Power: The German Army in Politics, 1918-1945* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1954).

Rommel Citations: 1945-1949



By 1949, Rommel was getting a mere five mentions a year. Most Western commentators during this time interpreted Rommel’s turn against Hitler as additional evidence of an unprincipled opportunism that prompted him to follow the German dictator from the early days – much in the same way core anti-Hitler conspirators General Ludwig Beck and Hans Bernd Gisevius construed Rommel’s sudden conversion to their cause. In March 1946, C.L. Sulzberger of the *New York Times* summarized many of the details about the July 20 conspiracy that emerged from the Nuremberg trials. Sulzberger’s portrayal of Rommel reiterated the wartime demonized images when he noted that that the German marshal “gave up his erstwhile hero role with Hitler and entered the putschist ranks” only after a military disagreement with the Führer and “pledged his SS support” to the conspirators.³⁴ A month later, the *New York Times* used the header “Rommel a Party General” when it quoted

³⁴ C.L. Sulzberger, “Full Story of Anti-Hitler Plot Shows That Allies Refused to Assist,” *New York Times*, March 18, 1946, 8.

Gisevius's testimony that although Rommel joined the conspiracy, "it is incorrect to picture Rommel as a fighter against Hitler" as he was a "typical party general and joined us only after military disaster."³⁵ Louis P. Lochner, who first reported Rommel's connection to the plot in March 1945, wrote in the introduction to his translation of Joseph Goebbels's diaries in 1948 that Rommel was an "ardent Nazi" and cut from the same cloth as the Propaganda Minister.³⁶ Noted Canadian journalist Milton Shulman's *Defeat in the West* (1948) had Rommel taking part in the early days of Nazi street brawling and instructing Hitler's SS and SA bodyguard. Shulman interpreted Rommel's participation and ultimate death in the *Attentat* as typifying "the course set and followed by those who had risen to power on the tidal wave of National Socialism."³⁷ Schulman does not list his sources on Rommel, but as he was at that time an intelligence officer in the Canadian army who had interviewed key German military figures such as Gerd von Rundstedt, his assessment was both representative and informed for the late 1940s.

Representations of Rommel in the United States in 1948

The problem of drawing a direct connection from the *Attentat* to the rehabilitation of Rommel's reputation is illustrated in the first postwar articles on the German marshal. These emerged in autumn 1948 when several US periodicals featured the story of his death. Commentators interpreted Rommel's participation in the July 20 plot as a disingenuous act triggered by frustration with Hitler's military strategy. These articles reveal that in 1948

³⁵ "German Condemns Hitler Hierarchy," *New York Times*, April 26, 1946, 6. Gisevius wrote a book which contains the same opinion of Rommel which was quickly published in German and translated into English. Hans Bernd Gisevius, *Bis zum bittern Ende* (Zürich: Fretz & Wasmuth, 1946) and *To the Bitter End* trans. by Richard Winston (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1947)

³⁶ Louis P. Lochner, "Himmler Linked to Plot on Hitler; Participant Tells of July Attempt," *Los Angeles Times*, March 20, 1945, 1; Lochner, *The Goebbels Diaries*, 28.

³⁷ Milton Shulman, *Defeat in the West* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1948), 22, 79, 139.

Rommel was still portrayed unfavorably and commentators still saw him as representative of fundamental flaws in German political culture.

How neatly Rommel still fit into the wartime portrayal of an overrated Nazi general was epitomized by a *Harper's* advertisement in the *New York Times* that invited readers to “read the whole story of Hitler’s pet commander” and how he “failed miserably” in his military task to defend the Third Reich. The popular American monthly magazine chose an interesting marketing strategy in framing its October 1948 article about Rommel as a “bad” German while a massive Anglo-American airlift delivered supplies to Berliners who were portrayed as “good” Germans victimized by a Soviet blockade.³⁸ And a “bad” German was precisely how William Harden Hale’s “The End of Marshal Rommel” depicted him. Hale, who had been a member of psychological warfare division and served at the Allied Supreme Headquarters, bluntly contrasted Rommel with his “old-line” professional military peers and contended that he was much more comfortable with the “roughnecks” of the Nazi Party. As for Rommel’s resistance against his “idol” Adolf Hitler, Hale saw it as disingenuous and argued it was not indicative of an authentic break with the regime: “But he himself hadn’t really revolted – in terms of acts that is ... for deep down, Rommel had never really broken with Hitler and Nazidom, but had only turned suddenly against them in the anger of frustration” (we will never know whether or not Rommel would have “revolted,” since he was unconscious in bed on July 20). Rommel’s generalship also came under attack. The article referred to him as a “propaganda general,” “favorite of Hitler,” and asserted that he “was at his best in a command tank or forward tactical headquarters of a division, but he was

³⁸ Harper’s advertisement, *New York Times*, September 26, 1948, BR26.

a sad sack at Army Group level.”³⁹ Hale’s 1948 representation was very much in line with what was in Allied obituaries in October 1944, a continuity of perceptions rather than change.

If anything, during the late 1940s the trajectory of Rommel’s reputation was downward. This was at least the opinion of Harvey A. DeWeerd, whose “The Reputation of Rommel” article appeared in the October 1948 edition of the scholarly journal *The Yale Review*. As noted previously, in 1943 DeWeerd had written that the German marshal in 1943 was a tactician of note and the Nazi rabble-rousing stories were improbable.⁴⁰ By 1948, DeWeerd had changed his view. Rather than noting Rommel’s skills as a tactician, he wrote, “Excepting Hitler, Rommel was more responsible for the success of the Normandy invasion than any other German.” Rommel’s strategy in Normandy is certainly grounds for criticism, however it does seem that DeWeerd was favoring second-hand sources that he wanted to believe. The 1948 article claimed that the Allies had aided in building up the legend of Rommel with “free advertising.” But when DeWeerd wrote about Rommel in 1943, he had said nothing about the “free advertising” on the part of the Allies. By that time, Allied commentators had explicitly stated the “Desert Fox” myth was busted and the later October 1944 obituaries claiming that Rommel slept outside Hitler’s door and led murderous raids as an SS leader illustrate a different public narrative. DeWeerd also wrote that Rommel called the Eighth Army “cowardly” and acted “dishonorably.” This is hearsay that DeWeerd chose to accept. We cannot document that Rommel ever uttered such remarks – in fact in *Krieg ohne Hass* he is magnanimous to his British opponents – and many testimonials during the

³⁹ William Harlan Hale, “The End of Marshal Rommel,” *Harper’s Magazine* 197, no. 1181 (October 1948): 67-78.

⁴⁰ Captain Harvey A. DeWeerd, “The Rommel Legend,” *Infantry Journal* 53 (July 1943): 16-23.

war on the Allied side acknowledged the chivalry of the *Afrikakorps* and its commander.⁴¹ Finally DeWeerd incorrectly wrote “Like Keitel and Jodl, Rommel ultimately joined the Nazi Party,” for which he supposedly “received his reward.”⁴² DeWeerd’s opinion of Rommel declined and appears to have affected his judgement; he was a well-informed commentator who was getting basic biographical facts wrong. Rommel was never a member of the Nazi Party.⁴³

The last of these 1948 US portrayals was written by Countess Rosie Waldeck, (formerly Rosa Goldschmidt) a Jewish German who emigrated to the United States in 1931 and later converted to Catholicism. Waldeck’s article first appeared in *Forum* in November 1948 and one month later in the mass circulated *Reader’s Digest*. It reveals that there were positive military themed images of Rommel in circulation, even if most portrayals tried to debunk them. Waldeck offered this trenchant observation regarding the fascination toward him:

... Today, some four years after his death, he emerges as the only legendary general World War II has produced. Compared to an Eisenhower or a Montgomery, his laurels appear singularly perishable. He never matched MacArthur’s remote grandeur. He lacked the strategic sophistication which made Von Rundstedt the expert’s delight. Yet he brought to modern generalship something none of the others had – a quality which might be called military sex appeal. ... To his men, who saw him rising out of the turret of his tank in the front battle line, he was the God of battle. ... When the Tommies spoke of “doing a Rommel” they meant doing a superb job. And American troops visiting the ancient castle of La Roche Guyon stood in awe

⁴¹ In all of Rommel’s writings and documented conversations with colleagues, he referred to the British Eighth Army as honorable opponents. This taciturn man even found time to occasionally joke about the plucky nature of his foe in letters to his wife. Contemporary British war correspondents who were in the Western Desert such as Alan Moorhead and Alexander Clifford wrote the feeling was mutual on the Commonwealth side.

⁴² H.A. DeWeerd, “The Reputation of Rommel,” *Yale Review* 38, (1948-1949): 67-81.

⁴³ An insightful analysis on how apt it is to categorize Rommel as a Nazi even though he was never a Party member is Lieb, “Erwin Rommel: Widerstandskämpfer oder Nationalsozialist?” It is telling that DeWeerd avoided this sort of nuanced approach and gravitated toward a reductionist assertion (that is incorrect) in a scholarly journal.

not because of the illustrious family of La Rochefoucauld, lords of the manor for centuries, but because Rommel had slept there.⁴⁴

This harked back to impression the “Desert Fox” had made in 1942. It was a perspective that had nothing to do with the *Attentat* and represented a continuity with what she had written in 1943 when she singled out Rommel from all the other German generals, asserting that he “alone had all the makings of a myth” due to his “indelible youthfulness,” “apparent invulnerability,” and a “closeness to [the] men” that he commanded.⁴⁵ Waldeck also uncharacteristically distanced Rommel from Hitler; she wrote that “Rommel was one of the few German commanders who threw [Hitler’s criminal orders] into the wastebasket.”⁴⁶ It was an unorthodox representation; however, it was one she held in 1943 when she wrote the tales of Rommel as a Hitler disciple were “the imaginary part of the Rommel myth.”⁴⁷ She no doubt was steeled in this belief by later events. At the Nuremberg trials on August 27, 1946, Dr. Hans Laternser testified about Hitler’s criminal orders, “The commander-in-chief in Africa, Field Marshal Rommel, destroyed the order immediately on receipt because of his inner opposition to it.”⁴⁸ And she could have been told by two Rommel-friendly sources who she corresponded, the aforementioned Captain Marshall and Professor Hesse who were both compiling their own manuscripts on Rommel.

Although Waldeck acknowledged military allure and chivalry, her views of the *Attentat* and Rommel’s death were not complimentary:

⁴⁴ Countess Waldeck, “Rommel’s Last Days,” *Forum* 110, no. 5 (November 1948): 279.

⁴⁵ R. G. Waldeck, *Meet Mr. Blank: The Leader of Tomorrow’s Germans* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s, 1943), 24-27.

⁴⁶ Waldeck, “Rommel’s Last Days,” 280; Waldeck, “What Really Happened to Rommel,” *Reader’s Digest* 53, no. 320 (December 1948): 130.

⁴⁷ Waldeck, *Meet Mr. Blank*, 25.

⁴⁸ Testimony of Dr. Hans Laternser (Counsel for the General Staff and OKW) at the IMT on August 27, 1946. The Avalon Project, “Nuremberg Trial Proceedings Volume 22: Two Hundred and Twelfth Day. Tuesday, 27 August 1946.” Yale Law School. Lillian Goldman Law Library. <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/08-27-46.asp>, (accessed December 14, 2015).

Like most unimaginative people, Rommel was perfectly able to bear tyranny as long as it was directed against others. Now that he had run head on into it himself, the whole truth about the Nazis' callous inhumanity was revealed to him ... Hitler, he understood at last, would drag all Germany into the abyss rather than give up ... [he looked] about for ways of ending the war in the West at once and overthrowing the Nazi Regime.

It was authentic resistance, but late in the day and the decision came only after he had been subjected to Hitler's tyrannical intransigence. Waldeck did *not* have much regard for Rommel the man and highlighted him as an example of the political immaturity of Germans that allowed the Third Reich to function. This is clear in what astonished Waldeck the most about Rommel's story: the compliant manner in which the celebrated German marshal and his family and friends simply accepted his fate.

In the annals of the Third Reich no scene exposes more flagrantly the psychological climate on which Hitler thrived. Here was no hapless Jew helpless in the hands of the Gestapo. Here was a German Field Marshal, complete with baton, the glory of the army, a legend all over the world for his courage ... And yet this man meekly let himself be taken away to his death. Why didn't someone in the house grab a gun and have a go at the two generals?⁴⁹

Waldeck made the point more forcefully in a letter to Marshall:

How can one expect the Germans to get excited over Jews being starved in a concentration camp if wife, sons, adjutant, orderlies let Papa depart without moving a finger and wait for the telephone call that he is dead!!!

She mentioned further there were six guns in the house and that if she had been in Lucie's position, "[the two generals] wouldn't have got out of my house intact."⁵⁰ For Waldeck, who called this story a "shameful, psychologically revealing end for a great man (or a pseudo-great man)," the episode was emblematic of the Germans' stultifying passivity when

⁴⁹ Waldeck, "Rommel's Last Days," 281-282. Waldeck, "What Really Happened to Rommel," 132-133.

⁵⁰ Taken from Marshall, *Discovering the Rommel Murder*, 199-201. Unfortunately, Marshall's original correspondence with Waldeck has been lost.

confronted with *Staatsgewalt* (state authority), which permitted the horrors of the Third Reich and led to its self-destruction, a point she reiterated in her letter to Marshall.⁵¹

What is important here is that Waldeck mediated Rommel's biographical information and interpreted its significance according to her own worldview. She had privileged access to positive biographical details of Erwin Rommel via Marshall and Hesse, and much of her knowledge of the *Attentat* came from Marshall, with whom she debated the significance of Rommel's death. Even when presented with this preferential and sympathetic viewpoint, for Waldeck, passivity was the most crucial element. Marshall wrote that this was a naïve opinion, which did not take into account key facts such as the SS had surrounded the house and a gun battle was hopeless.⁵² Waldeck rejected this outlook because she interpreted the story as "shameful" and a confirmation of "all the German lack of political instinct, of individual fighting spirit that led them to their colossal self-destruction."⁵³ Even if people acknowledged the accuracy of Rommel's resistance against Hitler, they still could interpret its significance negatively regarding Rommel and more generally Nazi-era Germans.

Once the links between July 20 and Rommel's reputation in Great Britain and United States are isolated and subjected to scrutiny, their explanatory power appears more superficial than sufficient. The foundation of Rommel's positive imagery was based on the military and it is overly simplistic to assume that was neatly interchangeable with the political action of trying to kill Hitler. It *could* be for some people, but it was not for many people. Revealingly many of those British authors who admired the German marshal and sculpted his reputation, from Desmond Young in 1950 to Ronald Lewin in 1968 to David

⁵¹ Taken from Marshall, *Discovering the Rommel Murder*, 199-201.

⁵² Rommel's son and soldier aide suggested a gun battle, which he rejected because it was not a battle that could be won and thus would entail the death of his family and his aide.

⁵³ Taken from Marshall, *Discovering the Rommel Murder*, 199-201.

Irving in 1977 to Sir David Fraser in 1993, have unambiguously asserted Rommel was unaware of the specific plan to assassinate Hitler. These authors were all drawn to Rommel's military qualities and differentiated him from Hitlerism more in the vein of defying the German dictator rather than trying to kill him. As Lewin remarked in his 1968 military biography:

Rommel's outlook was entirely honourable. While many of his colleagues and peers in the German Army surrendered their honour by collusion with the inequities of Nazism, Rommel was never defiled. ... His merits as a strategist can be argued indefinitely; but as one of the last great cavalry captains his place cannot be denied. On whatever corner of Valhalla Jeb Stuart and Attila, Prince Rupert and Patton may assemble, Erwin Rommel will be of their company: and the final words of Colonel Henderson's famous appraisal of Stonewall Jackson seem appropriate as a conclusion. "What Is life without honour? Degradation is worse than death. We must think of the living and of those who are to come after us..." The man who in two savage wars led his troops to victory among the Italian Alps, across the plains of France, and over the African desert, preserved his honour to the end; and his opponents, whatever their varying views of his vicissitudes, have never failed to hold him in honour."⁵⁴

That is the essence of what many find inspirational about Rommel. It true that Bonn and other NATO institutions invoked July 20 and the Rommel myth during the 1950s to make their policies more palatable. But the *Attentat* was always ambiguous – thirty-six percent of West Germans polled in November 1952 believed that German resistance to Hitler was responsible for Germany's defeat⁵⁵ – and as illustrated in future chapters, this favorable milieu did not emerge until *after* positive representations of a "good" Rommel had already been mass consumed by Americans and Britons. This is not to say his association with the Hitler conspirators did not (eventually) aid in fostering his public perception as an anti-Nazi.

⁵⁴ Ronald Lewin, *Rommel as Military Commander* (London: Batsford), 230, 248-249.

⁵⁵ Kurt Tauber, *Beyond Eagle and Swastika: German Nationalism since 1945* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), 1127 for poll citations. Rommel commemorations will be examined in Chapter Twelve.

Rather, such an association (or the lack thereof) did not (and still does not) determine the considerable stature he has enjoyed as an international military icon.

Chapter 6

“Rommel Conspired Against Hitler but his Heart Belonged to Him”

“I will make Rommel a hero of the entire German people” – Hans Speidel to General Leo Freiherr Geyr von Schweppenburg, 1946, as recalled by Geyr in April 1960¹

This chapter challenges the assertions made by other historians that Hans Speidel played a decisive role in promulgating the idea that Rommel was a resistance fighter and that he was instrumental in altering American and British perceptions. The previous chapter demonstrated that Rommel’s opposition to Hitler was already established without Speidel’s agency. More to the point, Speidel’s *Invasion 1944* (1949) was a flawed book, was immediately recognized as a biased source, and it took a charitable mindset toward Nazi-era Germans to interpret Rommel’s late turn against Hitler as something other than another signal of the failure of the Third Reich. As the *New York Times* articulated it in 1950: “Rommel conspired against Hitler but his heart belonged to him.”²

Hans Speidel and Invasion 1944

As mentioned previously, Speidel was a (peripheral) member of Stauffenberg’s resistance group and was Rommel’s former Chief of Staff during the Normandy campaign in 1944. He was the closest surviving witness to events regarding Rommel’s association with the *Attentat*. There is no question Speidel tried to make Rommel a hero with his autumn 1949 publication, *Invasion 1944: Ein Beitrag zu Rommels und des Reiches Schicksal*.³ The

¹ Leo Freiherr Geyr von Schweppenburg, “Eidesstattlichen Erklärung vom 27 April 1960” in *LCER*, reel 3. Geyr hated Rommel (the feeling was mutual) and had furiously clashed with the German marshal over the defensive preparations in France before D-Day in what has become known as the “Panzer controversy.” Geyr believed that Rommel’s fame had biased observers and spent much of his postwar life asserting that his own defensive conception was correct.

² H.R. Trevor-Roper, “Hitler’s Generals Create a Dangerous Myth,” *New York Times*, February 19, 1950, SM6.

³ Hans Speidel, *Invasion 1944: ein Beitrag zu Rommels und des Reiches Schicksal* (Tübingen und Stuttgart: Rainer Wunderlich Verlag Hermann Leins, 1949). First English language publication: Hans Speidel, *Invasion*

book represents Rommel as a moral resistor to Hitler and goes into considerable detail regarding plans the German marshal purportedly made to bring the fighting on the Western Front to an end and his consent to the German Resistance and their plan to overthrow the Nazi regime, which culminated in the July 20 assassination attempt on Hitler. Some commentators have cited both Speidel and his book as crucial determinants of the propagation of the “Rommel myth.”⁴ Speidel did indeed do well for himself; he rose to a four-star general in the postwar *Bundeswehr*, and between 1957 and 1963 served as Commander-in-Chief of NATO forces in central Europe. While he was able to resurrect his own career, the intuitive connection between *Invasion 1944* and the stature Rommel enjoyed in the postwar era breaks down when considering that the *Attentat* is not what defined Rommel’s good reputation, and that *Invasion 1944* was widely viewed as a transparent apologia. The notion that Rommel was involved with the conspiracy was already in circulation and Western audiences mediated Speidel’s thesis, just as the *New York Times* did.

Speidel has long been a controversial figure. He was arrested in September 1944 because the Nazi hierarchy suspected his involvement in the *Attentat*, yet he survived Gestapo interrogation and was not cashiered by the so-called “Court of Honor,” whereas Rommel was forced to commit suicide. What role Speidel’s testimony played in Rommel’s death cannot be determined based on the fragmentary evidence. He most likely implicated Rommel (under torture), but his interrogators had alternative sources of information incriminating Rommel.⁵ More important in this case is perception. Speidel has been seen as

1944: Rommel and the Normandy Campaign, trans. by Theo R. Crevenna (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1950). One year later, there was also a British publication: Hans Speidel, *We Defended Normandy* (London: Jenkins 1951).

⁴ Irving, *The Trail of the Fox* was the first and strongest articulation of this thesis. Reuth, *End of a Legend* is representative of more recent interpretations.

⁵ Remy, *Mythos Rommel*, endnote on 367-369.

a suspect source and one can often find the following sentiment in Rommel discussions:

“This man is famous for one thing. He betrayed Rommel.”⁶ For someone who supposedly made Rommel a hero, Speidel often draws acrimony from Rommel enthusiasts.

Victimization was Speidel’s reoccurring theme in *Invasion 1944*, a motif that his conclusion forcefully presents:

It is the tragedy of every German soldier and of German history that such courage was misused and sacrificed for a phantom. Every German now suffers the disastrous consequences: hundreds of thousands of soldiers are still in prison; hundreds of thousands have perished in obscurity; others remain prisoners of war or live like beggars in their own country. Those who returned home found a ruined fatherland crowded with millions of refugees and expellees.⁷

Of course, it required a particular perspective to comprehend that every German had to suffer the millions of uprooted refugees who “crowded” the Fatherland by presumably just taking up space. Speidel made a fundamental distinction between the professional soldiers, who were “sacrificed,” and the Nazi hierarchy. Indeed, the book gives the impression that Hitler was waging the war all by himself with the author’s constant use of phrases such as “Hitler had ordered...” and “Hitler’s decision...” supplemented by a forceful presentation that the officer corps was powerless to influence events.⁸ *Invasion 1944* presented Germans as victims who had little power to curb, let alone avert, the criminality of the Third Reich.

Speidel portrayed Rommel as the embodiment of a decent man who felt compelled to oppose the Nazi Regime and died doing so. Many pages detail Rommel’s humanity, how he “placed great importance on the conduct of his troops toward the [French] population,” as “a soldier with ‘civic courage’” who, after divining the criminal nature of the Nazi regime,

⁶ Taken from “Talk: Hans Speidel,” *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk%3AHans_Speidel, (accessed June 2, 2018).

⁷ *Speidel, Invasion 1944*, 176.

⁸ For Hitler-centric approach, see Speidel, *Invasion 1944*, especially 4-16.

forcefully “condemned the excesses of Hitler in human and military matters.” It was because “Rommel held the code of Moltke, which in the last resort put humanity higher than military duty, and man above principle,” that obliged the German marshal to involve himself step by step with like-minded soldiers to remove Hitler and end the war. Speidel was unequivocal about Rommel’s plans to make peace with the West against the commands of the Nazi regime, “to strike a blow such as Yorck’s” (who in 1812 broke the Prussian-French alliance to conclude an armistice with Russian forces, thereby facilitating the end of the Napoleonic occupation).⁹ Rommel’s death was not as much about the *Attentat* as it was because his open opposition constituted a dangerous threat to Hitler’s hold on power. As Speidel wrote:

The revolt of July 20, 1944 gave [Hitler] the opportunity he desired to rid himself of his only rival and possible successor ... There was to be no one in Germany who could take Hitler’s place. Rommel was the most popular man during the war, for his human qualities as well as for his military successes. He was willing to spring into the breach and avert chaos ... Murder was the only political weapon that Hitler could use to gain his ends without revealing his own weakness. To conceal it with a state funeral was merely a refinement of the reign of terror.¹⁰

According to this view, Rommel was not murdered so much for what he did as for what he represented, a voice of courage that Hitler was incapable of silencing.

Invasion 1944 thus portrayed Rommel more as a virtuous man and a victim of circumstance than as a brilliant commander. Indeed, Speidel spent only four pages analyzing the German marshal’s military aptitude and within the florid language he used to describe Rommel’s “clear blue eyes and warm animated face ... his manly qualities and the pulse of a great heart,” there lay admissions of his imperfections such as in the realm of strategic planning.¹¹ This is an important point as Speidel’s portrayal was tacking away from the

⁹ Speidel, *Invasion 1944*, 158-159.

¹⁰ Speidel, *Invasion 1944*, 159-160.

¹¹ Speidel, *Invasion 1944*, 163-166.

allure of the “Desert Fox,” which was precisely the foundation of the “strange hero-worship” that *The Manchester Guardian* noted in 1944. The motif of the book comes from its use of the word “Schicksal” in its title, which means “destiny” or “fate.” Rommel’s human qualities compelled him into a determined, albeit futile, resistance against Hitler. Fate intervened with the Allied air attack on July 17, 1944: “All those who were groping with his help to find a way to a new and better world felt themselves painfully deprived of their pillar of strength ... This was an omen which had only one interpretation.”¹² In 1960, when Geyr recollected that Speidel said he would make Rommel a “hero of the entire German people,” he was no doubt referring to *Invasion 1944*.

Invasion 1944 mirrored a pattern of selective remembering by many Germans during the postwar era in which they tried to come to terms with their Nazi past. Experiences and complicity with the Nazi Regime were buried, deemphasized, or discounted. Rommel was represented as an anti-Hitler resistor because he affirmed the feelers of the German Resistance by uttering, “I believe it is my duty to come to the rescue of Germany.” With its limited focus on the Allied invasion of France, *Invasion 1944*’s portrayal does not mention the pro-Hitler Rommel who had felt it was his duty to help Hitler rescue Germany when on March 13, 1939 he urged his Führer to ride in an open car during a triumphant march through Prague. It was not so much a lie as it was a convenient omission and savory interpretation of specific facts.

Moreover, some facts Speidel offers are suspect. Speidel was just another peripheral member of the resistance. Men like Claus von Stauffenberg, General Ludwig Beck, Carl Goerdeler, and General Henning von Tresckow were the driving forces of the movement who

¹² Speidel, *Invasion 1944*, 118-119.

argued among themselves over which course of action to take and when to take it, including the July 20 assassination attempt, something Speidel was not privy to. Speidel implied that Rommel chose him because of their like-minded doubts about Hitler, but in fact the appointment came by chance: Lucie had a row with the wife of Rommel's then Chief-of-Staff Alfred Gause for being given a less desirable role in a wedding, and insisted that her husband dismiss Gause.¹³ Rommel chose Speidel because he had an excellent *military* reputation and familiarity: Speidel was also a Swabian and they both once served in the same regiment.¹⁴

A close reading of *Invasion 1944* reveals contradictions and differences from what Speidel wrote later in life. *Invasion 1944* states (probably correctly) that Rommel rejected assassination, and while it devotes much ink to his frank arguments with the German dictator, Rommel's intention to initiate a separate peace on the Western Front, and his approval of an overthrow of the Nazi regime, Speidel does not explicitly write that the Stauffenberg circle informed Rommel they were going to kill Hitler. Instead, Speidel (incorrectly) portrays their plans to "do away" with the National Socialist regime in concert with Rommel's desire to end the war in the West. The implication that Rommel knew and approved of the *Attentat* is thus very strong; most everyone who has commented on the book has drawn the connection. Speidel's 1977 memoir *Aus unserer Zeit*, is noticeably more ambiguous regarding Rommel's connection to July 20, 1944. In it are the same encomiums about Rommel as a virtuous soldier and his hostility toward Hitler's policies, but references are fewer and hazier to the

¹³ Remy, *Mythos Rommel*, 234. Lucie must have been very aggrieved to have prompted a strategic rearrangement of the German command structure in France. Rommel was headstrong and worked well with Gause in Africa. Manfred did note in a 1970s interview that his father often acquiesced in arguments with his mother.

¹⁴ Russell Hart, "Hans Speidel," in David T. Zabecki, ed., *Chief of Staff: The Principal Officers Behind History's Great Commanders*, vol. 2, *World War II to Korea and Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 55-57.

Stauffenberg circle, and the implicit connections are noticeably weaker. *Aus unserer Zeit* endeavors to stay within the boundaries of framing Rommel's resistance as a recognition of a higher "duty to the Fatherland" to bring an end to the war in on the Western Front as opposed to killing Hitler. One example was its explanation of Rommel's July 9 meeting with Caesar von Hofacker, which historians have often cited as evidence of Rommel's knowledge of the plot. In 1977, Speidel limited it to "an appeal to the Field Marshal to end the war in the West as soon as possible."¹⁵ In 1949, Speidel wrote a much lengthier description, stating that Hofacker presented a memorandum that "ended with an appeal by all resistance forces for the field marshal to take independent action at once to end the war in the West." Speidel added that the memorandum, "coincided with the views of the conspirators" that Hitler, his cohorts, and the National socialist system "must be done away with at the same time." He also asserted that Stauffenberg's group "would be substantially influenced" by Rommel's assessment of the military situation.¹⁶ *Aus unserer Zeit* did not include these more overt statements. Speidel may have written *Invasion 1944* in a way that allowed readers to draw the desired and exaggerated conclusion, namely that both he and Rommel were central anti-Hitler resisters in concert with the *Attentat*, without having to write an untruth.

"Propaganda for a Lost Cause": Reception of *Invasion 1944*

It is difficult to reconcile the doubts many Western commentators expressed about *Invasion 1944* and the notion that it was instrumental in restoring the reputation of Erwin Rommel. There was a near consensus among reviewers that Speidel was not objective with his subject, the book did not generate much in the way of sales or scholarly interest, and only the newly founded anti-establishment publishing firm Henry Regnery Company was willing

¹⁵ Hans Speidel, *Aus unserer Zeit* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1977), 174. See also 165-175, 181-189.

¹⁶ Speidel, *Invasion 1944*, 112-113.

to translate it. This subdued reception that the English edition of *Invasion 1944* received at release is rather curious considering it was published just two months prior to Desmond Young's highly anticipated biography that sold in the hundreds of thousands. Timing would appear to be less an issue than credibility. Speidel did not provide substantive evidence or relevant biographical details to corroborate his victimization thesis. His representation was thus far beyond the horizon of expectations for most Americans and Britons. As such, many reviews perceived *Invasion 1944* as a transparent attempt to lionize Rommel.

Speidel wrote much on Rommel's upstanding character but presented little concrete material for Western readers to reconsider the "Hitler favorite" narrative, let alone accept his contention that the German officer corps was composed of European gentlemen who "had disapproved of the internal and external policy of Hitler before the war."¹⁷ What he did provide was mostly eyewitness testimony to events as Rommel's Chief of Staff and his assessment of the German marshal as a character witness. Speidel's position and proximity to Rommel gave him a perspective no other surviving conspirator could match, however there is little documentation or corroborating statements to authenticate his testimony (probably unavoidable as many of the witnesses and documents were eliminated in the wake of failure of July 20). Readers thus must accept his word.

Speidel's best evidentiary contribution presented in *Invasion 1944* was an ultimatum of sorts Rommel signed for Hitler on July 15 that unequivocally described the collapsing German military situation in Normandy, with the German marshal concluding, "I must beg you to draw the political conclusions without delay. I feel it my duty as the Commander in Chief of the Army Group to state this clearly." Other witnesses agree with the contents of

¹⁷ Speidel, *Invasion 1944*, 14.

the memorandum and it signified an unequivocal and open challenge to Hitler's sphere of authority. Yet, this is where the evidence dries up and readers must trust the author as to the significance of the ambiguous memorandum. Speidel interpreted this as the final preparatory step in Rommel's plan to impose a peace offering to the Western powers independent of Hitler because the German marshal confided to him after issuing the ultimatum: "I have given him his last chance. If he does not take it, we will act."¹⁸ Even if that were true, "we will act" is still ambiguous and Speidel's next paragraph reveals a German perspective that was probably difficult for non-Germans to appreciate:

The fair towns of Germany, the homeland that he loved, were still largely undamaged by war. The major part of the German provinces were still largely untouched by the storm. Needless sacrifices that nobody could justify, the deaths of many thousands of all nations, the horror of the death struggle on the soil of Germany, were all still avoidable.¹⁹

While not strictly false, it took a subjective perspective to empathize with such logic when the Third Reich had already destroyed many "fair towns" across Europe that were not on German soil, never mind that many of Germany's historic cities had already been reduced to rubble by Allied bombers.

Regarding Rommel's desire to implement an armistice with the Western Allies, this was the least of the German marshal's anti-Hitler credentials that Speidel exaggerated (which perhaps explains his 1977 formulation). Still, even if readers were willing to accept Rommel's plans to unilaterally surrender to the Western Allies, Rommel's intentions and motives were neither as clear cut as Speidel makes them out to be, nor were they necessarily associated with the *Attentat*. It does not follow that these preparations were part of a coordinated and centralized resistance movement (it was neither) as portrayed by Speidel.

¹⁸ Speidel, *Invasion 1944*, 115-117.

¹⁹ Speidel, *Invasion 1944*, 117.

Rommel did not determine his commanders' mindsets until mid-July. Moreover, these contacts could be interpreted as the actions of a man who wanted to keep his options open for a unilateral military move rather than a commitment to a political conspiracy he had vague knowledge of and little faith in.²⁰

Whatever Rommel's plans were, Speidel could not offer any evidence of Rommel's motivations because none existed; it is only on the author's word that Rommel planned to revolt against Hitler because he "put humanity higher than military duty, and man above principle." Readers could easily interpret a Rommel peace initiative borne from military desperation, very much in the same vein as when the German High Command had asked for an armistice in 1918 when enemy armies were inexorably marching toward the fair towns of Germany. This was undoubtedly why Speidel devoted so much ink to Rommel's virtues, for a character assessment is the only means to corroborate the German marshal as a moral resistor. The overall problem is that neither he nor Rommel had placed humanity higher than military duty when Hitler seemingly solved Germany's economic and psychological woes in the 1930s and apparently mastered political and military affairs before the failure of Operation Barbarossa in late 1941. Speidel wrote much on Rommel's spiritual growth, but in the end readers must take it on faith that the German marshal had been a dedicated moral opponent of Hitler.

Most Western commentators were willing to accept Speidel's declaration that Rommel had been a part of the anti-Hitler conspiracy – by then a notion found frequently in popular media portrayals – however many rejected the integrity and motivation with which

²⁰ Rommel was a practical minded soldier who instinctively distrusted abstract planning by non-combat officers. According to Manfred, Rommel told numerous people after July 20 that "Stauffenberg had bungled it and a front-line soldier would have finished Hitler off." This is a revealing statement that fit Rommel's personality. Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, 486.

Invasion 1944 portrayed Rommel and more generally the *Attentat*. In February 1950, British historian Hugh Trevor Roper commented on Speidel's volte-faced representation of Rommel, stating:

... it is therefore rather surprising to find him, too, now featuring as an anti-Nazi hero, a general in the old Prussian tradition of Clausewitz. Still, there is no doubt of the facts, which were known from other sources even before Speidel's book gave them in detail.

Invasion 1944 thus did not so much deliver a new interpretation of Rommel's resistance role as compile and synthesize specific facts underscoring it. Trevor Roper did not dispute Speidel's depiction of Rommel's role in the opposition: "As far as the facts are concerned, I am satisfied that it is true." Nevertheless, Trevor Roper rejected *Invasion 1944*'s characterization that Rommel was an anti-Nazi because he believed Rommel had failed politically:

When and why did Rommel go into opposition? Almost unawares Speidel lets it out. "After El Alamein he first spoke against Hitler's dreams of world conquest." Comment is unnecessary. It was not a difference of political principle that made Rommel a conspirator – it was military defeat.²¹

In Trevor Roper's mind, this sort of whitewashing was a fundamental misrepresentation of history and potential danger, as per the title of his review: "Hitler's Generals Create a Dangerous Myth."

This was the same perspective Hale wrote in his 1948 *Harper's* article examined in the previous chapter. Historian Emile de Groot questioned Speidel's distinction between the German professional soldiery and National Socialism as "this is a verdict which ignores (or forgets) the bombardment of Warsaw and the deliberate exploitation of the terror of civilian

²¹ H.R. Trevor-Roper, "Hitler's Generals Create a Dangerous Myth," *New York Times*, February 19, 1950, SM6.

refugees by low-flying attacks on the roads of northern France.”²² *The Manchester Guardian* felt Speidel’s politics were “of a curious kind” and was suspicious of the *Attentat*’s altruistic motives because, “the [plotters’] objection to Hitler was, primary, that he had failed.” As of 1951, the paper opined, “has long enough elapsed for the senior German officers to lose their ingrained beliefs? If there is doubt about Speidel, the pick of the generals, then the others are hardly to be trusted.”²³ Ernest Pisko of the *Christian Science Monitor* asserted that Speidel’s statement about the nonpolitical status of the German army is “patently wrong,” and opined that Rommel’s willing service in the Third Reich “cannot be clouded over by Rommel’s talk about his ‘metaphysical responsibility,’ though many Germans, no doubt, will be pleased to hear once more that they would have won the war if only Hitler had listened to his general staff.”²⁴ Drew Middleton, the *New York Times*’s German correspondent, lambasted *Invasion 1944* as a “rather fumbling attempt” to re-create a 1950 “stab in the back legend” and as “propaganda for a lost cause.” Specifically regarding Rommel, Middleton wrote: “Those who are easily revolted by indiscriminating adulation of military heroes had better read Dr. Speidel’s bits about Rommel on an empty stomach.”²⁵ Speidel’s romanticization of Rommel was so transparent and unaccompanied by verifiable evidence that commentators took it with a grain of salt. Even American general Albert C. Wedemeyer, who was publicly willing to defend the German General Staff in an era when it was unpopular to do so, noted in his review: “The author reveals a lack of objectivity with reference to his hero.”²⁶ These

²² Emile de Groot, review of *Invasion 1944: ein Beitrag zu Rommels und des Reiches Schicksal* by Hans Speidel in *International Affairs* 26, no. 3 (July 1950): 408-409.

²³ “Know Your Ally,” *The Manchester Guardian*, April 19, 1951, 4.

²⁴ Ernest Pisko, “Candidate for a Legend,” *Christian Science Monitor*, November 24, 1950, 24.

²⁵ Drew Middleton, “Generals Weren’t to Blame,” *New York Times*, November 5, 1950, 224.

²⁶ A.C. Wedemeyer, Review of *Invasion 1944: Rommel and the Normandy Campaign* by Hans Speidel in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 274, (March 1951): 218-219.

commentators – and presumably many readers – recognized *Invasion 1944* as a problematic source at best.²⁷

And they were right. Speidel worked with FRG Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's Blank Office, an unofficial agency that advised the Chancellor on military matters and rearmament.²⁸ While he did have a successful career in NATO, his service to the Third Reich was not forgotten. For example, in 1953 British Labour MPs balked at inviting the "ex-German Nazi [Speidel] ... who had been doubtless a member of the German officer class or caste who had made themselves willing partners of the Hitler regime" to a British armaments exhibition.²⁹ Speidel's consistent mentions of internationally esteemed historical German figures such as Moltke, Scharnhorst, and Yorck when referencing Rommel was a transparent and vigorous assertion that Rommel (and the German officer corps) epitomized an honorable soldiering tradition. The author made no allusion about his fundamental message:

Erwin Rommel, a *miles fati* [a soldier of fate], remains the personification of the good and decent in the German soldier. His life and works are throughout, a manly and humane legacy left to his country for all time.³⁰

There is little doubt that Speidel did *try* to make Rommel into a hero. Success is another matter. *Invasion 1944*'s commercial sales (about 15,000 copies)³¹ were not bad for a relatively unknown press, though this represented less than one-tenth of what Desmond

²⁷ In the copy at my university library, a student wrote in the margin to one of Speidel's many acclamations of Rommel: "bullshit on the highest level." UCSB copy, page 70.

²⁸ Alaric Searle, *Wehrmacht Generals, West German Society, and the Debate on Rearmament, 1949-1959* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).

²⁹ "House of Commons," *The Times*, April 30, 1953, 9. See also "London's Bid to Rommel Aide Protested," *Washington Post*, April 30, 1953, 6; William Barkley, "Churchill in Storm," *Daily Express*, April 30, 1953, 1. http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1953/apr/29/british-armaments-inspection-general#S5CV0514P0_19530429_HOC_237, (accessed May 7, 2012).

³⁰ Speidel, *Invasion 1944*, 166.

³¹ Emile de Groot, review of *Invasion 1944*, 409.

Young's biography (released just a few months later) would sell in the British market alone. The consistency of skeptical reviews suggests the issues regarding the book's reception was not so much about distribution and that it was not a pivotal publication. Other people, other themes, and other forces made the "Desert Fox" an attractive ideal.

Americans and Britons did not interpret Speidel's message in a manner that he would have liked, instead they construed it in a way that conformed to their pre-existing beliefs about Nazi-era Germans. *Invasion 1944* did cement the existing inchoate assumptions regarding the German marshal and the German Resistance. As per Trevor-Roper's commentary, this was not a revolutionary thesis and even upon accepting such an explicit (and exaggerated) connection, it (still) did not follow that Rommel was a genuine anti-Nazi. Thus, *Invasion 1944* did not so much as create new horizons of understanding as it bolstered what was already in circulation. The act of resisting Hitler and the testimony of a *Wehrmacht* general on their own were not enough to shift Western collective memories of the war, Nazi Germany, or Rommel. *Invasion 1944* did have the effect of historians assigning a greater importance to Rommel's role as an active conspirator, however it was not crucial in *changing* Western perceptions of Rommel in 1950 or serving as the foundation for the sterling reputation he would eventually enjoy.

Believing Speidel: US Captain Charles F. Marshall

As the negative reviews suggest, it was not enough for Western observers to be exposed to German sources and German perspectives of Rommel; they had to believe them. While mainstream narratives dismissed *Invasion 1944*, we have case studies of contemporary Americans who accepted the book's premise. These provide insight into the factors that made positive Rommel representations credible to readers. The findings here match a recurring theme during the war and after: the willingness to distinguish between Germans

and Nazis when considering the Third Reich from a historical perspective. Much of that willingness boiled down to the question of responsibility; those who were loath to absolve Germans (and Rommel) of their presumed culpability for the crimes of the Nazi Regime have historically been Rommel's harshest critics. On the other hand, those who believed most Germans were passive historical agents who bore little liability for the Nazi machinery of destruction were amenable to sympathetic portrayals of the German marshal.

Captain Charles Marshall, the aforementioned army intelligence officer who in May 1945 broke the story of Rommel's forced suicide, devoted much of his off-duty time in 1945-1946 driving around Württemberg to research his own Rommel manuscript. Whereas Speidel had had an obvious political agenda, Marshall was not a political advocate and embarked on this project for intellectual fulfillment and his joy of writing. His mastery of the German language, his army position, and his geographical proximity to Rommel's family and closest confidants gave him privileged access to the many previously unknown German sources that would eventually comprise the basis of much of the hagiographic narrative of the 1950s. Unfortunately, Marshall's original 1946 manuscript has been lost. I spoke to Marshall's son regarding its whereabouts. He informed me that it was lost in a move to a different home, and that his father did alter and augment his original manuscript before his death in 2002. So, his 1994 *Discovering the Rommel Murder* (republished 2002) cannot be considered a contemporary source. From our conversation about the process in which his father wrote *Discovering the Rommel Murder*, I assume that Marshall's outlook and attitudes during 1946 were commensurate with those expressed in the book. He became more committed to his beliefs and made corrections/refinements where necessary. *Discovering the*

Rommel Murder is best taken as a memoir, a recollection of events that have since been adjusted by later life experiences and research.³²

Quickly in the course of his research, Marshall believed that Rommel was a man of integrity, a deep-seated character trait that was borne out in the German marshal's correct conduct on and off the battlefield. Marshall supposed Rommel's social conscience prompted him to break with Hitler and National Socialism when he realized the extent of its depravities and the irrationality of the Führer. As Marshall articulated it in his later years, "Rommel in his deep accountability to the German people was ready to end the war in the West and end the Nazi regime ... which he wanted to destroy to save the people."³³ No doubt Marshall was steeled in this viewpoint because all of what he deemed "impeccable sources" were without exception longtime friends of Rommel. His two most influential sources were Lucie Rommel and Hans Speidel, both of whom he admired. Others listed are Rommel's son Manfred, Rommel's physician Dr. Albrecht, Rommel's aide-de-camp and longtime friend Hermann Aldinger, Great War comrade-in-arms and confidant Oskar Farny, and Dresden Military Academy colleague Professor Hesse. There was thus a strong German slant to this American's manuscript; it was about a German, written in Germany, and based on that German's friends' testimony.

Marshall's privileged access to sources that reflected well on Rommel does much to explain his divergent views from mainstream Western narratives of the German marshal, but what was most crucial was that he accepted their veracity. Marshall was a patriotic American who believed Nazis should be justly punished, yet he could draw a sharp line

³² Author's conversation with Jack Marshall, January 10, 2012.

³³ Quote taken from Marshall, *Discovering the Rommel Murder*, 259. Communication with son Jack Marshall January 10, 2012.

between Germans and the Nazi regime. In fact, this was his job after the war; he was tasked to screen out Nazis as the *Wehrmacht* was disbanded. Marshall wrote how he would sign the arrest reports of concentration camp guards “with pleasure,” but was sickened at the sight of prisoners who were fifteen-year-old boys or cripples who had lost limbs. Reflecting, Marshall wrote:

I had no rancor in my heart for these men, although I had come to hate the system they had been fated to defend. To one who was raised to believe all men were creatures of God, these lines of soldiers were an intensely poignant sight ... one had to ponder human resilience in the face of crippling, illness, starvation, and the absence of almost all creature comforts. Yet these men were anxious to get home to start life anew. I marveled at the tenacity of the human spirit.³⁴

This is a revealing passage. By writing that these German soldiers were *fated* to defend the Nazi regime, Marshall implied their connection to it was not one of choice or agency, rather it was the historical misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Marshall saw these men as victims of sorts, suffering from war injuries, hunger, dislocation, and, significantly, saw their better side as creatures of God who exhibited an admirable spirit in the face of suffering. Even among the elite of the German officer corps, he perceived enfeebled men whose appearance defied their alleged misdeeds. He remarked about Field Marshal Wilhelm von Leeb:

In his civilian clothes Field Marshal Leeb looked to me like a meek, harassed, retired grocer, at great variance with my conception of what the commander of Army Group North should have looked like. It was hard for me to believe that he was on the list of war criminals.³⁵

Marshall’s experience mirrored what Petra Goedde’s research has demonstrated, namely that many US GIs perceived Germans as pitiable figures.³⁶ His belief that many Germans’

³⁴ Marshall, *Discovering the Rommel Murder*, 164-165.

³⁵ Marshall, *Discovering the Rommel Murder*, 20.

³⁶ Goedde, *GIs and Germans*.

association with Nazism was insincere made his job in de-Nazification agonizing because “during the Hitler era great numbers of competent, efficient, and decent Germans had paid lip service to the Party in order to continue in their work and careers ... Too often we felt we were impinging on God’s work.”³⁷ Marshall himself recognized the effort he took to differentiate between Nazis and Germans was by no means the norm among US soldiers. Remarking on the wartime attitudes of many of his comrades during his time in the army, he wrote, “If I hadn’t known better I would have thought that ‘goddam Kraut’ was one word.”³⁸

Marshall’s memoir retells of instances in Germany during 1945-1946 that suggest his willingness to see the best in Nazi-era Germans. He objected when US GIs exhibited imperious behavior toward Germans. He enacted measures at the internment camp he worked at to eliminate scenarios in which guards could seize upon pretexts to shoot inmates. He treated the Germans he interacted with professionally and courteously. He asked high-ranking officers to pose in pictures with him. These pictures still hung in his study forty years later and suggest a consistency with Marshall’s attitude. Finally, there was the warm friendship he developed with Hans Speidel during the war’s immediate aftermath. The gracious tribute Marshall paid Speidel in the afterward of *Discovering the Rommel Murder* (1994) is a testimony to how these two men, although separated by two decades in age and nationality, saw eye to eye regarding Rommel and the potential moral fiber of Nazi-era Germans.³⁹

The many days and weekends I spent with General Speidel and his family, and with whom I remained in correspondence for a number of years after my return to the States, were memorable ones. They were filled with interest from the moment of arrival till the moment of departure.⁴⁰

³⁷ Marshall, *Discovering the Rommel Murder*, 170.

³⁸ Marshall, *Discovering the Rommel Murder*, 19.

³⁹ Marshall, *Discovering the Rommel Murder*, 265-266.

⁴⁰ Marshall, *Discovering the Rommel Murder*, 265-267.

The bond between these two men forged was an important factor in distributing *Invasion 1944* to English speakers. The two exchanged manuscripts, and as an active duty intelligence officer, Marshall could provide Speidel with relatively easy access to resources that might have otherwise been inaccessible. The most important of these was illegally forwarding post to and from Speidel's American friend Colonel Truman Smith (correspondence between Germans and Americans was barred under Allied occupation policy). It was Smith, a well-connected specialist on German affairs in the US Army, who endorsed *Invasion 1944* to publisher Henry Regnery whose new Chicago firm eventually published the book.⁴¹

Contrasting Marshall and William Harden Hale's outlooks toward Germans illustrates how intertwined general views of Nazi-era Germany were with perceptions of Rommel. Hale, whose 1948 article claiming that Rommel idolized Hitler was examined last chapter, exhibited a pattern of deep distrust when it came to Germany. He served on the board of directors for the Society for the Prevention of World War 3 (SPWW3), an anti-German political pressure group that as of 1947 was still publicly arguing for the necessity of a harsh peace against the momentum behind Secretary of State George C. Marshall's call for a European Recovery Program. In 1946 he wrote an article called "Germany's deformed conscience" for *Harper's Magazine* that echoed the anti-German "Luther-to-Hitler" wartime narrative. According to Hale, political immaturity was an innate trait of Germans, a "Teutonic form of Social Contract," which consisted of a revolt against Western ideals, a perversion of Christian teachings, and in his words something analogous to Faust's pact with Mephistopheles. Hale had difficulty accepting that any German might deviate from this

⁴¹ Marshall, *Discovering the Rommel Murder*, 210-224. Henry Regnery, *Memoirs of a Dissident Publisher* (New York: Narcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 69-70.

mindset, which he thought derived “naturally” from their past; he mocked “one of Germany’s few ‘decent’ generals” as epitomizing “the last five wars of Prussian militarism” and urged suspicion of any anti-Nazis since they too “demonstrated [a] transcendental ancient mystique of the race.”⁴² For Hale, National Socialism was part and parcel of Germanness and prompted him to see Rommel and most Germans as representative of something inherently rotten in German history – Prussian militarists, Teutons with deranged consciences, or Nazis. Hale believed “deep down” Rommel had never broken with National Socialism.⁴³

Who Rommel was “deep down” had much to do with how individuals made sense of the historical events involving the German marshal. For Hale, Rommel’s resistance against Hitler was a superficial byproduct of military circumstances. For Marshall, Rommel’s awe of Hitler in the later 1930s was an insincere offshoot of Rommel’s ignorance of the criminality of Hitler’s Third Reich. As Rommel’s story is too complicated, too contradictory, and too dependent on questionable source material, it is exceedingly difficult to form a perspective of the German marshal without relying heavily on speculation. Sometimes an individual’s biases or worldviews must reconcile conflicting or imprecise messages to their intuitive worldviews, their sense of right and wrong, and their understanding of history. In short, there are instances in which it is necessary to bridge the gap between knowledge and conviction. Ostensible views of Nazi-era Germans have proven to be a recurring means by which individuals have either filled in these information gaps or used to resolve the paradox that Rommel reportedly played both the role of Nazi and anti-Nazi during the Hitler era.

⁴² William Harden Hale, “Germany’s Deformed Conscience,” *Harper’s Magazine* 192, no. 1148 (January 1946): 1-9.

⁴³ Hale, “The End of Marshal Rommel,” 67-78.

Speidel's Other American Patrons

The Rommel mythology that would emerge in the 1950s is best seen as a creation of an international cadre who shared similar attitudes toward Nazi-era Germany. This was a process in which certain German sources came into contact with sympathetic Americans and Britons who believed their credibility and then, for their own disparate reasons, disseminated them to the American and British publics. Even if *Invasion 1944* had little discernible effect in altering attitudes toward Rommel, the manner in which this book was published illustrates the mindsets and motivations of people who were inclined to believe the “Rommel myth” and why they were keen to circulate it. The three men most responsible for publishing *Invasion 1944* in the United States, Charles Marshall (discussed above), US Army Intelligence officer Colonel Truman Smith, and the noted conservative publisher Henry Regnery, were not linked by their divergent agendas, rather it was their belief that there was a critical mass of “good” Germans who were unrepresentative of and not responsible for the crimes of Hitler’s regime.

Truman Smith was a patriot and someone who in both prewar and postwar eras evinced an affinity for Germans and Germany. Such characteristics sometimes get lost when considering the bigger socio-political picture. For instance, Smith had become convinced by June 1945, barely a month after the defeat of the Third Reich, that Germany would have to be rearmed to counterbalance a Soviet threat. However, this was not mere geopolitical realism. His preexisting positive views of Germans and Germany predisposed him to this position. Smith was an avid student of the German language and its culture whose expertise twice earned him positions with the US Army in Germany (in 1922, he was the first US diplomat to interview Hitler). Probably the most important aspect of his character relevant for this study was his ability and willingness to see consistently the best in Germans and

Germany when it was not popular nor considered patriotic to do so. This trait is best illustrated during his tenure as the military attaché in Berlin from 1935 to 1939 when he was branded as a defeatist and a fascist sympathizer.

As an attaché, Smith was a military ambassador of sorts. He socialized with German officers, uncovered and reported military developments within Germany, and then indicated their significance, from which Washington was to draw its own conclusions. His genuine interest in the land and its people made him ideally suited for such a task and distinguished him from many of his counterparts; his wife recalled that when he hosted a party in Berlin, “the other attachés were dumbfounded to find so many German officers at our reception.” This was in sharp contrast to the British and French, who she noted “were remarkably bare of contacts.”⁴⁴ Smith was both alarmed and amazed at the speed of the growing power of Germany’s *Luftwaffe* and warned his superiors that if developments continued at their present rate, Germany to attain air superiority over the United States as early as 1941 or 1942. These assessments were dismissed as alarmist because his estimates were both far greater than those of his British counterpart and contradicted what Washington wanted to hear.⁴⁵

Smith, whose perception was not clouded by anti-German prejudices or patriotic biases, was determined to prove the credibility of his reports to his doubting contemporaries. He enlisted the aid of the world’s most famous aviator of the era, Charles Lindbergh, who he was certain the Nazis would allow unfettered access to their facilities to showcase German aeronautics. From a strictly military intelligence perspective, this was a coup. The Nazi

⁴⁴ Taken from Andrew Nagorski, “Truman Smith: The American Who Saw Hitler Coming” <http://www.historynet.com/truman-smith-the-american-who-saw-hitler-coming.htm>, (accessed June 27, 2012).

⁴⁵ Truman Smith and Robert Hessen, *Berlin Alert: The Memoirs and Reports of Truman Smith* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University, 1984); Henry G. Gore, *Exposing the Third Reich: Colonel Truman Smith in Hitler’s Germany* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2013).

regime and in particular Hermann Göring proved gracious hosts and allowed Lindbergh to examine and even fly its most modern aircraft. Smith was thus able to ground his assessments of the *Luftwaffe* in expertise. And even if his reports overestimated its potency, captured German records have shown his perceptions were astute. The significance lay less with the accuracy of his intelligence work than its reception. His army superiors dismissed these estimates. After the fall of France in June 1940, the Roosevelt Administration and many widely read journalists such as Walter Winchell and Walter Lippmann charged that Smith was a German dupe and a fascist sympathizer who had deliberately exaggerated German military strength to weaken American resolve.⁴⁶

Although these charges were nonsensical and ignored Smith's patriotic motivation behind his warning, they illustrate that Smith was a person able to see positive qualities in Germany during a time when it was deemed unpatriotic. Smith's pro-German reputation was such that only through the intervention of America's highest ranking soldier, his close friend George C. Marshall, did he stave off attempts by the Army and the Roosevelt administration to force him into retirement. Smith's memoirs and the testimony of reputable figures such as Marshall and US General Albert C. Wedemeyer illustrate that he was not a defeatist, rather someone who could filter his patriotic and nationalist biases when it came to Germany. It was from this basis that he formed the friendly relationships he had with many Germans, one of whom happened to be Hans Speidel.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Hessen, *Berlin Alert*, xvii-xix, 32-33. General Albert Wedemeyer praised Smith for his intelligence and claimed they were victims of Roosevelt and other politicians who wanted to ignore Germany's military preparations. *Wedemeyer Reports!* (New York: Henry Holt, 1948). It is true that Roosevelt wanted Smith retired from the army, but this stemmed in large part due to Smith's association and friendship with Lindbergh, who was publicly hostile to Roosevelt's policies and outspoken in his esteem for Germany's achievements before the United States entered the war.

⁴⁷ Hessen, *Berlin Alert*; Marshall, *Discovering the Rommel Murder*, 210-224; Regnery, *Memoirs of a Dissident Publisher*, 69-70. See also the guide for the Truman Smith Papers at the Hoover Institute: <http://www.ecommcode2.com/hoover/research/historicalmaterials/other/smith.htm>, (accessed June 23, 2012).

The war did not sour his feelings toward Germans. Smith resumed his correspondence (illegally facilitated by Captain Marshall as middleman) with Speidel and Professor Hesse (another of Rommel's colleagues) as soon as he was able; it was as if the Second World War had been an inconvenient interruption to their friendship. Smith genuinely felt there were many Germans in the mold of Speidel who were impeccable people and were not responsible for the crimes of the Third Reich. In the foreword to the US version of *Invasion 1944*, Smith noted the following about the author:

He was a South German, a Swabian, a Württemberger, a son of that German tribe in which democratic tendencies have ever been strong ... [He] was hoping and praying for peace, but could scarcely dissimulate his fear that Hitler's policy would bring a second world war. Speidel's forte was his character. It was his inherent sense of right and wrong, as well as love of Fatherland, which caused him in 1944 to disregard his military oath of loyalty to Hitler and ally himself with the conspirators ... Again it was Speidel's moral qualities, as well as his feeling that he was above all else a European, which caused him on August 23 to sabotage Hitler's personal orders to carry out demolitions in Paris ...

The specific mention of a Swabian and Württemberger implied that Speidel (and Rommel) were not Prussians, that is "bad" Germans associated with authoritarian and militaristic stereotypes. Rather that they are "good" Germans, who were Europeans imbued with democratic civic virtues. It was thus a natural conclusion for Smith to deem that Rommel proved "no unworthy hero."⁴⁸ Smith's glowing foreword epitomized a man who consistently emphasized the redeemable aspects of Germany and its people.

Invasion 1944's American publisher, Henry Regnery, had no agenda of rehabilitating the image of German soldiers or supporting US foreign policy. The Henry Regnery Company has been a bastion for conservative thought since the early 1950s with seminal publications such as William F. Buckley Jr.'s *God and Man at Yale* (1951) and especially

⁴⁸ Speidel, *Invasion 1944*, vii-xiii.

Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* (1953). The company makes no pretense to hide its present political agenda as deduced from the mission statement on its website:

When the Henry Regnery Company first opened its doors in 1947, its mission was to contribute to the rebuilding of Western civilization after World War II, publishing serious works of cultural recovery, including, as it turned out, establishing and sustaining the postwar conservative intellectual movement in America.⁴⁹

Although Regnery was proud of this conservative reputation – when the *Daily Worker* sneered that he was “the most reactionary publisher,” Regnery took it as a great compliment⁵⁰ – when he opted to publish *Invasion 1944*, his contributions to conservatism still lay in the future. Regnery's prime motivations for opening his publishing firm was to challenge what he felt was doctrinaire liberalism, an orthodox liberal mindset that held a stranglehold over the intellectual establishment of government officials, university professors, and mainstream New York publishers. The publishing house's *raison d'être* for its first years was to provide a haven for anti-establishment intellectuals and a means to disseminate their literature. Many of its first authors were European political activists whose passionate denunciations of Allied policy or nonconformist views on Germany prompted New York publishers to pass them over. Victor Gollancz, Max Picard, and Freda Utley were among the first authors whose books rolled off Regnery's presses.⁵¹ As public narratives about Germany were decidedly negative, it was an ideal means for Regnery's end. The publisher also offered the first sympathetic portrayal of another unpopular German topic,

⁴⁹ “About Regnery Publishing,” Regnery Publishing, Inc. <http://www.regnery.com/about.html>, (accessed September 13, 2009).

⁵⁰ Regnery, *Memoirs of a Dissident Publisher*, 107.

⁵¹ Victor Gollancz, *In Darkest Germany* (Hinsdale, Ill: H. Regnery Co., 1947); Max Picard, *Hitler in Our Selves* (Hinsdale, Ill: H. Regnery Co., 1947); Freda Utley, *The High Cost of Vengeance* (Chicago, H. Regnery Co., 1949).

Hans Rothfels's 1948 *The German Opposition to Hitler*. In his memoirs, Regnery remarked about his decision to publish these books:

It was probably unwise, from a certain point of view, to launch my publishing enterprise with three books on such an unpopular subject as Germany. But it was the burning issue of the time, obviously no one else was anxious to take it up, and it seemed to me that if I felt strongly about it and had the means to do something, I had a moral obligation to publish the books I have described. It should also not be forgotten that these three were concerned not so much with Germany as with upholding the values and standards on which civilization rests.⁵²

Regnery published these books because he believed the dominant political and intellectual climate was not adhering to universal values he believed intrinsic to civilized society. And, of course, he wanted to thumb his nose at what he perceived was the intellectual establishment. *Invasion 1944* squared well with Regnery's publishing mission, for it was a book written by a European author whose thesis argued that Germans were fellow members of the human fraternity whose treatment at the hands of the Allied occupiers was unjustified. It is best to see his role as a Rommel memory-maker through the lens of his domestic politics.

The other important standpoint to recognize in Regnery was that, like the other US patrons of *Invasion 1944*, he did not harbor the views that upheld National Socialism as a logical product of German history. Regnery believed pre-1914 Germany was a stable society that shared the traditional values of Western Civilization. As he saw it, National Socialism arose from the ashes of Weimar Germany because postwar German society was exceptionally vulnerable to a peculiar mixture of dangerous modern trends, including a revival of extremist ideologies and conspicuous consumption.⁵³ He had studied at the

⁵² Regnery, *Memoirs of a Dissident Publisher*, 41.

⁵³ Regnery, *Memoirs of a Dissident Publisher*, 73. It is true that Regnery was German-American, but this does not by itself stand as a satisfactory explanation why he held these views. Many of Germany's fiercest critics

University of Bonn from 1934 to 1936 and visited the country again in 1949 when he was favorably impressed with a number of Germans he had met, one of them being Hans Speidel. Regnery was no Germanophile, but he was someone who believed there were enough “good” Germans during the Nazi era to warrant a distinction between them and the Nazi regime. He also agreed with the conviction of the authors he published, that collectively condemning Germans as guilty represented abandoning the values for which the Second World War was fought.⁵⁴

Horizons of Understanding

Literary theorist Hans Robert Jauss has argued that the crucial significance of a text can be determined by the extent to which it changes or creates “new horizons” of understanding. A text is significant if it alters the expectations of readers when they first encounter it. According to this criterion, *Invasion 1944* did not attain this benchmark. Rommel’s purported involvement in the plot and forced suicide had already been reported and we have evidence that reviewers assessed the book via their own beliefs rather than alter their opinions. *Invasion 1944* convinced some observers that Rommel was more directly involved in the plot to kill Hitler, but that was not what has defined the good reputation of Rommel. Desmond Young, who traveled to Speidel’s home in Freudentstadt and remarked how it evoked nostalgic feelings of his childhood, unequivocally wrote in his laudatory Rommel biography, “Neither then nor at any time afterwards was he aware of the plan to kill Hitler” [emphasis in original].⁵⁵

were (and are) Germans. Another famous German-American, Dwight D. Eisenhower, wrote to his wife during the war, “God, I hate the Germans.”

⁵⁴ Regnery, *Memoirs of a Dissident Publisher*, 42-77.

⁵⁵ Young, *Rommel*, 216, 222.

As for Marshall, Smith, and Regnery, *Invasion 1944* was already within their horizons of understanding as they already possessed entrenched views of Germany that were generous enough to see Germans in the main, even generals of the *Wehrmacht*, as victims of the Nazi regime. Considering the British and US spectrum of views of Germany, they were not representative of the majority middle. As we will see in future chapters, attitudes toward Germany were on the whole improving, but there was a limit to what the majority middle would accept. We saw last chapter how the *Attentat* did not prompt many people to change their assessments of Rommel and thus it is no surprise Speidel's concentration on politics elicited feeling of incredulity in mainstream reviews. The core of the wartime Allied fascination was the military imagery associated with the "Desert Fox." It was in this realm and facets such as Rommel's clean battlefield conduct (which could be substantiated, unlike the ethically ambiguous *Attentat*) and his image as a strong family man that prompted those in the majority middle to consider the Second World War portrayals of him as a devotee of Hitler and Nazi cad were wrong. The watershed creation that marked this change was Desmond Young's biography, released nearly simultaneous with *Invasion 1944*, and we turn to it now.

Chapter 7

Romanticizing Rommel: Desmond Young's Foundational Hagiography

What made Desmond Young's biography a watershed was that it married the two aspects of the "officer and gentleman" archetype. This was the first English-language account that laid to rest the fabricated stories of Rommel being a storm-trooper and sleeping outside Hitler's door. No doubt this was important, yet the best-selling biography was significant for more than its portrayal Rommel as a professional soldier. Whatever admiration the German marshal had elicited before was inchoate, disparate, and typically stemmed from idiosyncratic biases or specific experiences. The "Desert Fox" may have been a military hero of sorts, but even many in the British Eighth Army did not see him as anything more. As Auchinleck, who commanded the Eighth Army in 1942 and ordered his troops to stop harping on "our friend Rommel," explained in his Foreword to Young's book:

After reading the story of earlier and later years I find that my idea of him ... does not differ much from the author's considered appreciation. In one respect, however, my conception was wrong. I was surprised to learn how simple and homely he seems to have been. I think that we who were fighting against him pictured him as a typical Junker officer, a product of the Prussian military machine.¹

This is a new appraisal of Rommel as a person. It was this human element that Young's biography wove together with the already existing military imagery that cemented the foundation of Rommel's positive reputation in Great Britain and the United States.

This chapter aims to uncover why Young saw the German marshal as a gentleman, and the factors that made his portrayal plausible to American and British readers. The

¹ Young, *Rommel*, 9-10.

representation of Rommel that emerges from this biography was borne from the author's valuation of military ethos and his personal contact with Rommel's family and associates. This combination prompted Young to emphasize the brief time in which they suffered under the Nazi regime (as opposed to the considerably longer time they benefitted from it). If this chapter concludes that Young's *Rommel* strays too far into the realm of hagiography as opposed to biography, it nevertheless ought to be emphasized this was not a conscious myth-making enterprise. Rather, the portrayal of the "Desert Fox" was consistent with the author's mindset and someone who wanted (or at least was willing) to believe that this German soldier's life and values were not altogether different from that of an Englishman's. What was perhaps most crucial is that Young did not intend to exonerate Germany the way Speidel did. He had fought against Nazi Germany, his worldview was within the same horizon of expectations as other Americans and Britons, and readers of *Rommel* were told clearly that "something evil," as he put it, still stained Germany. In sum, *Rommel* was an honest endeavor that was coherent in the mindset of someone who fought for and believed in the Allied cause.

Desmond Young: Smitten by the "Desert Fox"

Desmond Young's personal worldview and professional life positioned him to understand Rommel as something other than the "Hitler favorite" and overhyped general that had dominated American and British public representations toward the end of the Second World War. Born in 1891 (just one month after Rommel himself) in an upper middle class family, the British citizen Desmond Young fashioned himself as an anti-establishment thinker, something he attributed to the lax attitude he had as a student at Oxford where "in playing the part of a rebel, I had become one." As such, he never adopted an identifiable political creed, but acknowledged an intellectual debt to Oxford: "There I learned – or

absorbed from the air – at least intellectual honesty. In heated controversies on matters about which I have felt deeply ... I do not think I have ever tried to evade the arguments of an opponent, however inconvenient they may have been to answer. Nor have I often failed to see both sides of a case.”² In his mind, he was willing and able to examine Rommel’s life unfettered and on its own terms. As Young put it in his 1961 autobiography: “In a little over a month I had so much firsthand information about Rommel and so much understanding, from the long days I had spent with his friends and family and in working in the room that contained his books, his portrait and his death mask.”³ He certainly possessed an eagerness to understand Rommel’s side of the story. The highly favorable sources he used combined with working in a shrine to the German marshal’s memory do much to account for his decidedly sentimental perspective.

When Britain declared war on Germany in 1914, Young immediately signed up as an officer in the British Army. Although he did not make soldiering a career, his military experience shaped the contours of the rest of his life. This is seen in the close friendships he forged with career officers in the British Army and, most importantly, his unwavering belief in military ethos: proper soldiers respected the creed and were of a fraternity that embodied virtues such as courage, sacrifice, brotherhood, honor, and duty. Soldiers – even enemies – who upheld these ideals and conducted themselves correctly on and off the battlefield were worthy of respect, even if their politics, their uniforms, or the causes for which they fought were not. After just a few days with his riflemen battalion, he dreaded the thought of being accepted into the Royal Naval Air Service (a position he initially tried to maneuver his way

² Quotes taken from Desmond Young, *All the Best Years* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), 21, 31.

³ Young, *All the Best Years*, 322.

into) because “I was much too proud of being a Rifleman to think of leaving the battalion.”⁴ He wrote during the war of things a soldier “definitely could not do – and among them was to fail one’s friends or look for a ‘soft option,’ such as a back-area job,” how the “battalion spirit is no myth,” and that he found the last months of the war “not only endurable but enjoyable” – sentiments that echoed military virtues across time and cultures.⁵ Young was one of many middle class Britons who enthusiastically enlisted in 1914 and then thought he had found his calling. The self-identified rebel conformed to what was expected of him as an officer.

The war did not have a traumatic effect on Young. He fought in the trenches and was wounded, but exhibited none of the aversion toward war that was fairly common among disillusioned returning veterans. This helps to explain how Young was able to conceive of war as an art to be admired and his valuation of Rommel’s “clean” fighting. After 1918, he left the army and traveled throughout the British Empire as a ship salvage expert (his father was one of the world’s authorities in this field) before establishing himself as a respected journalist in India during the 1930s, where he repeatedly criticized government policy. His journalistic stance reveals a man who took enough pride to remain true to his principles and examine the “other side,” albeit this was more because of his indignation at being censored than his politics.⁶ Young had talent as a journalist. He ran a successful newspaper and was seen by the many diverse factions in the explosive political environment of India during the 1930s as an impartial voice.

⁴ Young, *All the Best Years*, 46.

⁵ Young, *All the Best Years*, 56, 100-105.

⁶ Young, *All the Best Years*, especially 229-235.

When the Second World War broke out in 1939, Young returned to the soldiering profession that best defined his persona. Although he had attained a prominent position in press relations in India and initially felt it was the best way to contribute, a trip to the British army fighting in Syria rekindled his romanticized visions of war:

I felt strangely at home. How nostalgic, after more than twenty years, to see a flare go up in a far, far distance and to hear the drone of a homing bomber. How pleasant to wash next morning in a canvas blanket and breakfast in mess ... How refreshing to sit besides fit men in uniform and hear them speculate on the chances of leave in Cairo. Except for the setting, nothing seemed to have changed – and the desert setting had a curious charm of its own.⁷

A few months later, he connived his way into once again donning a soldier's uniform with the rank of brigadier as director of the Indian Army Public Relations for the British Eighth Army in North Africa. Young spent half a year with the Eighth Army before being captured by the Germans in June 1942. The timing was significant. Young had first-hand experience of his biographical subject only at his best and did not witness Rommel in defeat. His limited direct exposure is particularly important when recalling the tremendous prestige the "Desert Fox" had garnered in the first six months of 1942. After the war, Young spent much of his remaining twenty years writing books, mostly about romanticized soldiers, adventurers, and pioneers, of which *Rommel* was the first. Young's obituary described him as a "soldier, journalist, author," an accurate description, although he is probably best characterized as a journalist who possessed a soldier's ethos as he spent far more of his life writing than wearing a uniform.⁸

Young's infatuation with Rommel as a soldier is obvious in the book's prelude, where he details the circumstances of his capture by the Germans. As he describes it, there was a

⁷ Young, *All the Best Years*, 241-242.

⁸ "Brig. Desmond Young," *The Times*, June 28, 1966, 14.

chivalrous exchange with the German general. After his capture, a German officer commanded him to arrange a temporary cease-fire with a British artillery battery. Young refused and the resultant argument was noticed by the commanding General of the *Afrikakorps*. Rommel himself supposedly rebuked his own officer for overstepping his authority:

“The General rules,” [the officer] said sourly, “that if you do not choose to obey the order I have just given you, you cannot be compelled to do so.” I looked up at the general and saw, as I thought, the ghost of a smile. At any rate his intervention seemed to be worth a salute ... I could have hardly failed to recognize Rommel.⁹

In the described incident, Rommel does more than side with his future biographer in the dispute: the German general, through his own hinted smile, personally acknowledged Young’s adherence to the soldierly code that a captive ought to resist any command beyond giving his name, rank, and service number. Or at least that is what Young wanted to believe. His decision to title his second chapter “Our Friend Rommel” was both a natural extension of the manner in which Young personalized his subject and indicated to readers that even though the German general was technically the enemy, he is better remembered as a man and a soldier than a Nazi. It is best to consider this biography as a chivalrous tribute to a former opponent who the author believed embodied the best characteristics of an officer and a gentleman.

Young believed that Rommel was responsible for making the North African campaign a “gentleman’s war,” as he put it. The author devoted noticeable ink and effort to chivalric episodes he believed characterized the African campaign. For instance, in the

⁹ Young, *Rommel*, 13-15.

original British edition Young's passage on the attempt to assassinate Rommel headed by Geoffrey Keyes (discussed in Chapter Four), Young offered a summary that took about one page. His US publisher requested that such instances be shortened or deleted.¹⁰ Instead, Young did the opposite: he presented a more detailed and specific account of the Keyes incident in the US edition. That the author prioritized getting the facts straight about this vignette reveals the author's *modus operandi* and his wish to underscore the notion that Rommel and the *Afrikakorps* were chivalrous.¹¹ The effect of such anecdotes, combined with the author's inclusion of Nuremberg trials testimony describing Rommel's destruction of Hitler's order to execute Allied prisoners, portrayed the German marshal as taking a proactive role to ensure the Western Desert battlefield was a "gentlemen's war." They went hand-in-hand with the author's contention that Rommel and National Socialism were immiscible.

Such was Young's attraction to Rommel that he projected the qualities he envisioned in the German marshal onto the men of the *Afrikakorps*:

Rommel *was* the Afrika Korps, to his own men as well as to his enemy... In Germany in 1949 they still carry their palm-tree brassard in their pocketbooks. If you ask them whether they were in North Africa they take pride in answering: 'Yes, I was in the Afrika Korps: I fought with Rommel.' Good-luck to them, for they fought well and, as the Germans say, the next best thing to a good friend is a good enemy.¹²

Young made a clear ethical delineation between professional German soldiery – "good enemies" – and the Nazis (whom the author made plain he despised) because of the

¹⁰ See "Notes on English edition of Rommel by Desmond Young," and Evan Thomas letter to Desmond Young, July 6, 1950, in Harper & Row collection Box 44, Columbia University [hereafter H&R], Desmond Young 49/50 folder.

¹¹ Young, *Rommel*, 102-103. See also Young, *Rommel: The Desert Fox* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 84-85.

¹² Young, *Rommel*, 139-140.

professional respect he had for fellow members of a fraternity of soldiers. He had a personal experience that reinforced this perception. After his capture, a German who searched him apologized for commandeering his field-glasses (legitimate military hardware) and politely handed back the captive's gold cigarette case.¹³ Auchinleck echoed this concept his

Foreword:

I could never translate my deep detestation of the regime for which [Rommel] fought into personal hatred of him as an opponent. If I say, now that he is gone, that I salute him as a soldier and a man and deplore the shameful manner of his death, I may be accused of belonging to what Mr. Bevin has called the "trade union of generals." So far as I know, should such a fellowship exist, membership of it implies no more than a recognition in an enemy of the qualities one would wish to possess oneself, respect for a brave, able and scrupulous opponent and a desire to see him treated, when beaten, in the way one would have wished to be treated had he been the winner and oneself the loser. This used to be called chivalry: many will call it nonsense and say that the days when such sentiments could survive a war are past. If they are, then I, for one, am sorry.¹⁴

There are several episodes of this warrior ethos and chivalrous treatment between the German and Commonwealth antagonists in the book (Young intentionally excluded the Italians).¹⁵ Combined with the author's inclusion of phrases such as "It was a real soldier's battle, a 'proper dog-fight,'" and "I am one of those old-fashioned persons who regret that chivalry should be among the casualties of 'total' war," *Rommel* helped cement the inchoate perception that the war in the Western Desert was a "war without hate."

When examining the author's personal biases that colored his view of Rommel, the whole *Afrikakorps*, and, as we will see, some particular Germans, it is clear that his strident belief in the soldiering ethos was a more significant factor than the political context of the

¹³ Young, *Rommel*, 150.

¹⁴ Young, *Rommel*, 10.

¹⁵ Young, *Rommel*, especially 147-161. Young's narrative depicted the Italians as half-competent auxiliaries to the German forces (which was a common feeling held by Commonwealth soldiers).

time. Young was no Germanophile. He did not speak German (he did speak French), he enlisted twice to halt German expansionism, and he wrote that “something evil ... still hangs in the air of Germany to-day ... the taint of the Nazi regime ... still darkens the German scene.”¹⁶ Politically there was nothing exceptional about him and he never articulated a coherent political philosophy. He was disgusted by Nazism, yet also derisive of journalists on the political left whom he called “left-wing boys,” and indignant when he felt his right to criticize his government was infringed upon.¹⁷ Nowhere in his correspondence with his American publishing firm Harper & Brothers or filmmaker Nunnally Johnson did Young imply any political issues that motivated him to write the book or were of contextual importance. The personal encounter as a POW was no doubt crucial. Combined with Young’s consistent endorsement of military ethos, his pride in thinking he could examine both sides of an issue, and a track record of writing biographies devoted to men who were soldiers, pioneers, and mavericks does much to suggest his perception of Rommel.¹⁸

Young absolved Rommel and the *Afrikakorps* of guilt for crimes committed by the Nazi regime. After the war, Young came to believe a feud existed between the Nazi Party and the *Wehrmacht* that prompted him to unequivocally distinguish the professional officer corps from the fascist “brown scum,” as he put it. Such a line of thinking starkly contradicted the Allied argument presented at the Nuremberg trials just a few years earlier

¹⁶ Young, *Rommel*, 215-216.

¹⁷ Desmond Young letter to Nunnally Johnson, February 19, 1951 in Nunnally Johnson collection, Desert Fox-Desmond Young folder, Howard Gotlieb Archive Research Center, Boston University [hereafter referred to as HGARC], Young, *All the Best Years*, 235-251.

¹⁸ Young’s biographical subjects in order were Erwin Rommel, Count Benoît de Boigne, Sir Robert Davis, Frederick Rutland, and Weetman Pearson. De Boigne was French trained soldier who acquired fame and fortune serving the Maratha Empire in India during the late 18th century. Davis was an English inventor whose oxygen rebreather was used by the Royal Navy and for early scuba diving. Rutland was a pioneer of British naval aviation and was decorated for bravery at the Battle of Jutland during the First World War. Pearson was a British oil industrialist and best known for his involvement with the Liberal party and his philanthropy.

that argued that the German officer corps were willing accomplices to Hitler's war of aggression and genocidal policies. The author attributed all war crimes to the SS (the infamous Nazi elite paramilitary organization) and portrayed the German officer corps as powerless to curb the lawlessness that they found personally abhorrent. For instance, Young writes that when Rommel "demanded" to be allowed to punish the SS *Das Reich* division for the Oradour-sur-Glade massacre, he only provoked Hitler's anger.¹⁹

What Young wrote for this particular incident does match witness testimony in that Rommel objected to the SS murderous reprisals and Hitler was annoyed because of the Field Marshal's repeated inquires into matters beyond his military responsibility.²⁰ That being said, this was an instance of the author projecting a corner-case example to validate his belief that there was a fundamental divide between the conduct of the SS and that of Germany's traditional army. Much evidence was compiled at the Nuremberg trials demonstrated that both organizations worked together and were heavily involved implementing the criminal policies of the Third Reich. Young was knowledgeable of the contemporary evidence in this regard (he quoted testimony from the Nuremberg trials), but like many other intelligent and informed contemporaries, placed more trust in the testimonies that the *Wehrmacht* was "clean" and what had happened was the responsibility of a few high ranking officers'

¹⁹ Young does not provide a source for the "demand." Young, *Rommel*, 207. See other examples on 149, 152-154, 189.

²⁰ This is difficult to verify as there is no primary source that I know of for this conference and witness testimony sometimes conflates this meeting with another one two weeks later at Berchtesgaden, where Rundstedt and Rommel also clashed with Hitler over military strategy. According to Hitler's *Luftwaffe* Adjutant Nicolaus von Below, Rommel and Hitler had a private conversation, from which he heard the two had argued over the issue of a negotiated peace. See Nicolaus von Below, *At Hitler's Side. The Memoirs of Hitler's Luftwaffe Adjutant 1937-1945*, trans. Geoffrey Brooks (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2001), 204. It is believable that Rommel had *asked* (cf. demanded) to punish the SS commander for the atrocities. He submitted a similar protest of the SS while in Italy (and forbade his son from joining the organization). Moreover, Rommel was not the only German who felt the SS officer Diekmann at the scene ought to be punished. The local army commander and even Diekmann's superior in the SS did too. Diekmann was killed shortly afterward and apparently the matter, at least from the German perspective, was dropped.

malfeasance.²¹ According to Young, Rommel's attitude was "shared by the great majority of German regular officers ... In the higher ranks, there were only a few exceptions, the Keitels and the Jodls, who had sold out so completely to Hitler that they were prepared to transmit, even if they did not approve, his most outrageous orders."²² It was these exceptions, the "chairborne soldiers," whom Rommel detested for "having dishonoured the German Wehrmacht."²³ Young thus did more than grant the rank and file of the *Afrikakorps* and the German officer corps the benefit of the doubt in assuming their innocence of the Third Reich's crimes, he wrote that these men actually opposed what they saw, in thought if not in deed.

Thus, Rommel is portrayed less as an exceptional case in Hitler's Army and more as an example of the German soldiering tradition that, with some notable exceptions, had in the main conducted itself honorably. As will be shown in chapters below, Young was not the first to assert that the *Wehrmacht* was essentially "clean," so while his biography did not create such a myth, its mass circulation among British and American readers helped propagate it. How much Young's military mindset prompted him to draw such a sharp delineation cannot be determined, yet it is interesting that the German officers he does identify as despicable reflect poorly on what a model soldier ought to be. All were "chairborne soldiers," that is they pushed papers behind a desk rather than led men in battle, and all were described as weak-willed personalities who shirked their professional duties in subservience to Hitler. The same is true of the "poor Italians," whose military failures the

²¹ Omer Bartov, *Germany's War and the Holocaust: Disputed Histories* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 33-75; Ronald M. Smelser and Edward J. Davies, *The Myth of the Eastern Front: the Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Donald Bloxham, *Genocide on Trial: War Crimes Trials and the Formation of Holocaust History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) offer perceptive insights on the prevalence of this narrative in Great Britain and the United States.

²² Young, *Rommel*, 148.

²³ Young, *Rommel*, 85.

author repeatedly underscored (such as referring to General Rudolfo Graziani as “chicken-hearted”).²⁴ The importance of the warrior archetypes discussed in Chapter Two is particularly relevant to Young’s perspective in this matter. Indeed, one psychologist commented that the book and attitudes about Rommel followed a “well-known pattern” of affection for a dead enemy defeated in combat, fought by men “who regard war as a game and who can avert their eyes from the political and human sufficiency of it.” He concluded:

It is not surprising that many good soldiers admired Rommel and, especially when they were nearly beaten by him, created a legend of manly virtues around his person. Nor is it surprising that Brigadier Young sought out the facts about Rommel, the chivalrous opponent, the near-British gentleman – and soft-pedalled his tie with Hitler.²⁵

This is a key perspective that ought to be remembered considering the book’s reception in the next chapter.

Young extended the glowing terms he wrote of Rommel to the German marshal’s close associates because he genuinely liked or respected them, a perspective he did not try to hide. Through the course of his visits with Rommel’s wife, Lucie, Young treated her with the same personal respect he felt Rommel had treated him. As he wrote in his autobiography: “Frau Rommel and I were friends by the end of [our first] luncheon and have so remained.”²⁶ Indicative of this were the photographs in the Harper & Row records that feature Young and Lucie, each of them with the two in close proximity and genial expressions.²⁷ He openly wrote in his book of one of Rommel’s key subordinates, “I apologize for liking German generals. I suppose I ought not to do so. But at the end I liked

²⁴ Young, *Rommel*, 17-22, 78-81, 141-147.

²⁵ “Why Rommel Goes down with Sportsmen,” *The Picture Post*, April 1, 1950, 43

²⁶ Young, *All the Best Years*, 322.

²⁷ H&R, Desmond Young folders.

General Bayerlein.”²⁸ Young vouched for all the principal anti-Hitler conspirators who were connected to Rommel. Karl Strölin, who never disavowed Nazism and claimed the movement had been betrayed by Hitler, was, according to Young, depicted as a “man of the highest humane principles” by Americans and Jews.²⁹ Young quoted an assessment of Carl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel, whom historian Richard J. Evans has characterized as “a hardline anti-semitic,” that deemed Stülpnagel a “*chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*” (a knight without fear and without reproach).³⁰ Hans Speidel emerges from the pages of *Rommel* as a cosmopolitan philosopher-soldier who foiled his Gestapo torturers but could not save his friend Rommel because Hitler himself had determined the German marshal must die.³¹ Young’s sources for the conspiracy, Lucie, Speidel, Strölin, and other friendly witnesses, account for his generous appraisals, but do not explain why such a respected journalist as Desmond Young accepted at face value his interviewees’ stories and did not deign to probe deeper. He must have wanted to believe them.³²

What makes this point especially interesting is that Young, unlike the Rommel admirers of the 1940s examined in the previous chapter, was not favorably inclined toward Germany. Perhaps this prompted him to clarify his allegiances. Before the war he had “lumped all Germans together,” and described his feelings toward German officers as:

Apart from having served in two wars against them, I have never known many Germans. I had certainly never met a German general, except Rommel, and that was professionally and for a few seconds. My prejudice against a class which is largely responsible for my having spent ten years of my life in a sterile and unremunerative occupation is at least as strong as most peoples.³³

²⁸ Young, *Rommel*, 93

²⁹ Young, *Rommel*, 220-221.

³⁰ Young, *Rommel*, 230. Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2009), 379.

³¹ Young, *Rommel*, 210, 217, 248.

³² How much of a personal aspect there was to this is opinion difficult to determine. The sociable atmosphere in which he worked with his subject’s family and friends surely played some role in the British biographer giving his German subject the benefit of the doubt.

³³ Young, *Rommel*, 90, 148-149.

If anything, his upbringing probably prejudiced him against Germans considering that his father had believed war with Germany was inevitable long before 1914 and Young's immediate enlistment when the Great War broke out.³⁴ Even considering his effusive praise for select Germans in *Rommel*, Young believed that Germany after 1945 was still tainted by the Nazi regime. He was preempting disbelief.

Another factor to consider is that during the process of researching and writing *Rommel*, Young's attitudes toward Germans changed; he ceased seeing them as stereotypical Germans. It was his personal contact and his witnessing of the pathetic living conditions in postwar Germany that prompted him to perceive Rommel's friends and colleagues differently. He now saw people with values not altogether different from those he grew up with in England. This was a similar experience to the US GIs and officials stationed in postwar Germany.³⁵ After meeting General von Eisebeck, Young wrote that he "was a pathetic figure, I thought, a military Mr. Chips." Upon hearing Rommel's naval aide Friedrich Ruge mention he had felt at ease with Rommel because the German marshal was more of a naval officer, Young wrote:

With that in mind, I looked again at Rommel's photograph, covering up the cap, and reflected on all the stories I had heard about him, the odd pieces of his personality seemed to slip into place. Perhaps because my own father was a sailor and I spent much of my early life at sea, I felt that I could now understand this very unusual German general. He had hardly seen salt water until his last assignment. But think of him in the line of Nelson's captains, an unromantic Hornblower, and he runs true to type.³⁶

Young, who referred to his childhood as a "schoolboy at sea" for having accompanied his father salvaging wrecks around the world, believed his father represented a particular breed

³⁴ Young, *All the Best Years*, 42.

³⁵ Goedde, *GIs and Germans*.

³⁶ Young, *Rommel*, 190.

of deep-water sailors, a fraternity of men distinguished not by their politics or nationality, but their connection to a lifestyle on the ocean. It was another means for the author to impute values familiar to him onto Rommel.

Another way of reimagining Germans was evident in Young's reflections on visiting Speidel's house:

Above the peaceful Black Forest town of Freudenstadt, I had a feeling almost of nostalgia for the Victorian and Edwardian interiors of my childhood. It was in just such houses as this ... that the English, too, used to live their comfortable and well-ordered lives, their money in sound investments, their trust in God and the Government, the servants in their place, the cat on the hearth, the policeman on his beat. One might have been in North Oxford, forty years ago.³⁷

The stereotypical view Young held of Germans changed as he found either pitiable figures in a land devastated by war or gentlemen living in a familiar culture. He now identified with them in a way that envisaged them as colleagues, as men living similar lives and having similar interests as himself, if not quite as Englishmen.

This fit a general pattern in which Young looked favorably on his German sources, which were family members or confidants of Rommel.³⁸ Young also interviewed veterans of the British Eighth Army – the same army whose overdeveloped fascination prompted its commander to order his troops to stop referring to Rommel by name. Whether Young interviewed Rommel's rivals or people who hated him – and there were many, Gisevius, Geyr, Halder, Kesselring, Streich, et al. – is not clear. Young does not mention them by

³⁷ Young, *Rommel*, 216.

³⁸ Lucie, Manfred, Ruge, Bayerlein, July 20 sympathizer General von Esebeck, war correspondent Baron von Esebeck, Ravenstein, Speidel, Aldinger, Hartmann, Strölin, Rommel's orderly Günther, and artist Wilhelm Wessels, who painted one of the most enduring images of the German marshal. People familiar with the biographical details of Rommel will all recognize these names as being generous sources excepting Ravenstein, whom I would categorize as a neutral witness.

name in his sources (although his comments about Halder³⁹ suggest a meeting between the two). What is certain is that their critical assessments either do not appear in the book or are denigrated by the author. This is most clearly seen with Colonel General Franz Halder, whom Young described as a liar who did nothing in war “except sit on his backside in an office chair,” and was fortunate to escape the hangman’s noose at Nuremberg.⁴⁰ Young chose to accept those sources that told a similar story, one he wanted to hear. Young’s decision to exclude or openly deride sources more critical of Rommel meant that this foundational representation was more hagiography than biography.

Desmond Young’s accentuation of the romanticized military characteristics of his subject, which all but occluded the political, was a consequence of his personal biases. Because of his idiosyncrasies and the genuinely cordial relations he made with the Germans that he had met, most of whom were close associates of a man in whom he wanted to see the best, Young had by 1949 become convinced it was correct to differentiate between “good” Germans and “bad” Nazis – a common thread that bound Rommel’s admirers. He wrote *Rommel* as a testament by one soldier of another who embodied an iconic military ideal.

A Universal Hero: Analysis of Young’s *Rommel*

When Young looked at Rommel’s portrait and envisioned him in the vein of C.S. Forester’s iconic Royal Navy hero Horatio Hornblower, it was characteristic of one of the overarching themes of the book: the imagery of the “Desert Fox” fit easily with US and British military paradigms. Or at least that he possessed a set of values ordinary Americans

³⁹ Halder was generous granting interviews after the war, particularly with the US Army Historical Division, with which he had built up a network of cordial acquaintances and helped him avoid standing trial for war crimes. See Smelser and Davies, *The Myth of the Eastern Front*.

⁴⁰ Young, *Rommel*, 83-85. As partisan as the author was in making these statements, it should be noted that they contained large elements of truth with respect to Halder.

and Britons could easily relate to rather than the stereotypical authoritarian and militaristic German brute that marked the portrayals of Rommel's obituaries. Young depicts Rommel as an honest soldier guided by a set of decent moral values: he desired to keep casualties low, was wholly devoted to his family, and underwent a transformation from dutiful, patriotic soldier to active Hitler opponent. As represented in the book, Rommel's connection to Nazism was thus insincere, tenuous, and artificial, an unnatural relationship contingent on exceptional circumstances that was cut asunder upon his recognition of Nazism and Hitler's depravity. It was a representation that flowed naturally from the clear delineation Young drew between the Nazis he despised and the Germans who reminded him of iconic English traits. Or at least Young, who chafed against his own government's policies while in India and valued the military concept of duty, believed that a non-political man such as Rommel could honorably serve his nation without endorsing its government or its policies.

As such, Young spotlighted Rommel's traits as a gentleman, which starkly contradicted stereotypical notions of heel-clicking and goose-stepping German soldiers who only knew war. Amidst the political chaos in Germany after the First World War ended, Young depicted Rommel as a strong family man who had few vices, spent his off duty time vacationing with his wife, and did other middle class activities such as play the violin. He had no interest in politics. Nor in war, which he referred to as "a stupid and brutal business, which no sane man would wish to see repeated."⁴¹ When war came, Rommel was gracious in victory and self-reflective in defeat.⁴² In the field, Rommel was said to have a "very warm heart ... a smile and joke for everyone who seemed to be doing his job."⁴³ While lamenting

⁴¹ Young, *Rommel*, 50.

⁴² See for instance the author's applauding the conduct of a victorious Rommel during the French campaign, Young, *Rommel*, 74.

⁴³ Young, *Rommel*, 135.

the fighting qualities of his Italian allies, Young quoted the German marshal as observing: “Certainly they are no good at war. But one must not judge everyone in the world only by his qualities as a soldier: otherwise we should have no civilisation.” Young judged such a statement as “a refreshingly un-German remark” as if to highlight the difference between Rommel and the country he fought for.⁴⁴ When Rommel felt Germany could no longer win, he rejected senseless violence: “Hitler’s orders are nonsense; the man must be mad ... Every day is costing lives unnecessarily; it is essential to make peace at once.”⁴⁵ In this biography, Rommel is portrayed in every respect an officer and a gentleman.

From reading the book, it is evident the author believed Rommel’s non-Nazi persona was an integral part of his character and not simply the consequence of the waning military fortunes of Nazi Germany. Indeed, Young portrayed Rommel as the proverbial square peg in the Nazi round hole even at the peak of National Socialism’s political power. Consider Young’s assessment of Rommel’s short-lived assignment with the Hitler Youth in 1938. The author did not interpret the appointment as political (and thus problematic) in nature because it was at the behest of the army and because Rommel immediately clashed with Hitler Youth leader Baldur von Schirach. As Young recounts the arrangement, these two were at loggerheads because Rommel objected to the militarization of the Hitler Youth and wanted more attention given to education and character development. Rommel sought “to put this right” and arranged a meeting with the Minister of Education Dr. Bernhard Rust, but this came to nothing because Rust “was a fool.” Schirach then successfully politicked to oust Rommel because it was easy for the Hitler Youth leader to “represent that Rommel was not quite a good enough Nazi.” This interpretation of the falling out between Rommel and

⁴⁴ Young, *Rommel*, 147.

⁴⁵ Young, *Rommel*, 224-225.

Schirach went beyond portraying Rommel as apolitical – it highlighted Rommel as the son of a schoolmaster who actively worked against the politicization and militarization of Germany during the height of Nazi power.⁴⁶ Schirach, who served a twenty-year prison sentence from the Nuremburg Trials, told David Irving in the early 1970s that the dismissal was because Rommel wanted to turn the Hitler Youth into a training ground for future *Wehrmacht* soldiers.⁴⁷ In any event, Rommel was not a tactful man and it is easy to see how they clashed. Both stories stem from problematic sources who had their own agendas. But readers of Young’s biography only see Rommel’s side.

Young may not have intentionally been making a myth, but it was characteristic of how the author was easily satisfied with the best-case scenario for his biographical subject. Young’s extrapolation of Rommel’s potential future with the Hitler Youth cannot be characterized as anything but romantic. He speculated it was unfortunate that Rommel was not given more control over the Nazi organization because the German marshal would have been able to mitigate or even reverse the insidious influence National Socialism had on it. Young was unequivocal. He contrasted the professionalism of Rommel’s *Afrikakorps* with Kurt Meyer’s 12th SS Panzer Division *Hitlerjugend*, a division that drew the vast majority of enlisted men from members of the Hitler Youth born in 1926 (thus making them 17-18 years old in 1944), whose leader was charged by the Canadians and British for war crimes committed during the Normandy campaign. Young wrote:

They would not, it is safe to say, have become the intolerant and fanatical young bullies they became. Certainly they would not have killed prisoners-of-war, as they did under Kurt Meyer’s orders. Nor would the survivors now form that hard core of sullen, resentful and dangerous young Germans whom no man in his sense can suppose it possible to convert to our ideas.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Young, *Rommel*, 56-57.

⁴⁷ Irving, *Trail of the Fox*, 30-32.

⁴⁸ Young, *Rommel*, 56.

With this line of reasoning, Young presented Rommel as someone inherently antithetical to National Socialism and whose sense of decency prompted him to resist its pernicious influence whenever he encountered it. The responsibility for the conduct of the SS division was laid squarely at the feet of Nazi villains and presented as a preventable tragedy that the German marshal would have nipped in the bud. That the Hitler Youth would have imbibed Rommel's values had he been given a "free hand" with the organization as the author states, placed far too much importance – and faith – in the German marshal as a historical actor.⁴⁹ Indeed, Young's emphasis on the upright non-political schoolmaster lurking behind the German soldier whose close working relations with such National Socialist programs as Hitler's personal security battalion and the Hitler Youth required a strong element of faith.

This sharp division between Nazism and Rommel was a recurring theme in the book, even in the parts describing Rommel's relationship with Hitler. Young depicted Rommel as a simple soldier who was wholly content in his family life and in his profession, a stark contrast to the "storm troop leader" who conducted "murderous raids" as portrayed in wartime Allied reports.

The truth is less highly colored. Rommel was, from first to last, a regular officer and, as is shown by the extract from his *Wehrpass* or record of service ... from the day he joined his regiment to the day he died, he was never off the strength of the German Army. He never belonged to the Free Corps, he was never a policeman, he was never a member of the Nazi Party, still less a storm-trooper, and his connection with Hitler came about quite fortuitously.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ For clarification, I do think if Rommel had been in *direct* command of the 12th SS Panzer Division *Hitlerjugend* then it is likely the *specific* war crimes that it was charged of perpetrating in the Normandy campaign would not have occurred, given Rommel's record in this regard. This is quite a different and specific counterfactual than Young's sweeping claim.

⁵⁰ Young, *Rommel*, 26.

Young wrote that it was Hitler who was initially attracted to Rommel (when historically it was mutual) and their brief partnership had developed under specific and “fortuitous” circumstances. As he phrased it, Rommel “could not escape contact with the Nazis,” a phrase that suggests Rommel was an unwilling partner. There are two factors that solidified this relationship: the dysfunctional nature of interwar Germany and Rommel’s alleged ignorance. As Young tells it, the unilateral manner in which the Allies imposed the treaty of Versailles gave the Germans “a solid, permanent and perfectly legitimate grievance,” and “it is against this background that the subsequent behavior of every German officer has to be regarded.”⁵¹ The apolitical Rommel “long disapproved of the Nazi ‘scum,’” but he was a patriot, Germany was in a constant state of political crisis since the Great Depression, and Hitler’s personal magnetism seemed to set the Führer apart from political rivals.⁵²

For, like ninety per cent of Germans who had no direct contact with Hitler or his movement he regarded him as an idealist, a patriot with some sound ideas who might pull Germany together and save her from Communism. This may have seemed a naive estimate; it was not more naive than that of many people in England who saw him as a ridiculous little man with a silly mustache. Both views were founded in wishful thinking. But the Germans, having had a bellyful of defeat and a good taste of Communism, at least had some excuse for believing what they wished to believe.⁵³

That Young could adopt the perspective that the vast majority of Nazi-era Germans had “some excuse” for failing to comprehend the potential of a Hitler regime was one of the essential differences that separated him from Rommel’s critics who rejected such logic due to the conspicuous harbingers of National Socialist rule in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler’s rhetoric, and the continued escalation of anti-Jewish policies. Young prided himself on the ability to see

⁵¹ Young, *Rommel*, 44.

⁵² Young, *Rommel*, 218.

⁵³ Young, *Rommel*, 52.

“both sides of a case,” and one might say he went to great lengths to comprehend the German point of view.

Young’s depiction of Rommel’s association with the resistance movement and his death, did not offer any new historical facts. Instead, it synthesized them into a charitable interpretation. There are no sources listed here, though Lucie was probably a strong influence considering the interpretation. As reported in the biography, when Rommel learned about the extermination camps and experienced firsthand Hitler’s refusal to make sensible military decisions – both in 1943 – the German marshal confronted his Führer with the unpleasant truth that peace was necessary and proposed the disbandment of the Gestapo and the SS. Rebuffed by Hitler, Rommel, “for the first time in his life, became politically conscious.”⁵⁴ Resistance was thus, according to Young, a political act, not a military one. By summer 1944, Rommel had committed himself to “rescuing” Germany by unilaterally approaching Generals Eisenhower and Montgomery to end the fighting in Western Europe. Significantly, although Young contends that Rommel approved of the idea of removing Hitler from power, on page 222 he writes: “*Neither then nor at any time afterwards was he aware of the plan to kill Hitler*” [emphasis in original]. That Young felt the need to emphasize this fact suggests how prevalent the belief that Rommel was associated with the *Attentat* was, and perhaps a desire to distance the German marshal from it. In such a way, he could still envision the “Desert Fox” as an anti-Nazi, yet disassociate him from an assassination attempt that went against the military ethos of breaking an oath. Young was unequivocal: he asserted that Rommel had achieved “a remarkable feat of mental balance” in executing his obligations as a soldier while working toward his political goal of peace

⁵⁴ Young, *Rommel*, 218-219.

because the German marshal never wavered in his professional duty to defeat the Allied armies and gave his superiors a lucid, honest assessment of the military situation in Normandy.

Interestingly, although the author emphasized Rommel was ignorant of the plot to assassinate Hitler, this was one point of the book that failed to sway prevailing public narratives. In the motion picture *The Desert Fox*, in which Twentieth Century-Fox gave Desmond Young considerable input, the narrator unambiguously states: “Now definitely committed to assassinate his Führer... .” In speculating why this was so, it is important to note that Young’s version was a revisionist interpretation from the orthodoxy, which already had Rommel in some manner connected to the German Resistance. Young did not provide any corroborating evidence for his claim that Rommel was unaware of the plan to kill Hitler. The circumstances that had drowned out Lucie’s nuanced story discussed in Chapter Five were still the same and were now augmented by an authoritative biography that drew a sharp line between National Socialism Rommel. Definitive claims about Rommel’s role (or lack thereof) are going to be heavily based on intuitive logic, gut-feeling, and what people want to believe. What was available at that time implied that Rommel knew his associates were considering a coup and approved of its end – removing Hitler from power, even if he disapproved of the means via assassination. I suspect Young’s assessment was based less on the information he came across and more on what he would have wanted a military hero of his to do.

Young’s *Rommel* is above all a military tribute to the “Desert Fox.” In a biography that places much faith in Rommel’s character and ability when the evidence was ambiguous, it undercut much of the wartime Allied commentary that demystified his military abilities.

According to Young it was Rommel who captured thousands of Italians at Monte Matajur in 1917 (when in reality he had been a junior officer in an army that won a major victory against an ill-prepared foe). It was Rommel who changed the fortunes of the reeling Italians in spring 1941. It was Rommel who saw that Malta was the key to supplying the Axis forces, whereas the German and Italian General Staffs ignored the island's importance (the latter actually recognized its importance, but like Rommel, prioritized other military objectives). Young explicitly states that Rommel would have reached the vital objectives of Cairo and the Suez Canal by the beginning of 1942 if his hands had not been tied.⁵⁵ When Axis fortunes waned, it was because Hitler and the High Command did not support this modern day Belisarius:

The story of the war in North Africa is the story of an unending battle between Rommel, who saw – and proved – the possibility of a major success there and a High Command which refused to take the North African campaign seriously ... Above all, Keitel, Jodl, and Halder were jealous of his popularity with Hitler and the German public, of his war record, and, no doubt, of his good luck in having an independent command beyond the reach of the Fuehrer.⁵⁶

It was true that Rommel's peers were jealous. Yet military historian Martin van Creveld's 1977 study of the insuperable logistical difficulties involved with sustaining a major Axis presence in Africa suggests that Halder was right and Rommel was wrong in this respect.⁵⁷ According to Young, when Rommel ran out of fuel, it was the fault of Kesselring or the Italians – Young, a frontline soldier not trained in the administrative aspects, had been swayed by Rommel's letters to Lucie.⁵⁸ During the Normandy campaign, Rommel was hamstrung by logistical difficulties and an apathetic High Command that refused to

⁵⁵ Young, *Rommel*, 82-84.

⁵⁶ Young, *Rommel*, 84.

⁵⁷ Creveld, *Supplying War*.

⁵⁸ Young, *Rommel*, 166-168.

countenance his sensible proposals, the most important being his prescience into the eventual landing site of the Allied invasion (this was a popular notion at the time, but this was incorrect as Rommel had had no such special insight). Young did note criticisms levied against Rommel by his subordinate officers, such as his impatience and his habit of trying to do everything himself. Yet, such criticism was mitigated by these critical officers' admission of the results:

Rommel was the bravest of the brave; he had a sixth sense in battle; he was wonderful with troops; when he had quieted down it was always possible to talk to him; if he gave orders over one's head he would apologize afterwards; he was generous with praise and would admit when he had been wrong. Could they think of any one better for desert war, I asked them. No, they had all agreed, nor of any one half as good.⁵⁹

Whether it was capturing the Suez Canal or preventing the politicization of the Hitler Youth, Young attached far too much importance to Rommel and derived much of his analysis from a romanticized perspective of the "Desert Fox." This is perhaps a problem inherent in all biographies written by admirers, and it is difficult not to conclude that Young portrayed Rommel as such because he was in awe of his biographical subject.

Rommel is best characterized as hero-worship journalism. But not simply a specific type of military hero whose appeal would be limited to military enthusiasts or history buffs. Young had sculpted a hero whose relevance extended beyond the battlefield. Because Young had described the German marshal as an estimable character who was courageous, dignified, principled, and honorable, the "Desert Fox" seemed something more significant than a "good" German who conducted himself correctly in battle. E.T. Williams, an British officer who served in the Eighth Army, summed up the book aptly when he wrote in his review: "[Desmond Young] portrays Rommel not 'warts and all,' but rather as survivors of the Africa

⁵⁹ Young, *Rommel*, 141.

Corps care to remember him.”⁶⁰ His resistance against Hitler now assumed an altogether different and, importantly, legitimate moral fiber for Young’s US and British audiences. Devoted to his family, to his country, to the men under his command, and to an admirable set of principles that non-Germans could identify with, Rommel possessed a universalist appeal that most other commanders from the Second World War, however brilliant and whatever flag they fought under, lacked. This is what made the “Desert Fox” a marketable international commodity in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and around the world.

Auchinleck’s assessment of Young’s *Rommel* is worth quoting again: “I was surprised to learn how simple and homely he seems to have been. I think that we who were fighting against him pictured him as a typical Junker officer, a product of the Prussian military machine.”⁶¹ This human element set Rommel apart from the other able and supposedly non-political German generals. Speidel, of course, had tried to impress upon his audiences this humanity, but for all his sentences about Rommel’s “clear blue eyes and warm animated face,” his overt apologia was recognized by many readers as a transparent defense, whereupon the losers are not to blame for their defeat or for their unlawful role in the war. If Young allowed his own idiosyncrasies to color his perceptions, people nevertheless felt he was sincere, and he did offer testimony and evidence that might have resonated with people who believed in the Allied cause.

Mostly, the biography was at its core a military homage to the “Desert Fox” and thus revisited the very themes that had captured the fascination on the Allied side during 1942. This was another crucial difference from *Invasion 1944*, which devoted no ink to exploring

⁶⁰ E.T Williams, “The Rommel Legend,” *The Observer*, January 22, 1950, 4.

⁶¹ Young, *Rommel*, 10.

Rommel's military campaigns. Young revisited the battlefields of the Western Desert and thus tapped into the "military sex appeal" that Waldeck believed made Rommel an attractive personality in the first place. Young's biography was a reprieve of representations that had waned from public narratives by the end of 1942. It was familiar ground and, according to Young's autobiography, what had made his British publisher eager for him to produce a manuscript.⁶²

It was this book that set the wheels in motion for a rapid shift in public attitudes toward Rommel and thus meet Jauss's criteria for a significant text. The most important person whose horizons changed after reading *Rommel* was Hollywood film writer Nunnally Johnson, who was the driving force behind putting Young's biography onto the silver screen in late 1951. As will be shown in Chapter Nine, Johnson "believed every word" Young said and afterward contemplated, "Rommel was Shakespearean material ... That material is just so good." However, first we turn to the scholarly and popular reception of Young's *Rommel*.

⁶² Young, *All the Best Years*, 321.

Chapter 8

One Million Sales: Reception of Desmond Young's Rommel

When Desmond Young's biography *Rommel* appeared in Great Britain in 1950 and the United States one year later, it became an instant commercial success and served as the foundation for many of the hagiographic representations of the German marshal that followed for the next decade and beyond. The most interesting piece of evidence relating to the reception of the book was a response to a query made by US filmmaker Nunnally Johnson about the viability of turning Young's biography (and thus Rommel's story) into a major motion picture. His files contain a typed excerpt from *Three Against Rommel*, the 1943 retrospective by the British war correspondent Clifford this study touched on earlier:

The search for heroes [of the desert war] is irresistible ... If the whole great drama has a single hero I think it must be Rommel ... The Eighth Army adored him. They admired him passionately when he beat them, and when they beat him they admired themselves for beating such a clever general. They talked about him in a personal way as "old Rommel," or even more affectionately as "that bastard Rommel." At one time the British propaganda machine dimly sensed this, and set to work to discredit Rommel. But the Eighth Army would have none of it. They knew too much. And they could not be brought to hate him either. For the desert war was a clean, straight, dispassionate war with no Gestapo, no politics, no persecuted civilians, no ruined homes. There was nothing with which to work up an immediate, urgent hatred and the Eighth Army went on admiring Rommel. It did no harm. [emphasis in Johnson's typescript].

Underneath is the document writer's assessment: "In my opinion the above summation of Rommel exists in at least 80% of the British public today."¹ If that 80% figure devalues

¹ "Extract from *Three Against Rommel* by Alexander Clifford," Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC. This begs for a date but unfortunately has none. My best guess is probably early 1950. That was the time Johnson wrote Zanuck about the possibility of making the film and would have sent feelers about its marketability, of which the person who made the assessment used Clifford's observation about Eighth Army sentiments in 1943 as representative of British reception of Young's biography. There is no evidence to substantiate or dispute the 80% estimate, but it does indicate the film was made in response to how the public already felt about Rommel, rather than changing public attitudes.

some political objections Britons had toward an otherwise admired military figure, Young's biography certainly represented a watershed moment when positive representations of Rommel became accepted (if still contested by a vocal minority) in British society. There is continuity here; the document writer used Clifford's 1943 assessment of Rommel to illustrate the British reception of Desmond Young's 1950 biography for good reason. However, the dramatic volte-face of Rommel's public reputation was due to myriad factors that made Americans and Britons more favorably disposed towards Germany, and thus receptive to a well-written biography that debunked the propaganda of him being a brutish Nazi paramilitary.

The other 20 percent, that is, those who felt admiring Rommel did harm, is the key to understanding the reception of the book. The recurring pattern in post-war debates about Rommel's reputation is that those with entrenched beliefs that most Germans (and by extension Rommel) were in some manner fundamentally responsible for the crimes of the Third Reich steadfastly rejected the book's implication that Rommel was worthy of remembrance. This was of paramount importance for those 20 percent, the significance of the Belsen concentration camp took on a greater meaning than Rommel's chivalry, his purported resistance to Hitler, or rearming German soldiers. It was not that they disputed Young's contention that Rommel was not a member of the Nazi Party. Rather, they asserted that Rommel's willing association with the Nazis was what counted. The biography's reception reveals tensions in the post-war United States and Britain, tensions that arose from the fundamental question of the degree to which men such as Rommel should share responsibility for Nazi atrocities. The book's strong and sustained commercial success suggests that audiences were on the whole were prepared to accept a professional portrayal of

Rommel, that is, that a distinction could be made between a German general and National Socialism.

Profit not Politics: Publishing *Rommel*

In 1948 when Young queried an acquaintance at Collins on the prospect of publishing *Rommel*, he was met with an enthusiastic response. The British publishing firm's editors were so sanguine about the prospects of a Rommel biography that the first print order was for 50,000 copies, a figure that anticipated a best-seller. Collins's optimism proved well-founded; 85,000 copies were sold before the book's official publication in January 1950, and the *Sunday Express* (London), which syndicated *Rommel*, announced it had increased their circulation by 92,000 in just two weeks.² In less than one year, it had gone through nine editions in the UK, selling some 190,000 copies, and it had already been translated and published in Holland, Sweden, Germany, France, Norway, Spain, and Denmark.³

The eventual US publisher's reaction was decidedly cooler because the book was not deemed profitable. Responding to a November 1949 inquiry from Collins regarding the possibility of publishing *Rommel* in the US, John Fischer of Harper & Brothers replied that the book "presents some peculiar problems with the American market." Citing a prejudice against war books and a lack of interest in German themes, Harper & Brothers presented a very modest offer for the importation of 2,000 sheets and openly referred to *Rommel* as a "small edition."⁴ Yet, just six weeks later upon the book's release in Britain, Fischer urged his editorial board to make a forceful offer because "all who have read advance copies

² Young, *All the Best Years*, 321-324.

³ R.J. Politzer of Collins Publishers, letter to Evan Thomas of Harper & Brothers, November 30, 1950, H&R, Desmond Young 49/50 folder.

⁴ John Fischer of Harper & Brothers, letter to Mr. Bonham Carter of Collins Publishers, December 1, 1949, Harper & Row collection Box 44, Columbia University [hereafter H&R], Desmond Young 49/50 folder.

consider [it a] certain international bestseller” and “Collins first printing fifty thousand and triple choice of book clubs” backed up those advance readers’ assessments. A *New York Times* rumor that that the *Saturday Evening Post* was going to serialize *Rommel* (incorrect as it turned out) clinched the matter for Harper & Brothers. In a new offer to Collins, Harper & Brothers was worried that even “large quantities” of sheet importation presented a new difficulty: “the question of getting a quick delivery.”⁵ The firm’s disinterest turned into concern about meeting demand. Harper & Brothers’ hesitation to publish *Rommel*, doing so only when it was anticipated to be a bestseller, ought to give pause to speculation that there was an obvious market for positive representations of the German military.

Harper & Brothers had no desire to extend reconciliation to Germany. Indeed, the firm still operated from assumptions that identified Germans and German culture as inherently problematic. From the list of proposed items that the firm asked the author to edit or remove, it was plain that its editors closely read the British edition and paid special attention to details concerning references to Nazi Germany and Hitler. In the British edition, Young described the political chaos and violence that marked Germany after its defeat in World War I as such that “the officer corps [was considered] the only Germans ... capable of respecting and restoring order.” Harper & Brothers asked Young to put the word “order” in quotation marks. He obliged and then some, adding, “the ‘order’ which the German is

⁵ John Fischer of Harper & Brothers, letter to Mr. Bonham Carter of Collins Publishers, January 25, 1950, H&R, Desmond Young 49/50 folder. See also Cablegram, Hamilton to Harper & Brothers, January 12, 1950, H&R, Desmond Young 49/50 folder. For the serial rumor David Dempsey, “In and Out of Books,” *New York Times*, January 8, 1950, 184 and Editor letter to Miss Dorothy B. Fiske, February 9, 1950, H&R, Desmond Young 49/50 folder.

always trying to impose upon his own people as well as upon others.”⁶ In the British edition, Young wrote that Hitler had a “better side”:

Of course Hitler was, unfortunately, surrounded by rascals ... But what a great man! ... It seems incredible. It was not incredible to Rommel who himself, when he served him, had only seen Hitler’s better side.

In the US edition, there was no ambiguity regarding Hitler. Instead:

Of course Hitler was, unfortunately, surrounded by rascals ... But what a great man! ... It seems incredible. It was not incredible to Rommel who was not in the innermost circle and was spared the worst of Hitler’s displays of temper and hysteria until much later.⁷

In the British version, Young suggested that Dale Carnegie, a famous American author and lecturer on self-improvement, had read *Mein Kampf* and was influenced by Hitler’s masterful handling of audiences. In the US version, this suggestion was deleted.⁸ In the British edition, Rommel characterized Goebbels as “agreeable and interesting.” In the US edition, this became a “naive impression.”⁹ Harper & Brothers also wanted to ensure that a sharp division existed between Rommel and his peers in the German Army. It was not enough that Rommel “was not of the arrogant type of officer.” In the US edition, this was changed so that Rommel “was not of the aristocratic type of Junker officer.”¹⁰ These changes were mostly cosmetic, yet revealing. That the publisher took umbrage at the implication that Dale Carnegie had learned something from Hitler illustrates Harper & Brothers’ keen desire to maintain a simplistic and sharp distinction between the United States and Nazi Germany.

⁶ Young, *Rommel* (British edition), 45; Desmond Young, *Rommel, The Desert Fox*, (US edition), 28; “Notes on English edition of Rommel by Desmond Young” in H&R, Desmond Young 49/50 folder.

⁷ Young, *Rommel* (British edition), 86; Young, *Rommel* (US edition), 67; “Notes on English edition.”

⁸ Young, *Rommel* (British edition), 59; Young, *Rommel* (US edition), 41. “Notes on English edition.”

⁹ Young, *Rommel* (British edition), 53; Young, *Rommel* (US edition), 35. “Notes on English edition.”

¹⁰ Young, *Rommel* (British edition), 66; Young, *Rommel* (US edition), 48. “Notes on English edition.”

Or at least that was the intent. Of course, Young's representation of Germany and Nazi-era Germans was on the whole quite favorable. Part of the explanation is that Harper & Brothers' objections were sometimes based on lip service meant to mollify potential critics. In the British edition, Young openly, yet respectfully, disagreed with Eisenhower's rejection of chivalrous treatment of the German enemy. Young can hardly be accused of denigrating Eisenhower:

General Eisenhower is a wise and generous man, with whom no one would willingly disagree. Nevertheless there are some who feel that even tattered traditions may be worth preserving if, when wars are over, we still have to live in the same world.¹¹

Harper & Brothers asked Young to make it explicit that "we all despised" the Nazi flag and to conclude with: "One must agree with General Eisenhower in general terms..." When Young softened his objection but did not include the suggested phrase or reference to the Nazi flag, Harper & Brothers pressed him further:

We all wish you would add words to this effect ... "Much depends on the specific circumstances. General Eisenhower might very well have refused audience to a captured Rommel, but it may not be taken as presumptuous if I suggest that he would have honored Rommel's conduct (had they been enemies in the Libyan desert) even as we all despised the flag under which he served." We think this business of the "flag under which he served" is most important, since it is in no sense a retreat from your own position, and yet makes it abundantly clear that you were and are an absolute enemy of all that the swastika stood for. *I know this may seem redundant but we think it would be most effective in setting back the harping and obtuse sort of criticism which may be expected from certain quarters* [emphasis added].¹²

The firm's response here suggests the "flag under which he served" was important more because it would deflect "obtuse criticism" than a heartfelt belief in identifying the German

¹¹ Young, *Rommel* (British version), 160-161.

¹² "Notes on English edition" and Evan Thomas letter to Desmond Young, July 6, 1950, H&R, Desmond Young 49/50 folder.

enemy as Nazis.¹³ The firm eventually accepted a narrative with an additional sentence, but still one that omitted what it had previously felt important:

General Eisenhower is a wise and generous man, with whom no one would willingly disagree. His attitude is a perfectly logical and intelligible one. Nevertheless, there are some who feel that even tattered traditions may be worth preserving if, when wars are over, victors and vanquished still have to live and work together in the same world.

Young was able to placate the firm by burying the “flag” phrase in a lengthy footnote.¹⁴

This exemplifies a pattern in which Harper & Brothers questioned Young’s favorable assertions about Germany or asked him to revise them, but the firm was easily appeased.

When the editors asked for the source of a quote that referred to Strölin as a man with “the highest humane principles,” of whom Jews spoke with “great appreciation and reverence,”

they was satisfied when Young replied, “in a letter which I myself [have] seen.”¹⁵ To their inquiry if the other conspirators of July 1944 were “clean,” it accepted a footnote

distinguishing the “*chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*” Carl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel from the war criminal Otto von Stülpnagel.¹⁶ In the British edition, Young titled Chapter Eight,

“Such was the Enemy,” and in it claimed “the regular German Army, whatever it may have done in Poland and Russia, elsewhere fought a clean war ... a cleaner one than 1914-18.”¹⁷

Harper & Brothers requested Young change the chapter title to “Such was this [instead of the] Enemy” or simply “This Enemy.” It also questioned the assertion of a clean war

¹³ It is possible to contemplate that the editors actually did have a heartfelt belief and framed the objection in such a way to make it more palatable to Young. If that was the case, however, it would be difficult to explain why they did not object to the bulk of the book, which portrayed Nazi-era Germans and even key figures in the *Wehrmacht* favorably.

¹⁴ Young, *Rommel* (US edition), 138.

¹⁵ Young, *Rommel* (British edition), 220; Young, *Rommel* (US edition), 195. Such a letter does exist and can be found in Nunnally Johnson’s files.

¹⁶ Young, *Rommel* (British edition), 230; Young, *Rommel* (US edition), 204.

¹⁷ Young, *Rommel* (British edition), 149; This is a highly problematic statement, as if the Eastern Front was somehow ancillary to Germany’s military operations. It is but one example that underscores the book’s tendency to present a Rommel-centric version of the war.

because of a massacre against US troops at Malmédy in December 1944 and asked Young to delete the passage.¹⁸ Young indulged the firm by changing the title to “The Enemy in Africa,” but did *not* delete the reference to the regular German Army fighting a clean war.¹⁹ Provided the author denoted that the “good” Germans who fought honorably were associated with Rommel in Africa, then Harper & Brothers did not feel it necessary to mention whatever the “bad” Germans might have done in Poland or Russia. The firm may have despised what the Nazi flag stood for, but it was easily mollified concerning its initial apprehension concerning significant figures in the Third Reich.

One final point to make is about priorities. Harper & Brothers showed much greater resolution in urging Young to alter or delete what it felt were unflattering references toward the United States. A poignant example of the firm’s priorities regarding representations of Germany vis-à-vis the United States can be seen in the British edition where Young postulated the (non SS element of the) German Army in France “was regarded with grudging admiration,” by noting “their conduct is, indeed, often favourably compared with that of the American liberators.” In the American edition, the reference to American liberators was dropped whereas the admiration for the German Army was not.²⁰

It was not just American and British publishers who recognized that the “Desert Fox” could help business. Barely one month after the release of *Rommel* in the United States, General Electric seized upon the German marshal as an authoritative voice in a commercial on the popular CBS “Meet Corliss Archer” program. The commercial noted how US

¹⁸ “Notes on English edition.”

¹⁹ See also the anecdote of British General Fortune and the pity Young felt for German General von Eisebeck, both of which Harper & Brothers requested that he delete and both of which Young kept. Young, *Rommel* (British edition), 74, 90; Young, *Rommel* (US edition), 56, 71; “Notes on English edition.”

²⁰ Young, *Rommel* (British edition), 79-80; Young, *Rommel* (US edition), 60; “Notes on English edition.”

enterprise and free workers provided the electric light and power that prompted this “brilliant general – and a dangerous enemy” to lament in a voice-over:

From the moment that the overwhelming industrial capacity of the United States could make itself felt in any theatre of war, there was no longer any chance of ultimate Axis victory there ... Providing the Americans were able to bring in their material, we were bound to lose it in the end.²¹

While Rommel helped GE sell washing machines and light bulbs in the US, the largest department store in northern England, Kendals, supposed that the German marshal could sell more household merchandise to Britons. It regularly hosted Rommel-themed exhibitions (sometimes inviting Field Marshal Auchinleck) showcasing memorabilia including his personal letters and photos as it invited customers to “Follow his victorious campaigns though his own eyes.” Kendals marketed the exhibition with sizable advertisements and presumed it was speaking for all Britons by proudly declaring that “Kendals is YOUR store.”²² Rommel had gone from politicized to commercialized in just a few short years after the war. It is difficult to interpret this as cause or effect. Still, it is evidence of a shift towards a more amenable public narrative on Rommel.

The negotiations between Desmond Young and Harper & Brothers reveal that the first firm in the United States to package and transmit the Rommel hagiographic narrative did not seek to make the “Desert Fox” an icon. It did little to impose its political or moral standards onto the biography, and, perhaps most revealingly, it only embraced a *Rommel* publication when it already had strong data that indicated it would be a bestseller. It was very cognizant of the potential backlash from critics of a pro-German stance. In the view of Harper & Brothers, US consumers would accept sympathetic representation of particular

²¹ “Electric Companies Advertising Program,” H&R, Desmond Young 1951-1954 folder.

²² Advertisement, *The Manchester Guardian*, May 4, 1953, 6. See also “The Good Soldier,” *The Manchester Guardian*, May 22, 1953, 6.

Germans, provided there were clear distinctions made between them and Nazi Germany as a whole. This is another example of the recurring theme of “good” Germans and “bad” Nazis. All the firm felt it needed to do was to remove unflattering insinuations about the United States and make clear the distinction between Rommel and Nazi Germany. From there, it was just a matter of shipping the book to stores and awaiting the profits. This was precisely what happened.

Customers and Critics: Reception of Desmond Young’s *Rommel*

In analyzing the reception of *Rommel* in American and British societies, two salient conclusions can be drawn: the book was a commercial sensation and those who applauded the book generally had a favorable attitude toward Germans. On a popular level, the book was a phenomenon; it enjoyed massive sales and quickly went through multiple editions and foreign translations (including in the newly formed People’s Republic of China). The importance of attitudes toward Germans concerning the reception of *Rommel* is apparent when analyzing its critical reception, which fell into two opposing camps. The decisive factor in causing this divide were the preconceptions each group had regarding the relationship between National Socialism and Germans. Those who were committed to the notion that Germans were fundamentally responsible for the criminality perpetrated by the Third Reich condemned the book on moral grounds, whereas those who saw National Socialism as an aberration in German history praised the book for setting the historical record straight. Thus, *Rommel*’s unqualified commercial success suggests British and US positive perceptions of Germany.

By no means are copious sales alone indicative of how well an entertainment product was received or by themselves indicative of a lasting influence. Nevertheless, the sheer quantity of sales *Rommel* enjoyed, particularly for a non-fiction book, warrants attention – it

probably sold over one million copies worldwide. And many of these sales were immediate, a pattern that suggests customers anticipated Rommel's biography. Advertisements in the *Daily Express*, targeted at patriotic readership and the highest circulating paper in Britain, hailed Young's biography as "one of the greatest books of our times," and advised its readers to secure a copy quickly before they ran out.²³ Indeed, in the UK it was the bestselling book aside from Churchill's war memoirs. In the United States, the book was quickly entrenched in the *New York Times* bestseller list (it spent virtually all of March 1951, two months after its release, at number four) and sold an estimated 150,000 copies for its first edition.²⁴ The English-speaking Allies represented the core of an international fraternity of Rommel consumers. By the end of 1951, *Rommel* had been translated and published in Western Europe, Scandinavia, and China. The same was soon true for places such as Thailand and Ethiopia.²⁵ Or consider Rommel's symbolic appeal to Egyptians. When the German film *Das war unser Rommel* (*That Was Our Rommel*) was shown in Egypt during its 1954 premiere, Rommel was greeted with enthusiastic cheers when he appeared on screen. Egyptian President Mohammed Naguib and Lucie Rommel attended the event, in which Lucie was reportedly treated as a "social lioness."²⁶ These formalities suggest a strong

²³ *Daily Express* advertisements: January 18, 1950, 3; January 19, 1950, 5; and January 20, 1950, 3.

²⁴ Exact numbers are difficult to determine. Collins recorded 190,000 copies sold in 1950 alone. Harper & Brothers estimated 150,000 for the first American edition in 1951. Desmond Young claimed in 1961 that 600,000 copies had been sold excluding the American and foreign markets. Young, *All the Best Years*, 323-324; R.J. Politzer of Collins Publishers letter to Evan Thomas of Harper & Brothers, November 30, 1950, H&R, Desmond Young 1949-1950 folder. See also the correspondence between Evan Thomas and Desmond Young in H&R, Desmond Young 1951-1954 folder and "The Best Sellers," *New York Times*, April 1, 1951, 206.

²⁵ Desmond Young claims in his 1961 autobiography the book was published "into every known language, including a pirated edition in Siamese" and "was serialized in newspapers all over the world." The library catalogue WorldCat does indicate an Amharic translation published in 1968. Probably the one part of the world where Rommel never received such attention was the Soviet Union; its government, intuitions, and citizens contributed nothing to Rommel's lore. The Soviet experience during the Second World War made it all but impossible to conceive that there were gentlemanly professional officers comprising the *Wehrmacht*, which in my assessment made the folklore associated with Rommel a non-starter.

²⁶ "Egyptians Go Wild Over Marshal Rommel Widow," *Chicago Tribune*, May 18, 1954, B2.

anticipation. Even if it mostly reflected an anti-British and anti-colonial sentiment, it was another case of people interpreting Rommel's history in a way to make the past relevant for their present. The critics' charge that the biography glorified a Nazi general did not prevent Americans and Britons – or international audiences – from being enthusiastic consumers of this encomium to Rommel.

While recognizing it is difficult to gauge, let alone categorize a body as diverse as the book-buying public, there are indications beyond sales figures that the book was well received. Collins intended to showcase the positive reception of *Rommel* in British society by sending Harper & Brothers a front page story from *The Newcastle Weekly Chronicle* with an accompanying picture showing the Fathers of the Dominican Order of Newcastle all reading *Rommel* during their midday meal.²⁷ Harper & Brothers received letters that spoke well of the book. Chaplain Lieutenant Colonel Morris U. Lively wrote that it “will be my privilege to introduce his book as widely as possible to my fellow clergymen, fellow army officers, [and] others,” and offered his “sincere appreciation” to Young and Harper & Brothers for “giving this book to the world.”²⁸ Among requests for photos of Erwin Rommel and autographed copies of the book, there was a query from a Doris Wray for additional information for her son's school project.²⁹ Desmond Young also mentions a “huge and friendly fan mail,” particularly from veterans of the Western Desert, in his autobiography.³⁰ Young's *Rommel* went through multiple editions in both Great Britain and the United States

²⁷ R.J. Politzer of Collins Publishers letter to John Fischer of Harper & Brothers, March 22, 1950, H&R, Desmond Young 1949-1950 folder.

²⁸ Chaplain Lieutenant Colonel Morris U. Lively letter to Harper & Brothers, H&R, Desmond Young 1951-1954 folder.

²⁹ Various letters in H&R, Desmond Young 1951-1954 folder.

³⁰ Young, *All the Best Years*, 324.

from the 1950s until the 1980s, which suggests that the book enjoyed sustained popularity. At least among the general reading public, *Rommel* was an unqualified success.

The critical reception of *Rommel* was mixed, however. Partly this was because of the nature of the profession; the journalists and historians who reviewed it were supposed to do so with an analytical eye, pointing out strengths and weaknesses. Still, such reasoning does not give a satisfactory answer to why some critics accepted Young's sympathetic thesis while others rejected it as the glorification of a Nazi general. Instead, the salient feature that caused the divide between those reviewers who praised and those who panned the biography was which aspect of Rommel's life story they prioritized. Favorable reviewers focused on the military or the human story; those more critical were concerned mainly with the political or the criminality associated with the Nazi regime. In short, the gulf was created by their willingness, or lack thereof, to differentiate between Germans and Nazis. Those who made this distinction tended to applaud the biography and envisioned the German marshal as emblematic of the German people whose connection to National Socialism was circumstantial and aberrant. *Rommel's* detractors denied such a division between Rommel and National Socialism; they instead believed that the German marshal was intrinsically linked to the Nazi regime and its crimes – a connection that a belated turn against Hitler could not simply undo. Projecting this pattern to audiences implies their acceptance was contingent on their pre-existing attitudes toward Germany.

Favorable reviewers not only differentiated Rommel from the Nazi regime, they also highlighted Rommel's qualities as a person by contrasting them with his government. They pictured a decent German, a Nazi victim, and a man whose deeds deserved commendation – perspectives that required a sharp division between Germans and Nazis. Cleave Jones of the

Los Angeles Times noted: “We gave Erwin Rommel a bad name as a Nazi bully and tough. That was entirely wrong.” He acknowledged Rommel as a “professional soldier” who “burned Hitler’s order” and rebelled against the Nazi Regime because he “discovered real conditions in Germany.”³¹ *Commonweal* believed the author admiring, yet deemed the book “authentic” and valued the insight into the “behind-the-scenes military and political details” of Rommel’s story.³² *Newsweek*’s review highlighted Rommel as a Nazi victim. It pronounced, “The best part of Desmond Young’s biography is not Rommel in the desert, but Rommel with his wife when the streets were blocked with S.S. cars and Gestapo agents were around his house.” Underneath an accompanying picture of the German marshal, a caption read “Rommel: The Gestapo lied to him.”³³ On the other side of the Atlantic, while the *Irish Times* observed, “the author’s treatment of [Rommel] is sympathetic to the extreme,” it nevertheless concluded, “out of all this research has come the picture of a most remarkable man, whose stature has lost nothing by having legend replaced by fact.”³⁴ Lastly, Lieutenant General Sir Francis Toker, a British veteran from the desert, lauded Rommel multiple times as a “great soldier” and “upright man” who advised Hitler to disband the S.S. and seek terms from the Allies. Toker underscored Rommel as a victim of “the inmates of the German madhouse, those homicidal maniacs who murdered him.”³⁵ What is also significant in many of these sympathetic reviews is what was *not* mentioned: Rommel’s historical culpability for the rise of National Socialism. As Toker explained: “Though at one time he commanded Hitler’s bodyguard he was not a Hitler man.” To believe that Rommel could be so close to

³¹ Cleave Jones, “Rommel Myth Exposed: He Wasn’t a Nazi Bully,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 1950, B5.

³² P.V. Farrell, Review of *Rommel* by Desmond Young, *Commonweal* 53, (February 2, 1951): 428

³³ “Old-Fashioned General,” *Newsweek*, January 22, 1951, 84-86.

³⁴ “Man of War,” *Irish Times*, February 25, 1950, 6.

³⁵ Lieutenant General Sir Francis Toker, “A Great Soldier and Leader,” *The Manchester Guardian*, January 23, 1950, 6.

Hitler and attain a prominent position in the Third Reich without being a “Hitler man” necessitated a belief that most Germans were not Nazis and required a tremendous confidence in Rommel’s upstanding character.

This was the point of divergence for reviewers who censured the book: they were unwilling to disassociate Rommel from the regime he served. Even if they accepted Young’s portrayal of the German marshal as a chivalrous opponent who adhered to the rules of warfare, unfavorable reviewers still found it incredulous to represent Rommel as a principled anti-Nazi. Such a perspective suggests they perceived the German marshal through the prism of Nazi Germany. Though these reviewers found it difficult to disconnect Rommel because of their beliefs toward Nazi-era Germany, it does not follow that the veracity of their observations are somehow less valid than those such as Tucker who, perhaps naively, were eager to draw a sharp line between the German marshal and the regime he willingly served. It simply means that the inner preconceptions that shaped the perception of Rommel among these reviewers were different.

Drew Middleton of the *New York Times* believed that Germans were inherently international troublemakers and at this time was worried about the persistence of authoritarian tendencies in a defeated Germany.³⁶ During the war, the correspondent casually inserted German stereotypes in his columns and, not surprisingly given his distrust of German nationalism, wrote a scathing review of Speidel’s *Invasion 1944* by condemning it as “propaganda for a lost cause.”³⁷ In his review of *Rommel*, he probably echoed the

³⁶ Drew Middleton, *The Struggle for Germany* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1949).

³⁷ Ferdinand A. Hermens, “The Danger of Stereotypes in Viewing Germany,” in *Public Opinion Quarterly* 9, no. 4 (Winter 1945-1946): 418-427; Drew Middleton, “Generals Weren’t to Blame,” *New York Times*, November 5, 1950, 224.

sentiments of the like-minded Americans who supposed National Socialism had enjoyed support within Germany when he mused:

This reviewer finds it difficult to believe that the top Nazis, fearing the Army as they did, would have picked Rommel had they any doubts as to his independence of political outlook. Like a great many other German soldiers, Rommel only began to doubt his Fuehrer when Germany clearly was losing the war.³⁸

Middleton rejected Young's thesis because his experiences as the German correspondent for the *New York Times* led him to consider that anyone close to Hitler must have been a supporter of some sort. He still grouped Rommel together with "a great many German soldiers" who only doubted their Führer when it was obvious Germany was headed toward defeat.³⁹ Because Middleton placed a greater emphasis on these biographical facts, he interpreted the significance of Rommel's place in history differently than did the reviewers who praised the book.

Time also questioned Rommel's late turn against Hitler by stating, "The question Biographer Young never answers is how his shining hero could stomach the Nazi program as long as victory seemed possible, turned on Hitler only when defeat was certain."⁴⁰ The review in *The Spectator* asserted the book did nothing to reevaluate the important question of the relationship between Germany's generals and the Nazi regime:

[*Rommel*] will provide no answer to those who want to know how it was that a set of men, in the main honourable and chivalrous, consented to assist Hitler's march to power and conquest, and why their qualms of conscience appeared only when it was manifest that the march was going to end in disaster for Germany.⁴¹

³⁸ Drew Middleton, "Sand, Blood and General Rommel," *New York Times*, January 21, 1951, 168.

³⁹ Drew Middleton, "Sand, Blood and General Rommel," *New York Times*, January 21, 1951, 168.

⁴⁰ "Armored Knight." *Time*, January 22, 1951, 98.

⁴¹ P.J. Grigg, "General Rommel," *The Spectator*, January 27, 1950, 118-120.

Historian H.R. Trevor-Roper acknowledged Rommel was a “tactician of genius”⁴² and “a professional soldier who fought like a professional – that is cleanly.” Yet Trevor-Roper believed representing Rommel as a principled opponent of Nazism was inappropriate:

When many Germans were murdered for bravely facing these moral and political issues, it is unjust to build up, in their stead, a man who (in spite of Brigadier Young’s simple-minded picture) understood and supported both, and whose quarrel with Hitler came very late, after defeat, and on points of strategy.⁴³

Malcolm Muggeridge, an English journalist and caustic critic on Communism, similarly condemned the separation of the German general, whose anti-Hitler stand was “too little too late,” from the Nazi system. Muggeridge believed this view undercut the reeducation of Germany as “‘honour’ in the Western Desert is unrelated to unutterable dishonor at Dachau.”⁴⁴ Critical reviewers typically did not deny that Rommel fought honorably, was politically naive, or was involved in the *Attentat*. The divergence was not so much based on disagreement over biographical facts. Rather, it was that these reviewers prioritized Rommel’s service to the Nazi regime, which had brought incalculable misery upon its enemies.

At issue here was the dubiousness of celebrating someone closely connected with Nazism, regardless of his deeds. The *Contemporary Review*, a British left of center journal, acknowledged that although Rommel was a “brilliant commander,” “chivalrous as a foe,” and revolted against Hitler, he was unworthy of remembrance because he had no qualities beyond the military. He had accepted Hitler’s laurels while Germany’s military prospects

⁴² Although a number of critics were willing to concede this point, Rommel’s purported military genius did not go unchallenged. See for example, Sir Brian Horrocks, “The Rommel Myth Debunked,” *Picture Post*, April 1, 1950, 39-42.

⁴³ H.R. Trevor-Roper, “Why Should We Idolise Rommel?,” *Picture Post*, March 18, 1950, 25-29.

⁴⁴ Malcolm Muggeridge, “A Flattering and Unconvincing Portrait,” *Daily Telegraph*, January 23, 1950.

were favorable, and “many a man in those days died for a better cause.” As the German marshal had “no overall human code outside his profession,” the journal concluded: “with all due respect for a well written and magnanimous tribute to an adversary in that most romantic of all military struggles, desert warfare, we cannot attribute lasting value to it, despite its widespread success.” It was a perspective that deemed it inappropriate to disassociate the ideological aspects of the Second World War from the military, a point of view that had a strong correlation with those who were critical of Erwin Rommel.⁴⁵

As clear as the case was that Rommel was unworthy of remembrance was to these critics, responses to the Trevor-Roper’s critical review in the *Picture Post* demonstrates the issue was not cut and dry. One letter to the editor claimed that Trevor-Roper’s “insertions of ‘ifs’ and ‘he may have’” neither constituted concrete proof of his assertions nor nullified his grudging admission of Rommel’s virtues. He concluded, “we should be allowed to know the unprejudiced truth. There were other ‘good’ Germans besides General Beck,⁴⁶ and it is surely ridiculous to refuse to recognize their qualities because we are afraid of showing signs of ‘post-war softness.’”⁴⁷ Another respondent queried Trevor-Roper’s qualifications and implied that the historian was applying double standards. “I only heard of one British soldier with a conscience and he was sent to prison for a year. I refer, of course, to the brave act of Douglas Home [who refused to participate in an attack on Le Havre when Allied officials rejected a German request beforehand to evacuate French civilians]. No, sir, Rommel was,

⁴⁵ Edgar Stern-Rubarth, “Rommel,” *The Contemporary Review*, no. 1014 (June 1950): 380.

⁴⁶ General Ludwig Beck was seen as representative of the positive traditions of the German army because of his resignation as Chief of the German General Staff in August 1938 over Hitler’s plans to seize Czechoslovakia by military force. In subsequent retirement, he became one of the driving forces of the conspiracy against Hitler. He was taken into custody in the failed aftermath and shot after a failed suicide attempt. While the intent of the author is clear, Beck’s history (like Rommel’s) is considerably more complicated as he initially supported Hitler and he resigned because he thought Germany would lose if war broke out over Czechoslovakia, not because of moral or philosophical reasons.

⁴⁷ Martin Brooke-Taylor, “This Rommel Myth,” *Picture Post*, April 15, 1950, 51.

as a general and a soldier, one of the finest characters of the war.”⁴⁸ A third defender of the book declared the “Hate the Germans pack are once again in full cry!” and those “petty minds” were incapable of comprehending chivalry and why “to thousands of British ex-servicemen Rommel will remain a hero.”⁴⁹ The rationale in these rejoinders, other “good” Germans, comparing the Allied conduct of war with the German, and the valuation of military ethos, et al., mirror the mindsets of others who viewed Rommel positively and each was consistent with a perspective that did not attach responsibility to Nazi atrocities to the German military, which was the thrust of Trevor-Roper’s censure. Mostly, these respondents demonstrate that people did not just passively accept what they were told, even by an ostensible authority in a historian.

There were also consumer responses that showed their disagreement and concerns with the Young’s representation of a German general. A Briton approved of Trevor-Roper’s “counter-barrage” and lamented, “if ever the champions of the dormant military caste raise their heads in Germany, no small blame should be laid at the feet of Brigadier Desmond Young.”⁵⁰ American Harry S. Green sent several fiery condemnations to Harper & Brothers, Nunnally Johnson of Twentieth Century-Fox, and the British Embassy. Green, a man with strong patriotic passions, believed that the “hokum” glorifying “this inhuman military and personal monster” was damaging his county and its institutions; he cited “unregenerate and unredeemable Nazis” active in West German affairs working with the US (and also was irate that the book overshadowed the roles of US heroes).⁵¹ And then there is Erich Ollenhauer, the Deputy chairman of the German Social Democratic Party. He noted it was odd to see

⁴⁸ Dennis N. Fine, “Rommel Defended,” *Picture Post*, April 1, 1950, 43

⁴⁹ H. James, “Hate and Hero Worship,” *Picture Post*, April 1, 1950, 43.

⁵⁰ R. M. D. Hall, “If Militarism Revives,” *Picture Post*, April 1, 1950, 43.

⁵¹ Harry S. Green letter to Harper & Brothers, February 11, 1951, H&R, Desmond Young 1951-1954 folder.

Rommel the topic of a British debate as “a German who feels that it is essential to eradicate the spirit of militaristic nationalism from Germany.” Ollenhauer continued: “it is going rather too far in the present international situation to deal with one of the outstanding representatives of the Third Reich’s war machine, as if the issue were simply one of fair play in a sporting contest.”⁵² The international character of these responses and their association of Rommel with the “military caste” and “Third Reich’s war machine” succinctly illustrate that it was not nationality that determined where the fault line in the debate over Rommel, rather their understanding of origins and liability for the rise of the Nazi regime.

Softening Attitudes towards Nazi-Era Germans

Once Germany surrendered in 1945, the potency and prevalence of the Germans-as-Nazis narrative quickly declined. Americans and Britons were better disposed toward Germans, and policymakers quickly began to re-evaluate the wisdom of harsh occupation policies in light of the wartime devastation of Germany. Nurturing Germans, so the argument went, would ensure the best prospects for the eventual reconstruction of German political life on a democratic basis. Much of the older postwar literature saw this development through the lens of foreign policy and attributed it to the Cold War that saw the public’s attention shift from defeated Nazi Germany to the new threat posed by the Soviet Union.⁵³ More recent literature has persuasively challenged the primacy of the Cold War in this process by pointing out that this trend had already begun before relations deteriorated

⁵² “Opinions of Rommel – By a British and German Politician,” *Picture Post*, April 1, 1950, 43. The British politician offered the trenchant observation that too many people deluded themselves in thinking that decent Germans (like Rommel) could not be supporters of Hitler and many of Hitler’s opponents could not be anti-democratic.

⁵³ Manfred Jonas, *The United States and Germany: A Diplomatic History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Frank A. Ninkovich, *Germany and the United States: The Transformation of the German Question since 1945* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995); Carolyn Eisenberg, *Drawing the Line: The American Decision to Divide Germany, 1944–1949* (Cambridge, England, 1996); Anne Deighton, *The Impossible Peace: Britain, the Division of Germany, and the Origins of the Cold War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

between the US and USSR and by highlighting non-ideological factors such as gender, culture, race, and personal contact between Americans and Germans that facilitated better understandings and genuine relationships.⁵⁴ While I do not discount the importance of Cold War antagonisms in fomenting a favorable socio-political context for the positive reception of *Rommel*, the evidence available suggests a direct causation is overly reductionist. Critics such as Middleton and Muggeridge were cognizant of the perceived Soviet Communist threat, yet they rejected what they believed was a whitewashing of Rommel's Nazi past. Overemphasizing the Cold War also ignores the element of continuity in the unfolding of Rommel's reputation; the fascination Americans and Britons had with the "Desert Fox" stemmed from the military and had existed before the breakdown of the Grand Alliance between Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States. It is a complex process that deserves a closer examination to better grasp the myriad factors that made Americans and Britons better disposed toward Germans, which in turn influenced how people viewed Rommel.

One of the reasons the hegemony of anti-German narratives quickly broke apart after the war's conclusion was that the Western Allies never succeeded in shaping coherent public attitudes toward Nazi Germany during the war itself. As mentioned in Chapter Three, attitudes hardened, but these were not necessarily representative of a fundamental reappraisal of deeply rooted mindsets toward Germany. Even at the peak of their influence in winter 1944-1945, harsh-peace advocates worried that the public was not committed to keeping

⁵⁴ Goedde, *GIs and Germans*; Timothy L. Schroer, *Recasting Race after World War II: Germans and African Americans in American-Occupied Germany* (Boulder: University of Colorado, 2007); Detlef Junker, ed., *The United States and Germany in the Era of the Cold War: A Handbook, 2 vols.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Christopher Knowles, "Winning the Peace: The British in Occupied Germany, 1945-1948," (PhD diss., King's College London, 2014).
https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/files/33449326/2014_Knowles_Christopher_1069327_thesis.pdf

Germany weak and the backlash against the proposed punitive Morgenthau Plan put them on the defensive.⁵⁵ Poll data show that three-quarters of Americans during the war consistently considered the Nazi government as opposed to the German people to be their “chief enemy.”⁵⁶ Americans and Britons believed in the cause of defeating Germany, yet argued among themselves why that cause was just, what to do with Germany after the war was over, and in the main lacked historical awareness of National Socialism’s connection to German society. As historian Michaela Hoenicke-Moore cogently points out, it was in retrospect that “the Nazis and Adolf Hitler became a symbol of evil incarnate and World War II the ‘Good War’ – partly because it acquired a moral quality it lacked at the time.”⁵⁷

The lack of a crystallized vision of Nazi Germany accounts for the range of contradictory attitudes Allied soldiers had toward their enemy counterparts. Many American officers and GIs accepted their *Wehrmacht* opponents as professional (as opposed to politicized) combatants, whereas many others expressed general contempt for their failure to take responsibility for the atrocities committed by the Third Reich.⁵⁸ The War Department, concerned with these divergent attitudes, conducted numerous studies in the war’s immediate aftermath and found that “problem attitudes” were common among military personnel who indicated sympathy for Nazi-German views. One study in Spring 1946 found that “one-third of the enlisted men and one-fourth of the officers say the Germans were partly or wholly right in treating the Jews as they did” and concluded most US military personnel “*do not clearly understand the struggle for democratic ideals and practices as opposed to those of*

⁵⁵ Casey, “The Campaign to Sell a Harsh Peace for Germany to the American Public, 1944-1948.”

⁵⁶ Gallup, *Gallup Poll*, 337, 356; *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (Autumn 1944): 448; Henry H. Field and Louise M. Patten, “If the American People Made the Peace,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (Winter 1944-1945): 500-512.

⁵⁷ Hoenicke-Moore, *Know Your Enemy*, 341.

⁵⁸ Linderman, *The World within War*.

Nazism” [emphasis in original].⁵⁹ British views were similarly in flux. British diplomat Harold Nicolson, who was sympathetic to the tales of destruction and despair in Germany he heard, presciently wondered, “how far the mood of hatred induced by Buchenwald [a concentration camp] will be succeeded by a wave of pity.”⁶⁰ According to historian David French, “Most [British] soldiers found it impossible to maintain a sustain hatred of the enemy. ... the image of the enemy as an inhuman brute rarely survived first contact with him, especially if he was a prisoner. ... A feeling of grudging respect was much more common.”⁶¹ The British occupation forces were ordered not to fraternize, yet did so anyway and many of those who came into contact with Germans saw them as individuals who shared many of the same values, especially when contrasted with the encounters with Soviet soldiers and refugees from East Europe.⁶² The British historian Michael Howard, then an aged 19 newly commissioned officer, fell in love for the first time with a German woman and wrote to his mother, “I would rather spend my time talking to a pleasant and intelligent German than a stupid and uncongenial Englishman.”⁶³ During the 1940s, Americans and Britons experienced a range of similar messages that identified Germans as Nazis and historical troublemakers during the Second World War. Nonetheless many chose not to embrace it.

Another factor in softening attitudes were the soldiers, journalists, and administrators who entered Germany and soon discovered the country bore little resemblance to the militarized stereotypes portrayed in wartime propaganda. The absence of young men encountered by GIs once they set foot in Germany, due to high casualty rates and the large

⁵⁹ Taken from Hoenicke-Moore, *Know Your Enemy*, 337.

⁶⁰ Nigel Nicolson, ed., *Harold Nicolson Diaries and Letters*, vol. 2, *The War Years, 1939-1945* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), 461.

⁶¹ French, “You Cannot Hate the Bastard Who is Trying to Kill You...,” 8.

⁶² Knowles, “Winning the Peace.”

⁶³ Michael Howard, *Otherwise Occupied: Letters Home from the Ruins of Nazi Germany*, (Tiverton: Old Street Publishing, 2010), 287.

numbers held in Allied POW camps at the end of the war, meant that US GIs encountered a preponderance of women, old men, and children living in a landscape devastated by war. Historian Petra Goedde argues that this peculiar gender imbalance was an important factor inhibiting the willingness to enforce a harsh occupation policy and helping Americans reconceptualize the German populace as an emasculated nation unwilling to make war. According to Goedde's research, as early as 1944 GIs gave chocolate to German children, entered into relationships with German women, and ignored the official ban on fraternization (which was rescinded by summer 1945 – just a few months after the war). Fraternization was more than just sex. It was an avenue for American GIs to step into the roles vacated by absent German men, that is as providers and protectors for the German women they dated and then more figuratively for the German communities they had forged ties with. As occupation soldiers and officials encountered German women and children struggling in a devastated land marked with ruined buildings and food shortages, perceptions and attitudes changed. Postwar Germany shed its aggressive masculine identity and assumed a more pacific and feminized image, one that prompted many Americans – including President Harry S. Truman after his July 1945 visit to Potsdam and Berlin – to perceive Germans as more victims than villains. This does not deny that there was an overall ambivalence in US attitudes and some who complained about the coddling of Nazis. Nevertheless, Goedde's overall point that the direct contact between GIs and Germans was an important catalyst in the process in which many ordinary Americans and policy makers altered their perceptions of Germans is convincing.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Petra Goedde, *GIs and Germans*. Maria Höhn, *GIs and Fräuleins: The German-American Encounter in 1950s West Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) is a useful complement in that it focuses more on the German perspective, albeit at a later chronological date. For a similar perspective of British encounters with Germans, see Knowles, "Winning the Peace."

The imagery of devastation and the pathetic state of many Germans (particularly women and children) was not confined to occupation troops and officials. Soon some journalists turned their attention away from Nazi atrocities to German misery during the winter of 1945-46. As early as September, *The Economist* depicted a Germany desolated in “misery, disease and starvation.”⁶⁵ *Time* reported: “Thousands of shivering, tired Germans lugged their bundles of wood to cold, bombed houses. Hospitals were crowded. Because the patients were undernourished, many died.”⁶⁶ British media mogul Lord Beveridge asserted as early as January 1946 that “the conditions of life of the German population of the British Zone are intolerable” and that British policy was “fit only for a totalitarian state” in his mass circulated *Urgent Message From Germany*, which showcased the misery in postwar Germany.⁶⁷ Ordinary Americans also responded to Germany’s perceived need. Records of CARE, a privately funded relief organization founded in November 1945 to aid a decimated Europe, indicated that Germany and Austria received 80% of all packages purchased by Americans. A 1949 CARE assessment concluded that “the greatest victim of that war was Germany itself.”⁶⁸ Britons responded similarly. Between December 1945 and May 1949, one million food parcels were sent to German families.⁶⁹

Once peaceful relations were reestablished, it was easier for the former adversaries to recognize what they had in common. As with the US-German POW encounter, race was another factor that fostered sympathetic views. In Europe, at least from the perspective of the Western Allies, the war was framed from the perspective of ideology and values. In the

⁶⁵ “A Policy for the Ruhr,” *The Economist* 49, no. 5324 (September 8, 1945): 321.

⁶⁶ “Policies & Principles: Winter of Discontent,” *Time Magazine*, December 17, 1945.

⁶⁷ Lord Beveridge, *An Urgent Message from Germany* (London: Pilot Press, 1946), 2, 15-16.

⁶⁸ Hoenicke-Moore, *Know Your Enemy*, 338.

⁶⁹ Ramsden, *Don’t Mention the War*, 244.

Pacific, as John Dower's excellent study of American images of the Japanese shows, there was a link between racial thinking and the conduct of war.⁷⁰ Many American GIs found a familiar culture and felt at home more so in Germany than in any other country where they served.⁷¹ In November 1945, just six months after the end of the war, a US Army survey of its soldiers revealed that nearly 80 percent (!) of respondents had a favorable impression of Germans and 56 percent had spent time "talking" with German girls.⁷² Age was also a factor that facilitated feelings of familiarity. One biographical study of twelve British military and civilian administrators in occupied Germany concluded the four young officers examined had common experiences:

Inevitably, as young men, they had greater involvement with Germans than their senior officers, both through their work and socially. Personal contacts of all kinds, including friendships and sexual relations with German women, and in [Jan] Thexton's case, marriage, led them to see Germans as 'people like us', rather than in terms of the stereotypes prevalent during the war.⁷³

As historian Richard Bessel aptly put it in his study of Germany in 1945: "It did not take very long before the occupation forces were sleeping with the enemy."⁷⁴

The point here is that there were many factors that figured into how Americans and Britons made sense of Nazi-era Germans. The sense of familiarity is a common theme that inspired improved attitudes and this ought to be emphasized as Young portrayed the domestic side of Rommel, which prompted Auchinleck to appreciate how simple and homely

⁷⁰ Dower, *War Without Mercy*.

⁷¹ US journalist Julian Bach Jr. wryly noted in his 1946 *America's Germany* that main reason for American sympathy for Germans was that they had to go to France to get there. Paul Fussell, author of the influential *Great War and Modern Memory* and someone who could not be accused of jingoism, also wrote that during the war GIs had a noticeably negative attitude toward the French more so than the Germans.

⁷² Earl F. Ziemke, *The U.S. Army in the Occupation of Germany 1944-1946* (Washington: Center of Military History United States Army, 2003) 327.

⁷³ Knowles, "Winning the Peace," 248.

⁷⁴ Richard Bessel, *Germany 1945: From War to Peace* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 205.

his former adversary was in contrast to the stereotypical Junker officer.⁷⁵ And there is the basic fact that Young's biography – a well written and trustworthy source – had unequivocally informed audiences that Rommel had never been a member of the Nazi Party and the propaganda of him leading Stormtrooper raids was nonsense. Given how the majority of the US public had throughout the war responded that the German government rather than the German people was the chief enemy, it did not require a great leap of logic for Americans and Britons to accept Young's representation, especially since it was acknowledged that Rommel had refused to carry out Hitler's criminal orders.

Just how important was the Cold War then? It is difficult to say. Measuring public opinion is hard enough. Trying to account for which factors are more important than others is even harder. With the case of the reception history of Erwin Rommel, there is hardly any direct evidence when it comes to the Cold War factor. I have read hundreds of assessments made by contemporary journalists, public commentators, pundits, military personnel, et al., and I have only come across one positive assessment of Rommel in connection with the Cold War, whereas there are several detractors of Rommel who cite Cold War logic. As people who thought about the issue of Rommel's significance and recorded their thoughts couched their reasoning in factors not directly connected with the Cold War, I am inclined to assess its influence as indirect, albeit important.

⁷⁵ Young, *Rommel*, 9-10. Historian Alison Landsberg's theory of "prosthetic memories" is interesting to consider in this respect as she theorizes that people, regardless of race, nationality, or gender can share collective memories and thus assimilate as personal experience historical events that they themselves did not experience. Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

Such an approach helps to account for the continuities in Rommel's reputation. The "Desert Fox" had *already* possessed a military allure that prompted admiration and respect even though he was an enemy. Clifford judged him to be the hero of the African Campaign and the *Manchester Guardian* commented on the "strange-hero worship." The Rommel myth has its roots with military themed ideals. It was not a prerequisite for Germany to be a political-military ally for Americans and Britons to admire him.

Continuity cut both ways. As per Rommel's obituaries in October 1944, he was identified as a "fanatical Nazi" who once slept in front of Hitler's door. The association of Rommel with the Nazi regime did not automatically go away with the news that Rommel was involved in the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. It persisted when British and US foreign policy turned from a harsh occupation to reconciliation characterized by Secretary of State George Marshall's European Recovery Program, popularly known as the Marshall Plan, which was conceived in 1947 and implemented the following year. Scholars debate the best date to assert the Cold War began, though there is consensus it was underway by 1948 with the Berlin Blockade.⁷⁶ And yet portrayals of Rommel were still decidedly negative for some time afterwards. As noted in Chapter Six, *Invasion 1944*, released in late 1949, was widely panned as a transparent apology and in 1950 the *New York Times* still articulated that "Rommel conspired against Hitler but his heart belonged to him."⁷⁷

Mostly, it is not easy to reconcile the objections of people such as Drew Middleton, Malcom Muggeridge, Bosley Crowther, Hugh Trevor Roper, and others who were committed anti-communists and worried about Soviet expansion, with their criticisms, if not outright

⁷⁶ Journalist Walter Lippman gave the phrase "Cold War" wide currency as with the release of his book with the same name in 1947.

⁷⁷ H.R. Trevor-Roper, "Hitler's Generals Create a Dangerous Myth," *New York Times*, February 19, 1950, SM6.

condemnation, of the 1950s Rommel representations that they perceived as a whitewashing of Nazi Germany. The evidence is there that just because there was a perceived need to integrate West Germany into an alliance and even rearm the Germans, it did not automatically follow that Americans or Britons were willing to sweep the historical importance of Nazi criminality and those they deemed responsible for it under the rug. The presence and persistence of Rommel detractors needs to be accounted for, which is something monocausal Cold War explanations for the shift in attitudes toward Rommel (and I would posit Germany as a whole) have a hard time doing.

What I think is the best way to characterize the Cold War's influence is that it dissuaded and slowed down the development of a thorough and critical historiography that assessed the issue that was never resolved during the war: the connections between the German people and the Nazi regime. After reading scores of contemporary assessments of Rommel, what struck me the most about them was the lack of historical awareness of how the Nazi regime functioned and its connection to German society. It was not that these writers were naïve, did not try to engage the topic objectively, were not well read, or lacked intellectual curiosity. Rather, they put a lot of confidence in the inchoate state of contemporary historiography, which had an orthodoxy that Rommel was a member of the German Resistance. It would take years, decades even, before historians chipped away at myths that the German people did not know of the Holocaust and had been coerced by a totalitarian regime. Perhaps they should have known better. But the reality is that educated people who were appalled by Nazi criminality such as Desmond Young, Charles Marshall, "Artifex," Basil Liddell Hart, and others thought about the issue, researched it, and concluded that a distinction ought to be made between Rommel and the Nazi Regime. If

historian John L. Schell was correct in that the anti-German climate was built upon “an ignorant animus” rather than a thorough historical understanding,⁷⁸ then it would have made it easier and even logical for people to make such a distinction between decent Germans and bad Nazis, which is perhaps what they wanted to believe. It was an unsettling intellectual prospect that the masses of ordinary people in a civilized society could be culpable and complicit in genocide, to say nothing of a specific person such as a GI who dated a German woman.

The lack of historical awareness of Nazi Germany in British and US societies is a working hypothesis that I will return to again in later chapters. More scholarly study here, especially on how societal understandings of Germany and the Second World War changed over time, would be a fruitful endeavor and challenge some prevailing assumptions. In any event, lack of historical awareness is a tidy fit for what appears to be the strongest correlation to draw upon the available evidence: when people tried to make sense of Rommel’s place in history, they placed a primacy on what they believed was his role and function in the Nazi Regime and the destruction it inflicted upon the world. Recognizing the poor state of historical knowledge also allows for a more nuanced assessment of the Cold War’s influence as an enabling factor as opposed to *the* reason.

Attributing too much influence on the Cold War misses the mark of what made the “Desert Fox” a military idealization and why he has been the subject of so many books, movies, board games, and general fascination from Americans and Britons in the first place. Young’s Rommel was a reprise. He had come to this conclusion in 1942 and had framed his understanding of Rommel through a military lens. More attention ought to be paid to the

⁷⁸ Schnell, *Wartime Origins of the East-West Dilemma Over Germany*, 13.

military sphere to understanding the reputation of Rommel. Historian Gerald Linderman concluded that during the war, the combat between Americans and Germans was waged according to the “rules,” even if it was bitter and vicious. GIs made distinctions between professional soldiers, who were “decent fighting men,” and the SS, who were deemed perpetrators of atrocity and associated with Nazi fanaticism and thus subject to harsh treatment.⁷⁹ If a nineteen year old US rifleman could hold the view that German soldiers were “boys like us,” then that helps explain the contemporary assessment given at the beginning of this chapter that concluded 80 percent of British society felt it did “no harm” to admire Rommel since the war he fought in the desert “was a clean, straight, dispassionate war with no Gestapo, no politics, no persecuted civilians, no ruined homes.” That 80 percent estimate is interesting as it matches the percentage of US soldiers polled in occupied Germany who had a favorable impression of Germans. Digging a little deeper into that poll reveals of those US soldiers responding in November 1945, less than half (43 percent) blamed the Germans for the war and fewer (25 percent) alleged the German people were responsible for the concentration camp atrocities.⁸⁰ That polling result suggests while there may not have been an obvious market for Young’s biography, a crucial precondition for its success had already been set in motion years before it was published.

⁷⁹ Linderman, *The World within War*, 90-142.

⁸⁰ Ziemke, *The U.S. Army in the Occupation of Germany*, 327. The source does not state who did they blame. During the war, Americans distinguished between the German people and the Nazi government, presumably these US soldiers were also making that distinction.

Chapter 9

Rommel as a Celluloid Hero: Memory Making on the American Silver Screen

The second of the three principal revivers of the Rommel myth was US filmmaker Nunnally Johnson, who was the creative force behind the romanticized 1951 motion picture *The Desert Fox: The Story of Rommel*.¹ This motion picture was a huge commercial success and was periodically featured on network television well into the 1970s, making it the most visible and widely accessible of the hagiographic portrayals of Rommel. It also resurrected James Mason's career as a debonair British actor for his memorable performance of the German marshal.² In this chapter I set out to examine three themes. First, I pay particular attention to how Johnson attempted to make sense of Nazi Germany and how this was manifested in his portrayal of Rommel as a romanticized figure. This evidentiary reconstruction, based on documents and correspondence in Johnson's files, shows that the filmmaker strongly believed his creation was historically authentic. Second, I analyze the authenticity of the portrayal of Rommel in *The Desert Fox*. While it is easy to conclude the film was more mythical than historical, it does not follow that this was Johnson's intent. When Twentieth Century-Fox film mogul Darryl Zanuck boasted, "We are only saying about Rommel exactly what history said ... Every movement in our picture can be authenticated by existing documents and testimony at the Nuremberg trials," he exemplified the filmmakers'

¹ Typically the director is best seen as the creative force behind a motion picture. However, for this particular film, there is a conspicuous lack of input from director Henry Hathaway in Twentieth Century-Fox's internal correspondence. Johnson wrote the initial screenplay, conferred with Desmond Young and Darryl Zanuck as to how best to revise the script, and from there shaped not just the film's storyline, but the crucial decisions of how Rommel and other Nazi-era Germans were to be represented.

² James Mason's career was at its nadir when he asked Zanuck if he could play the role of Rommel. Zanuck was told, "Mason is through. Can't have Mason," but eventually decided to cast the British actor anyway. "Recollections of Nunnally Johnson, Oral History Transcript," interview by Tom Stempel, (Los Angeles: Oral History Program UCLA, 1969), 284-285, 295.

belief that they were recreating history rather than art.³ Third, I consider how Johnson's representation of Germany mirrored the selective memories many Germans adopted that either mitigated or even exculpated their knowledge and complicity of the machinery of destruction during the Nazi era; that is, Twentieth Century-Fox created a representation of the Third Reich that was nearly as charitable as those made by German apologists themselves. The parallels suggest that nationality is not necessarily decisive when making sense of wars and enemies. It is further evidence that the primary link between Rommel's admirers (and similarly for his detractors) in Germany, Great Britain, and the United States was the similarity of assumptions about Nazi era Germans.

“Shakespearean material”: Johnson's Portrayal of Rommel

Rommel evinces an American persona in the film. Hollywood has often portrayed the German *Wehrmacht* as professional and honest soldiers in movies such as *The Longest Day* (1962) and *The Bridge at Remagen* (1969), but James Mason's performance of Erwin Rommel is different. He is witty, charming, and devoted to aspects outside of the military – character traits that are not associated with German soldiers. It was an aberrant American film typology. As per Johnson, this was intentional:

When I've done pictures which involved conflicting forces, *I have tried to imagine all of them doing exactly what Americans would do*, and I remember once I was very much impressed by something Ludwig Bemelmans said – “There are no bad people, just bad governments.” ... People in general are about the same. There are so many bastards, so many cowards, so many brutes, so many decent guys ... the last thing I want to do is a picture in which they are all Preminger or Peter Lorre ... we've got bastards to equal any bastards the Germans ever had. [emphasis added].⁴

³ For example, Darryl Zanuck letter to Charlie Einfeld, October 19, 1951 in Rudy Behlmer (ed), *Memo From Darryl F. Zanuck: The Golden Years at Twentieth Century-Fox* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 203-204.

⁴ Nora Johnson, *Flashback: Nora Johnson on Nunnally Johnson* (New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1979), 222. The author (the screenwriter's daughter) specifically listed *The Desert Fox* as a film in which the screenwriter adopted this formula. This approach was also evident in Johnson's representation of Gestapo officer Major Diessen (played by Otto Preminger) in *The Pied Piper*, who discovers his humanity at the end when he asks the English protagonist to take his Jewish niece to safety in England.

This quote exemplifies the mindset of those who accepted portrayals of Rommel as a “good” German: people are people whether they lived in the democratic United States or Nazi Germany. It was their actions, not their associations, that made them bastards or decent guys.

Johnson’s inspiration for making the film was fundamentally professional. An Academy Award nominee for best screenplay in the acclaimed *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), and a filmmaker who had an eye for turning bestsellers into movies, he immediately recognized the lucrative potential of Desmond Young’s *Rommel*. “I think we should lose no time in buying it,” Johnson wrote Zanuck. What was crucial for Johnson’s eagerness was Rommel’s personal story, which he felt was “all there” and made the German marshal a compelling protagonist.⁵ Nearly twenty years later, Johnson still exhibited enthusiasm when asked about the project: “Rommel was Shakespearean material ... That material is just so good, still so good ... I don’t even pretend that I got anywhere near the level that it deserved.”⁶ *Rommel* was critical in changing Johnson’s horizons of understanding; he noted to Zanuck that Rommel’s military career and other stuff were “available in a dozen different books.”⁷

Johnson envisioned the former enemy as a captivating protagonist for American audiences because the filmmaker believed that the German marshal could and should be distinguished from the Nazi regime he served, that is, “there are no bad people, just bad governments.” Professionally delineating Germans from Nazis was not a novel experience

⁵ Nunnally Johnson letter to Darryl Zanuck, February 14, 1950. Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC. Johnson had acquired the British version of the book from an acquaintance who queried about the biography’s prospects for the silver screen.

⁶ “Recollections of Nunnally Johnson Oral History Transcript,” 184, 293-294.

⁷ Nunnally Johnson letter to Darryl Zanuck, February 14, 1950. Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC.

for Johnson as he had cast a sympathetic German officer in 1943 when writing the screenplay for *The Moon is Down*. When asked if this caused him any problems, Johnson replied:

No. It was played by Cedric Hardwicke [who] put it right. He said, “I suppose it’s like a Jesuit who doesn’t really believe in the Church.” I said, “That would do it. He was a soldier. He did his job. But he didn’t believe in what he was doing.”

He then remarked that Rommel was “simply a gentleman soldier” who “didn’t believe what was going on back in Berlin.”⁸ Johnson may have found this dichotomy easier as he saw in Rommel in effect an American character lurking beneath the German uniform. As he put it to Twentieth Century-Fox’s President Spyros Skouras:

In the course of time this particular soldier began to awaken to the evil in his leader. Being neither the brightest nor the most decisive of men, it took him longer than it did a few others, but at least he was one of the small minority that not only recognized the dangers in Hitler and Hitlerism but who moved to destroy both. He well knew that such a decision laid him open to the charges of treason and disloyalty to his own country, but in spite of this, once he was *convinced of the rightness of this decision*, he went through with it. He failed, as did others who sought to save their country from the consequences of Hitlerism, and paid for it with his life. *Such a man, we hold, is entitled to an examination regardless of his uniform. At the bottom of the American character as well as its national policy is a fundamental enmity to dictatorship in any form* [emphasis added].⁹

Johnson believed Rommel had acted righteously and in keeping with the “American character,” a perspective that interpreted Rommel’s resistance as virtuous rather than as sordid military opportunism as critics had argued during the 1940s. Desmond Young, who had similarly projected iconic English traits onto the German marshal, was particularly influential in Johnson’s assessment. Reflecting years later, Johnson remarked, “I believed every word [Young] said.”¹⁰

⁸ “Recollections of Nunnally Johnson Oral History Transcript,” 183-184.

⁹ Nunnally Johnson letter to Spyros Skouras, February 26, 1951. Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC.

¹⁰ “Recollections of Nunnally Johnson Oral History Transcript,” 300.

Johnson's politics, or lack thereof, promoted such identification. Politically it is difficult to categorize the filmmaker because he was proud of his non-political nature and not being a "joiner" as he put it. When asked if the anti-Communist investigations of the late 1940s in Hollywood affected him, Johnson replied, "No. No, I've never been political. I have sympathies which would be called liberal."¹¹ Conceiving of Johnson having political sympathies rather than passions is apt when we examine his response to the political connections people raised with *The Grapes of Wrath*:

They're going to hit this one with that kind of stuff. After all [executive producer Darryl] Zanuck is a Republican. He always had been. I'm a Southern White Methodist. I have very little to do with politics so there was never any feeling of a picture which was aiming to do anything more than to show the plight of some very unfortunate people.¹²

When considering the emphasis on Rommel's humanity and tragic ending from the protagonist and his family's perspective, *The Desert Fox* offers a parallel in which Johnson focused on the plight of unfortunate people instead of making a political statement.

There is something else that can be derived from this quote: the first sentence implies that his non-political nature may have prevented him from understanding the political passions others had. Johnson was told many times and was well aware of the argument that Rommel was an unworthy subject for a motion picture. In his letter to Zanuck in which Johnson explained his enthusiasm about Rommel being "Shakespearean material," he noted: "I have been reminded that however brilliant Rommel was as a military man and however admirable as a soldier, he was still part of a vicious anti-Semitic group that rose up with Hitler."¹³ To take another example, he could not comprehend the political controversy over

¹¹ "Recollections of Nunnally Johnson Oral History Transcript," 263.

¹² "Recollections of Nunnally Johnson Oral History Transcript," 122.

¹³ Nunnally Johnson letter to Darryl Zanuck, February 14, 1950. Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC.

1947's *The Senator Was Indiscreet*, a comedy that parodied corruption in Washington, during the early Cold War era when many Americans were sensitive about the trustworthiness of their government representatives. When his partners at Universal-International expressed their concern for the investigation of Communist influence in Hollywood, Johnson characterized their worries as “mumbles.” When audiences and theater owners did not appreciate the humor in the film, Johnson was baffled and blamed “shrills” such as the gossip columnist Hedda Hopper for crusading against it. In 1969, when asked whether at the time he had any indication he would encounter such problems, Johnson replied, “Never.” In another revealing incident from his daughter's memoir, during the FBI's investigation into alleged Communist infiltration into Hollywood, an investigator asked Johnson if he had ever been a Communist. He leaned and whispered, “We're not allowed to tell.” This was a man who consistently exhibited an inability to appreciate political perspectives he did not share.¹⁴

Befitting his emphasis on the human tragedy of Rommel, Johnson wrote a screenplay that portrayed the German marshal as a protagonist with whom ordinary Americans could easily identify. The only trademark Germanic quality the Rommel played by British movie star James Mason had was his uniform. All the negative stereotypes associated with German culture, so replete in wartime representations, were excised; Mason never goosesteps, never speaks with a guttural accent, and never acts with the arrogance that marked the Rommel played by Erich von Stroheim in *Five Graves to Cairo* (1943). Johnson did not stop here in sculpting Rommel's image, he presented a hero with no blemishes. The German marshal in *The Desert Fox* is utterly devoted to his wife and son, is friendly and chit-chats with his

¹⁴ Tom Stempel, *Screenwriter: The Life and Times of Nunnally Johnson* (San Diego: A.S. Barnes, 1980), 118-124; “Recollections of Nunnally Johnson Oral History Transcript,” 249-253. Johnson, *Flashback*, 155-157.

troops (the historical Rommel was notably taciturn), is cordial and proper in conduct with his peers (whereas he was often argumentative and tactless), and exhibits no vices on or off screen. When asked about Mason's performance, Friedrich von Mellenthin,¹⁵ a former German general who knew Rommel and would in time strongly defend his character, admitted it was "altogether too polite."¹⁶ The influential *New York Times* film critic Bosley Crowther summed up Johnson's portrayal well when he wrote, "Mr. Johnson and his director, Henry Hathaway, have presented a type which, except for the uniform, is indistinguishable from all the familiar and conventional representations of the heroic officers on 'our' side."¹⁷

Perhaps the most effective means of disarming audiences and eliciting sympathy from them was Johnson's domestication of Rommel's image. Several crucial scenes take place at his home in Herrlingen, which allowed the filmmaker to portray Rommel as a strong family man as well as an honorable soldier. Lucie, played by veteran actress Jessica Tandy, is not just relegated to a supportive good wife as she plays a central role in Rommel's turn against Hitler. Rommel initially rebuffs the advances of resistance representative Karl Strölin by claiming, "I am a soldier not a politician," until Strölin mentions that Lucie confided to him sarcastically how her husband really felt about "our sainted leader and his glorious reign over Germany." Rommel's struggle between his duty as a soldier and his conscience, the film's dramatic center, is played out in scenes with his wife when he tells her: "It's a great, dreadful, terrible thing [Strölin] proposes ... I didn't say he wasn't right." It was a means of

¹⁵ Mellenthin served as an intelligence officer on Rommel's staff in the African Campaign from June 1941 to September 1942. He authored *Panzer Battles: A Study of the Employment of Armour in the Second World War* (London: Cassell, 1955), a well known tactical study that is found in many of the world's premier military academies. A passionate defense of Rommel's character is found in his 1977 book *German Generals of World War II: As I Saw Them* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press).

¹⁶ Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles*, 45 note 6.

¹⁷ Bosley Crowther, "Curious Twist," *New York Times*, October 28, 1951, 89.

portraying the vulnerability of the protagonist; for all his brilliance as a soldier, he had to turn to his wife for guidance. Indeed, one event that fortifies his resolve was acting upon Lucie's advice to do what he felt was "right." When the conspiracy fails and certain death from a Nazi show trial confronts him, the on-screen Rommel still aims to pursue the righteous course to defy Hitler and face the docket. It is only the threat of *Sippenhaft*, in which his family would share in the punishment, that compels the hero to acquiesce to poison. And the film's conclusion with Lucie staring helplessly out the window as her husband is escorted into the back of an SS vehicle emotively portrayed Rommel as a victim torn away from his loving family. The overall effect of the tender exchanges between Mason and Tandy, and the presentation of a stable and contented middle-class family accentuated the gentleman in the "officer and gentleman" trope. Johnson presented British and US audiences with the powerful impression that Rommel had a civilian life very much like their own, or at least the model family life, and suffered a needless death that made the uniform he wore less relevant.

Johnson supposed he wrote an unbiased screenplay. When asked about writing this script years later, he reflected: "The main difficulty with *The Desert Fox* was how to tell this story, how to use this material in some kind of coherent fashion without seeming to even subconsciously favor one of our enemies such a short time after the war." It is revealing that Johnson did not think projecting American reactions onto an internal conflict a German general experienced was not subconsciously favoring the film's protagonist. Considering his belief that "people in general are about the same," such a position is consistent. He supposed that an objective presentation of the facts would inoculate himself and the film from political criticism and allow his art to come through. He believed he had succeeded. "I went to a lot

of trouble to make sure of my facts ... It wasn't that I had to take sides in the thing. It was the tragedy of a man ... All cold-blooded."¹⁸

“A Conscientious Historian”: Nunnally Johnson

The central question in this section is how authentic the portrayal of Rommel in *The Desert Fox* was compared to Johnson's knowledge of the historical record. If the film and his later testimony suggest that Johnson uncritically accepted the hagiographic Rommel, it was not because he was uninformed. Johnson believed that he engaged the topic with a historian's eye for scrutiny and felt a responsibility to represent Rommel in a manner that he could substantiate. In his letters to Zanuck, with whom he had a warm and candid professional relationship spanning nearly two decades, Johnson took pride in his research and often mentioned his accountability as a screenwriter to stay within the confines of history. And this was no empty boast as his files and correspondence show he was very well informed of the contemporary historiography on Erwin Rommel. If Johnson's representation was a hagiographic, it was because he was beholden to his inner biases and not for lack of knowledge.

For *The Desert Fox*, the filmmaker sought a diverse source base. Chief among these was a nine-page bibliography of material that encompassed a wide range of topics related to the Second World War. This list includes key works, some penned by recognized experts, on the internal working of the Third Reich, military campaigns, recently published memoirs, and works on the German Resistance. It also contains detailed accounts of the plot on Hitler's life including literature on Rommel's ambiguous role and specifics such as the unreliability

¹⁸ “Recollections of Nunnally Johnson Oral History Transcript,” 293-294.

of the English bomb manufacture.¹⁹ In his correspondence, he bragged about knowing Hanson Baldwin's wartime writings of Rommel, the fabrications devised by Goebbels, General Maisel's testimony at Nuremberg (he was one of the generals who delivered the poison to Rommel), and that General von Rundstedt specifically used the word "fool" to describe Field Marshall Wilhelm Keitel, a notorious sycophant to Hitler.²⁰ Johnson also flew to Europe to talk with British officers and soldiers who had fought against Rommel, and he visited Lucie at her home in Herrlingen.²¹ If the filmmaker evinced a haughtiness that bordered on arrogance regarding this subject, he nevertheless possessed a firm grasp of the contemporary historiography and documentary record.

Johnson believed he made concessions to what he had learned from the historical record. And some of these decisions meant excluding elements from the screenplay that would have made Rommel appear overly favorable. The filmmaker dropped a scene that had Rommel protesting to Hitler about SS atrocities in France. He told Zanuck these protests to Hitler were not going into the script because, "True or not, I felt it looked like a whitewash of his character."²² Johnson expressed the difficulties to Zanuck in reconciling the facts while writing the screenplay:

I've had to work harder on this script than any I can remember in a long time. It isn't the plot or structure, which I outlined in general to you, but the characters and dialogue. Dealing with these people and this situation is walking on eggs. I can't make Rommel a Frank Merriwell [a fictional clean and sober dime novel hero], but on the other hand I can't make a bum out of

¹⁹ "Information and Sources - Bomb Plot Against Hitler July 20th, 1994," in Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, "Desert Fox-I-62" folder, HGARC.

²⁰ See for instance Nunnally Johnson letter to Darryl Zanuck, October 26, 1951, Nunnally Johnson Collection, Box 7, "Desert Fox-Desmond Young" folder, HGARC.

²¹ Stempel, *Screenwriter*, 130; Johnson, *Flashback*, 202-203.

²² Note accompanying script sent to Zanuck on December 11, 1950. Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC.

him. Reconciling fact and [storytelling] without damaging either too seriously had called for great carefulness.²³

When fact contradicted drama, sometimes Johnson, albeit reluctantly, acquiesced in favor of the former. For instance, Johnson initially preferred a script that had Strölin attempting to recruit Rommel into the resistance in early 1943 (cf. historically February 1944) to produce a long period of worried indecision, the “classic form of drama” as he phrased it. Young advised Johnson to remain true to the historical record because any deviation would become fodder for Rommel’s critics who could undermine the legitimacy of the film. Johnson yielded and opted for the historical timeline.²⁴

The filmmaker intended *The Desert Fox* to be historically accurate and convinced himself that it was. “I satisfied myself that I knew something about the whole life of Rommel,” Johnson reflected in a 1969 interview. “In other words, my conscience was clear about dealing with him.”²⁵ The effort he put into his research made him acutely sensitive to accusations that he had falsified history. He was incensed when Crowther’s biting review in the *New York Times* accused him of obfuscation. Johnson prepared a three-page letter for the paper in which he vigorously defended the film and charged that the *New York Times* review constituted an attack “not only on my integrity as a conscientious historian in the making of the pictures but also on my very honor.”²⁶ Nearly twenty years later, knowing that the film enjoyed such sustained commercial success that it was still a regular selection for weekend movies on television networks, Johnson was still seething:

²³ Nunnally Johnson letter to Darryl Zanuck, November 13, 1950. Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC.

²⁴ See the correspondence between Johnson and Young regarding this issue. Especially Desmond Young letter to Nunnally Johnson, December 17, 1950; Nunnally Johnson letter to Desmond Young, December 26, 1950; Nunnally Johnson letter to Desmond Young, January 20, 1951. Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, “Desert Fox-Desmond Young” folder, HGARC

²⁵ “Recollections of Nunnally Johnson Oral History Transcript,” 294.

²⁶ Nunnally Johnson unsent letter to the *New York Times*. Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC.

The thing that sticks in my craw to this day was the *New York Times* established a “party line,” you might say, that this was the celebration of a Nazi. I knew about five times as much about it as they did because they hadn’t done the research I’d done, and I knew he was not a Nazi. Bosley Crowther, an omniscient fellow, explained how Rommel was a street rowdy and a hoodlum and so on. Exactly the opposite was true ... I must say that Crowther’s review outraged me because he wouldn’t let me answer it.²⁷

This was not the attitude of a filmmaker who felt he had sacrificed history for the sake of drama. Johnson must have taken Crowther’s review very personally; he wrote Desmond Young at the time that “big box office reports give me a great philosophical attitude” toward Crowther and he was advised not to press the issue by Twentieth Century-Fox because the film was “doing tremendously well everywhere.”²⁸

What probably steeled Johnson’s resolve that he was historically correct was that he did not necessarily distort the Rommel he came across in his research to create “Shakespearean material,” as he put it. This was primarily due to the filmmaker’s decision to focus the plot on Rommel’s turn against Hitler and subsequent forced suicide. It was not so much lying as being selective with the historical record. After the opening scenes depict a failed British commando raid on Rommel and a chivalrous meeting between the prisoner of war Desmond Young and the German marshal (included, among other reasons, for the need to prove authenticity), the film focuses on the Rommel-Hitler conflict, first with the protagonist tearing up Hitler’s “Victory or Death” order at El Alamein and then his conversion to the Resistance cause, which culminated in his ultimate demise at the hands of the German dictator. Not seen in the motion picture are Rommel’s Nazi fellow-traveler

²⁷ “Recollections of Nunnally Johnson Oral History Transcript,” 297.

²⁸ For the studio’s perspective not to confront critics, see Charlie Einfeld letter to Darryl Zanuck, October 22, 1951, Nunnally Johnson collection, Desert Fox-Desmond Young folder, HGARC; Nunnally Johnson letter to Desmond Young, October 26, 1951, Nunnally Johnson collection, Desert Fox-Desmond Young folder, HGARC.

credentials such as his cordial relations with Goebbels, Hitler's 1939 triumphant ride through Prague with a fawning Rommel at his side, and his belief that Germany's initial war against Poland was just.

Interestingly, as Nathan Glick wrote in a *Commentary* review, also not seen in the film are examples of Rommel's superior military leadership: "Instead of a history-making figure of daring and military intuition, we are shown a stodgy, intellectually quiescent family man ... If Rommel was a tactical genius, this movie gives no evidence of it."²⁹ Johnson and the film must have taken the military allure of the "Desert Fox" as a given. In focusing on Rommel as a resistor and victim, Johnson's screenplay was more humanizing to the German marshal than Desmond Young's biography. Whereas Young also presented Rommel as a loyal family man with admirable character traits, his biography was still at heart a story about a chivalrous opponent on the desert battlefield; only 34 of 249 pages were devoted to "A Pitiless Destiny," a chapter that explored Rommel's association with the Resistance and his eventual death. Johnson reversed this ratio; there is surprisingly little battle footage for a war film – Zanuck devised the narrating epilogue to accompany a pictorial desert battlefield to give an "artificial stimulation" so that the audience would think "they have seen a lot more action and battle stuff than they actually have."³⁰ Instead, the film committed sixty-two of eighty-eight minutes to events after the African campaign and thus removed much of the desert from the "Desert Fox." By selectively using facts, Johnson's emphasis on Rommel's anti-Hitler credentials and gentlemanly qualities portrayed Rommel as a principled anti-Nazi. Or as Johnson said in a more general context as noted above, "When I've done pictures

²⁹ Nathan Glick, "When Do You Call It Treason?," *Commentary*, (February 1952): 177-180.

³⁰ Zanuck Memorandum for *The Desert Fox*, "New Finish," June 20, 1951. 20th Century-Fox Collection, USC Cinematic Arts Library.

which involved conflicting forces, I have tried to imagine all of them doing exactly what Americans would do.”³¹

The filmmaker was clearly familiar with the argument that Rommel was a Nazi unworthy of rehabilitation. He just did not accept it. From the beginning, he was able to articulate these objections as seen in his initial letter to Zanuck.³² And he was told he should not make the film in plain terms during a December 1950 meeting with Henry Kellermann of the US State Department. A memorandum of the State Department’s position was as follows:

Field Marshal Rommel was not only the chief German military hero of the war, but he was also a political general, a man whom Hitler and Goebbels had played against the hereditary military caste. Mr. Kellerman also pointed out that his disillusionment with Hitler came only after Nazi fortunes began to ebb, long after the defeat at El Alamein, and that he was not a major actor in the plot against Hitler. He also emphasized that any film dealing with Rommel would certainly be seized upon by the communist propaganda as confirmation of the Soviet thesis that the United States is re-building the old Wehrmacht preparatory to an aggressive war against the USSR. He further explained that the glorification of a Nazi general, particularly one already a national hero, would cast doubt among democratic circles in Germany and among our Allies in other countries on the genuineness of our determination to prevent a revival of German militarism.³³

Johnson strongly disagreed, contending that his script “intended to demonstrate that there were good as well as bad Germans,” that it “would not glorify Rommel but treat him objectively,” and “pointed out that Rommel had been highly praised by Churchill among others.”³⁴ What is also noteworthy of this conversation is it shows that State Department *opposed* the film’s distribution because of Cold War geopolitics. Johnson tried to argue

³¹ Nora Johnson, *Flashback*, 222.

³² Nunnally Johnson letter to Darryl Zanuck, February 14, 1950. Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC.

³³ Memorandum of conversation between Department officers and representatives of Twentieth Century-Fox on December 18, 1950 in Record Group 59, Department of State, Central Decimal File [hereafter RG 59, DoS, CDF] 1950-1954, 811.452/11-2351.

³⁴ Memorandum of conversation between Department officers and representatives of Twentieth Century-Fox on December 18, 1950 in RG 59, DoS, CDF 1950-1954, 811.452/11-2351.

otherwise, however Kellermann remained unconvinced and the State Department's Acting Director for Bureau of German Affairs nearly one year later repeated "the Department's serious doubt as to the wisdom, from the point of view of the United States foreign policy, of producing at this time a motion picture tending to glorify one of Hitler's generals," in a letter to the President of Twentieth Century-Fox.³⁵ Neither the State Department nor the High Commissioner's Office for Germany, which also opposed distributing the film, were able to prevent the studio from releasing the film. They could only advise. Johnson and Zanuck, convinced in their rectitude, were so dismissive that they misjudged the State Department's objections to releasing the *Desert Fox* in Germany in November 1951.³⁶

Indeed, a prevalent theme within Johnson's correspondence was a haughty confidence that he had a firm grasp of the historical record. The filmmaker was adamant that with Rommel, opinions contrary to his were born of historical ignorance or stemmed from "Communist critics."³⁷ He was consistent in saying so in public and private. It is worth quoting him at length, from a 1951 letter to Twentieth Century-Fox's President Spyros Skouras:

It is difficult to argue with people who are ignorant of the facts, and it is perhaps useless to argue with those who use the word "glorifying" to describe our treatment of Rommel in this picture. We are glorifying Rommel no more than Ray Milland [who played an alcoholic New York writer] was glorified in *LOST WEEKEND*. It may be stated that Rommel turned against Hitler simply because Germany was losing the war. This is only part of the truth. As a German patriot, Rommel naturally did not want his country to be defeated. In his judgment, if my research has been fair and accurate, it was not to save his country from defeat but from utter destruction that he made his decision between Hitlerism and Germany, which he had come to regard as two entirely

³⁵ Letter from Geoffrey W. Lewis to Spyros P. Skouras, November 7, 1951 in RG 59, DoS, CDF 1950-1954, 811.452/11-751

³⁶ "Copy of a telegram despatched November 13, 1951 to the Department by Mr. Darryl Zanuck" in in RG 59, DoS, CDF 1950-1954, 811.452/11-2351. This topic will be discussed in greater detail next chapter.

³⁷ See especially Nunnally Johnson unsent letter to the *New York Times*. Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC and Nunnally Johnson letter to Darryl Zanuck, October 26, 1951. Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC.

separate things. His final conviction was that Germany was doomed by Hitlerism just as surely as a human being might be doomed by some loathsome disease. The effort of the group he joined in the conspiracy was to destroy the seed of the disease that was condemning his country to death and ruin.³⁸

How little the political entered Johnson's assessment is revealed by his comparison between Ray Millard and the German marshal. National Socialist Germany was just another "bad government" as Hitlerism and Germany were "two entirely separate things." As I have noted before, the filmmaker was hardly alone in holding such a perspective: it mirrored the central message of those who rejected the all-Germans-were-Nazis position during the war.

Johnson's screenplay was, very much like Young's biography, a product of the sources that he accepted as valid. And he found other people who fortified his stance. Prominent British war correspondents such as Alexander Clifford and Alan Moorehead briefly mentioned the romanticized aura Rommel possessed in their narratives on the African campaign written during the war. Johnson's British contacts dug up these relevant excerpts, ignored by the mainstream media during the 1940s, and brought them to the filmmaker's attention. In his files there is one such excerpt (investigated last chapter) that claimed "at least 80% of the British public today" agreed with the assessment that if the Western Desert campaign had a single hero, it was Rommel.³⁹ Although the British veterans Johnson talked with certainly had diverse opinions about the German marshal, this was the same Army in which "Rommel" entered the vernacular and some of them must have reinforced aspects the screenwriter wanted to hear. And if many contemporary accounts questioned Rommel's

³⁸ Quote taken from Nunnally Johnson letter to Spyros Skouras, February 26, 1951. Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC. See Johnson's statements in Thomas F. Brady, "Hollywood's Shifting Sands," *New York Times*, February 25, 1951, 93; Nunnally Johnson letter to Darryl Zanuck, October 26, 1951 Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC; "Recollections of Nunnally Johnson," especially 293-306.

³⁹ "Extract from 'Three Against Rommel' by Alexander Clifford," Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC.

motivation for his anti-Hitler position, it was nevertheless historical orthodoxy that the German marshal had in some manner undertaken such a course.⁴⁰ Johnson's approach to these sources is illustrated by his recollection of visiting Lucie:

But I was greatly satisfied, if you can ever find out such a thing, going to Frau Rommel's home, a modest place. She had a small pension ... and such a real housefrau. This woman isn't acting. This is an extremely nice, pleasant woman who has improved herself to her limit of her possibilities. And quite frank with me about everything.⁴¹

It is interesting that Johnson, much like Young, came away from his meeting with Lucie impressed with her character and dignity. She was by many accounts a domineering personality and very difficult woman to get along with.⁴² She forcefully carried on disputes regardless of setting or circumstance, such as the aforementioned rift with Frau Gause and her clash with the family of an *Afrikakorps* colleague whom the Rommels had taken in because their house had been destroyed in an Allied air raid, which prompted them to seek refuge elsewhere. The German marshal himself, whose inability to accept directives from superiors was so notorious that it was a running joke in the high echelons of the *Wehrmacht*, conceded to his son he often acquiesced in arguments with Lucie. Manfred admitted that his mother was an ardent nationalist who typically saw things only in black and white.⁴³ Both Lucie and Erwin Rommel had prevalent flaws and obvious connections with National Socialism. Yet both Desmond Young and Nunnally Jonson came away from their meetings

⁴⁰ Even though Johnson had access to one assessment that stated there was "no evidence that Rommel was a support of the plan to liquidate Hitler" it still maintained that Rommel had supported the overall plan of imposing peace, a position that did not contradict the sequence of events played out in the film. Nunnally Johnson collection, "Desert Fox" folder, HGARC.

⁴¹ "Recollections of Nunnally Johnson Oral History Transcript," 303-304.

⁴² For example, the interview of Rudolf Loistl, the soldier servant assigned to the Rommel household, in *LCER*, reel 3.

⁴³ The best compilation of this material comes from David Irving's interviews with Manfred in *LCER*, reel 3. See also the Kurt Hesse interview in *LCER*, reel 3 for an indicative anecdote regarding Rommel's penchant for disregarding orders from High Command.

as stout admirers of Erwin Rommel the man and were impressed with Lucie enough that they maintained a cordial correspondence afterward.

Young and Johnson might have had their minds made up who Lucie was before meeting her in Germany. Alternatively, having been given such a personalized account of Rommel's death and being impressed with the dignified way in which the widow carried herself, it is easy to envision that Johnson, like Young, acquired secondhand memories that buttressed his convictions. Armed with this information derived straight from Lucie, it is easily to understand why the filmmaker was dismissive of Kellerman of the State Department, Crowther from the *New York Times*, and those he deemed "Communist Critics," who the filmmaker believed were "ignorant of the facts." This was a man convinced of his scholarly rectitude, whose perspective and art were born from his own worldview.

There was much validity in Crowther's charge that the film's representation of Rommel was indistinguishable from that of heroic officers on "our" side. This portrayal was not so much a result of trickery or the falsification of history, as he believed, as a consequence of the filmmaker's particular point of view toward Nazi-era Germans. Johnson came to consider Rommel a decent man and saw his approval of the conspiracy against Hitler as proof. Writing to Skouras, Johnson declared: "If Rommel hadn't turned on Hitler, it would never have occurred to us to make this picture. If he hadn't come to hate Hitler enough to join the conspiracy to assassinate him, his story would have been without drama or significance to Americans."⁴⁴ Actually, that was not entirely true. The story of Rommel as an anti-Hitler resistor would have been already known to Americans who read the *New York*

⁴⁴ Nunnally Johnson letter to Spyros Skouras, February 26, 1951. Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC.

Times or *Reader's Digest*. It was not until *after* reading Young's humanized biography that Johnson conceived of turning Rommel's story into a major motion picture. It is interesting that Young and Lucie, sources Johnson valued highly, both rejected the claim that Rommel knew of the plan to kill Hitler and yet the filmmaker came away with a different impression (much like the aforementioned US Captain Marshall). I think this is partly because, as noted in Chapter Five, Rommel as a conspirator had already been established as historical orthodoxy. Also, it was a perspective that made sense to Johnson given his views of Nazi-era Germans and the general lack of historical awareness within British and US societies at that time. The groundbreaking historiography that established the complicity of the *Wehrmacht* in genocide and the participation and passivity of "ordinary" Germans with the criminality of the Third Reich was not available in Johnson's nine-page bibliography. In this intellectual *terra incognita*, he (and others) had to rely heavily on their instincts to make sense of history. And we have already seen Johnson's: "There are no bad people, just bad governments," "I have tried to imagine all of them doing exactly what Americans would do," and:

In the course of time this particular soldier began to awaken to the evil in his leader. ... [He] not only recognized the dangers in Hitler and Hitlerism but moved to destroy both. ... once he was convinced of the rightness of this decision, he went through with it. ... Such a man, we hold, is entitled to an examination regardless of his uniform.

This was a belief strong enough to discount Lucie's and Young's more nuanced versions of Rommel as a fellow traveler with the July 20 conspiracy, and to convince himself of the historical veracity of this "Shakespearean material." The on-screen Rommel resembled an American more than a stereotypical German because Johnson (and Zanuck) were willing to believe that even a prominent member of the Third Reich was not an authentic Nazi. In fact most Germans in the film were treated nearly as charitably as the leading role.

“Good” Germans and “Bad” Nazis

One of the ironies about the film is that Johnson and Zanuck were so fixated on presenting a Rommel that was historically accurate, neither seemed to realize their depiction of Germans and Nazi Germany as a whole was oversimplified at best and a virtual whitewash at worst. All Germans in the film, except for Hitler and clearly defined villains (namely the brief appearance of the obsequious Field Marshal Keitel and the generals who deliver the poison to Rommel), are not just de-politicized, but depicted as “good” Germans who are professional, thoughtful and, surprisingly, exhibit at times an non stereotypical Germanlike friendliness – this was perhaps the only movie to depict a cheery German desk soldier. Johnson’s narrative was so generous to Nazi-era Germans that some German critics sensed an underlying motive. As one German commentator put it:

Hollywood used to depict German soldiers as barbarians. But as now the market has swung around and German soldiers are in demand one adapts oneself to the changed situation ... The criticism which was stirred up by the Rommel picture should keep us from assuming that Churchill and the men around him are friends of Germany in a popular and sentimental sense.⁴⁵

But there was no such motive. These portrayals derived from Johnson and Zanuck’s perspective that Nazi-era Germany had consisted of some “good” Germans and some “bad” Nazis. The most significant aspect of this portrayal was that the film made such a charitable representation of Nazi-era Germany that it mirrored much of the selective memory-making of the Germans themselves.

⁴⁵ “Duesseldorfer Nachrichten” in “Roundup of Press Comments on ‘The Desert Fox’” from High Commission for Occupied Germany to Department of State, December 11, 1951 in RG 59, DoS, CDF 1950-1954, 811.452/12-1151. “Flensburger Tageblatt,” “Hamburger Freie Presse,” “Heidelberger Tageblatt,” and Dr. A. Winbauer’s review, among others convey similar settlements. It ought to be noted that while this viewpoint was in the German public sphere, the German reception was diverse (just as the British and US) and it would be misleading to ignore the multiple narratives and meanings Germans derived from the film. A thorough examination of the postwar reception of Rommel in Germany – both East and West – would yield much insight into how postwar Germans made sense of the Nazi past.

Leo G. Carroll's charismatic performance of a sagacious and upright Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt reveals both the problem of these generous portrayals, and that the impetus behind them lay with Johnson's belief that even high ranking members of the Third Reich genuinely opposed Hitler. In a 1969 interview, when asked about the German resistance to Hitler, he specifically cited von Rundstedt as having "complete contempt" for Hitler, adding that "there were plenty of Germans who did not approve, who in fact disapproved of him so much that they wanted to blow him to death."⁴⁶ The reality was more complicated. In 1945, Rundstedt was wanted by both the US and the Soviet Union for war crimes committed while in command of Army Group South on the Eastern Front in 1941 and avoided prosecution only because of deteriorating health.⁴⁷ Away from the battlefield, two of his assignments were particularly thorny. First was Rundstedt's presiding over the so called "Court of Honor," which cashiered army officers suspected of involvement in the *Attentat* from military jurisdiction, so they could be tried in Roland Freisler's civilian show trials. Second, Rundstedt had acted as Hitler's representative at Rommel's funeral and it was suspected that Rundstedt might have known the truth about the German marshal's death (he did not as it turned out). Johnson, armed with his nine-page bibliography, decided to cast Rundstedt favorably anyway.⁴⁸

To secure Rundstedt's permission for portraying him in the film, Johnson and Desmond Young enlisted Basil Liddell Hart, a highly respected English military theorist, as a mediator. Liddell Hart was a natural choice here. After the war, he cultivated friendly

⁴⁶ "Recollections of Nunnally Johnson Oral History Transcript," 305.

⁴⁷ Bloxham, *Genocide on Trial*, 42-49.

⁴⁸ McCloy raised these issues about Rundstedt when explaining his objection to the film being shown in Germany. John J. McCloy letter to Kaltenborn, December 18, 1951 Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC.

relations with many of the *Wehrmacht*'s leading generals (including specifically von Rundstedt), was a vocal opponent of the Nuremberg trials, and had argued in his recent book *The Other Side of the Hill* (1948) that the German officer corps were professional "technicians" who made genuine efforts to insulate themselves and the army from the politics of the Third Reich.⁴⁹ Young and Liddell Hart promised Germany's senior soldier that, "the general effect of the film will clearly be to do credit to the regular German Army in contrast to Hitler and the Nazi regime."⁵⁰ Rundstedt, obviously embittered at being branded a war criminal, expressed his unwillingness but resigned himself that the film would be made and stated: "I do not ask for payment. I imagine, however, that I will be represented in the film in a decent manner and not as one having knowledge of Hitler's acts of shame" [emphasis in original].⁵¹ Rundstedt was looking for a quid pro quo, but Johnson did not need to be swayed – he had *already* promised Rundstedt what he asked.

And the filmmaker's script did just that. Von Rundstedt was portrayed as an honest professional in a memorable performance by Carroll that was singled out for praise by many reviewers.⁵² The on-screen Rundstedt openly mocked Hitler's amateurish military interference and, like Rommel, also eventually took a stand against the German dictator's pointless war. Frustrated with the "Bohemian Corporal's" meddling and his "enthusiastic determination to cut his own throat," when asked by Hitler's military lackey Keitel for advice, the script has Rundstedt derisively shout, "Make peace you idiot!" and afterward give

⁴⁹ B.H. Liddell Hart, *The Other Side of the Hill: Germany's Generals, Their Rise and Fall, with Their Own Account of Military Events, 1939-1945* (London: Cassell, 1948).

⁵⁰ Desmond Young letter to Gerd von Rundstedt, May 28, 1950, Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC.

⁵¹ Gerd von Rundstedt letter to Liddell Hart, June 5, 1950, Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC.

⁵² Reg Whitely, "All Rommel...And No Lili Marlene!" *Daily Mirror*, October 12, 1951, 4; Leonard Mosley, "James Mason's Rommel Will Fuel the Fires," *Daily Express*, October 4, 1951, 3; "Odeon Cinema," *The Times*, October 10, 1951, 6.

Rommel his blessing for the impending insurrection. This was more than “doing credit,” the representation completely disassociated Rundstedt from Hitler and the Nazi regime.

Rundstedt’s portrayal was far too generous and is historically dubious. Rundstedt did argue to Hitler that Germany’s strategic situation was untenable at the end of June 1944 and this telephone conversation to Keitel may have happened, as the respected Canadian Intelligence Officer Milton Shulman accepted its veracity during an October 1946 interview with Rundstedt.⁵³ And Rundstedt was indeed relieved of his command during the Normandy campaign. Everything else the film portrays is problematic. In fact Rundstedt had rebuffed numerous contacts by the German Resistance, and in June 1946 reaffirmed his position at the Nuremberg trials by dubbing the plot as “base, bare-faced treachery.”⁵⁴ Hitler did dismiss Rundstedt thrice after clashes regarding military strategy. However, audiences were not shown the Rundstedt who submissively and repeatedly accepted Hitler’s offers for reemployment. When asked by Hitler to preside over the so-called Court of Honor that sent the men of July 20 to their doom, he obliged. When asked by Hitler to command the failed December 1944 counter-offensive known in the West as the Battle of the Bulge, he agreed even though he knew it would end in disaster. The most damning piece of evidence against Rundstedt was his circulation of the so called “Reichenau Order,” which emphasized the “necessity for the severe but just retribution that must be meted out to the subhuman species of Jewry,” to his senior commanders in the 6th Army on October 12, 1941. Rundstedt declared his “complete agreement” with it and suggested that similar orders be issued to

⁵³ Milton Shulman, *Defeat in the West* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1947), 120.

⁵⁴ International Military Tribunal, *The Trial of Major German War Criminals*, vol 21 (Nuremberg, 1948), 30.

other units.⁵⁵ In the final analysis, Rundstedt had aristocratic contempt for Hitler, whom he dubbed the “Bohemian Corporal,” as well as a perceptive eye for military strategy, but was imbued so heavily with the concept of duty that he did not find the fortitude to decline orders or even requests, however criminal or unsoldierly, from “Corporal” Hitler.

But Johnson, like many Western observers and soldiers at the time, believed the German officer corps’ pious pleas of innocence. Johnson, who styled himself a conscientious historian, came across the arguments linking Rundstedt and the *Wehrmacht* to the Third Reich crimes. And Rundstedt himself resentfully referred to his status as a “war criminal” unable to leave the British occupied zone.⁵⁶ But nowhere do Johnson’s records indicate concerns about Rundstedt’s representation. As for the Court of Honor appointment, Johnson noted that it did not disprove “the generally acknowledged fact that he knew enough about the plot not to want to get into it.”⁵⁷ Johnson saw the best in the archetypal Prussian Field Marshal. Indeed, upon learning of the pathetic state of Rundstedt’s postwar living conditions (his wife was on her deathbed and he lacked the money for nursing care), Johnson helped ensure that Twentieth Century-Fox retroactively remunerate him and mused how “a man of such eminence had been reduced to such circumstances.”⁵⁸

Rundstedt’s representation was emblematic of how the *Wehrmacht* was portrayed in the film: a volte face from the “bad” Germans argument made at the Nuremberg trials and the wartime representations in *Five Graves to Cairo* or the classic role from *Casablanca*, Gestapo Major Strasser. When the soldiers in the film speak of Hitler or Nazism, they refer

⁵⁵ “Begleitschreiben von Generalfeldmarschall von Rundstedt” and “Anweisung von Generalfeldmarschall von Reichenau,” *NS-Archiv: Dokumente zum Nationalsozialismus*, <http://www.ns-archiv.de/krieg/untermenschen/reichenau-befehl.php#begleit>, (accessed December 22, 2014).

⁵⁶ Gerd von Rundstedt letter to Liddell Hart, June 5, 1950, Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC.

⁵⁷ Nunnally Johnson letter to Darryl Zanuck, January 7, 1952. Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC

⁵⁸ Nunnally Johnson letter to Lucie Rommel, November 18, 1952. Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC.

sardonically to “Berlin” as if was some alien entity at best interfering with their professional duty and at worst victimizing them. In Africa and again at Normandy, “Berlin” – what the on-screen Rommel calls “Those hoodlums...thieves, crooks, and murderers. Those toy soldiers, those dummy generals ... non entities ... filth [to be] slaughtered” – failed to properly supply German forces and needlessly sent German troops to their death by issuing “clear, straight, stupid, criminal” orders to conquer or die. It was not quite a recreation of the “stab-in-the-back” myth that Berlin lost the war, but it was not far from the mark as Rundstedt’s character states:

Give me a free hand for a few months and I’d make them pay for it. I’d make them pay such a price in blood that they’d wish they never heard of Germany. I might not be able to stop them all, but they’d know they fought an army, not a series of stationary targets.

Such a field-grey and purely professional perspective of the *Wehrmacht* mirrored the memoirs the German generals themselves wrote in the 1950s.⁵⁹

There were also “bad” Germans in *The Desert Fox: The Story of Rommel*. Hitler, played by Luther Adler, is a caricatured exaggeration. In one of the film’s most memorable scenes, “Reasoning with a Madman,” Hitler and Rommel argue over military strategy after D-Day. Whereas Hitler wildly flails his arms, kicks chairs, and froths at the mouth, Rommel stands stoically and calmly explains, “Crises should be examined promptly and realistically.” While the historical Hitler probably did just that,⁶⁰ Adler’s Hitler rants delusionally about destroying London with miracle weapons such that, “In two more weeks, remember my

⁵⁹ Franz Halder, *Hitler als Feldherr* (Munich: Münchener Dom-Verlag, 1949); Siegfried Westphal, *Heer in Fesseln: Aus den Papieren des Stabschefs von Rommel, Kesselring und Rundstedt* (Bonn: Athenäum Verlag, 1956); Heinz Guderian, *Erinnerungen eines Soldaten* (Heidelberg: K. Vowinckel, 1951); Albert Kesselring, *Soldat bis zum letzten Tag* (Bonn: Athenäum Verlag, 1953); Erich von Manstein, *Verlorene Siege* (Bonn: Athenäum Verlag, 1956).

⁶⁰ Rommel’s letters to his wife indicate that he went into the meeting pessimistic and came away from it buoyed (albeit only for a few days). See Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, 491-493.

words, they'll be screaming for surrender!" When Mason's Rommel coolly interjects that in those two weeks Allied armies will race into Germany, and his Führer should "draw the proper conclusions," Adler's Hitler goes off on a tirade about "working miracles" and "determining the course of history for centuries to come." The scene then fades to black with Hitler rambling incoherently, "I have one in mind. I have a weapon in mind..." While German audiences recognized that this was not Hitler as they imagined him,⁶¹ Johnson probably assumed his script was not far from reality. For example H.V. Kaltenborn, a widely known radio commentator respected for his knowledge of international affairs, congratulated Johnson that he had "succeeded in giving us the true Hitler."⁶²

The Desert Fox made such a stark distinction between "good" and "bad" Germans that it fostered the impression that Hitler and the Nazis had victimized Germans, an astonishing message from a major American film production just six years after the war. In one scene Rommel, lying in a hospital bed, spoke of how Hitler had "officers like me [put] against the wall and shot."⁶³ Rommel then quoted how Hitler "had no further interest or concern in the *Afrikakorps*" and refused to evacuate the beleaguered force, to which Lucie strongly interjected, "And that was *their* thanks." No decent German is safe from "Berlin" in the film. In one scene, an SS clerk pulls a large ledger from an extensive collection and

⁶¹ Jack Raymond, "Some Observations on the German Screen Scene," *New York Times*, September 7, 1952, X5.

⁶² Harry v Kaltenborn letter to Nunnally Johnson, November 23, 1951. Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC. Johnson might also have been inspired by Speidel's *Invasion 1944* portrayal.

⁶³ It seems to have been a popular assumption that those generals who contradicted Hitler's military orders risked their lives. This is an exaggeration (which portrayals such as this movie have fostered). Those generals who challenged Hitler's military strategy on the Eastern Front risked their professional careers, not their lives. Bock, von Rundstedt, Hoepfner, Guderian, Halder, von Manstein, and others were indeed dismissed from their posts and ushered into comfortable retirement (usually via bribes in the form of seized estates), although some generals like Guderian and von Rundstedt were eventually called back into service. Many of the generals who did lose their lives, some eighty-four if one takes the most cited number, who were killed in some manner by the Nazi regime, either executed or forced suicides, were virtually all involved in some manner with the July 1944 conspiracy. The ordinary *Landser*, of whom some 30,000 were executed mostly on charges of cowardice near the end of the war (often with the approval of generals such as Model and Schörner), were in far greater lethal danger contradicting orders than were Hitler's generals.

expresses surprise that the Lord Mayor Strölin, “is on the list ... To be kept under strictest observation.” Even the hero, Rommel, is under threat. While lamenting Hitler’s interference in military matters, Rundstedt warns Rommel things are different than in Africa: “If I were you, I wouldn’t be altogether unguarded about what I had to say about this new strategic arrangement ... you’ll be under more or less constant observation.” The danger Rommel faced in the film was intentional; Zanuck instructed in his notes on the script, “We want to know that [Rommel] is liable to be shot by both the English and the Germans.”⁶⁴ Of course, the film’s climax when Hitler’s emissaries compel the German field marshal to “relieve the situation himself” and escort the suddenly helpless war hero from his home and into the back of an SS vehicle, represents the pinnacle of the theme of Nazi terror against “good” Germans.

The Desert Fox’s clean bifurcation between “good” and “bad” Germans reveals one problem of associating memory with nationality. Recent scholarship has produced excellent literature that shows how dominant contemporary public narratives in postwar German society portrayed Nazi-era Germans as passive victims of Allied bombers, the Red Army, and, significantly, of National Socialism. These narratives represented a longing for a past that did not exist, yet one in which through the process of selective remembering Nazi-era Germans convinced themselves they were authentic. Historian Harold Marcuse labeled the core of these distorted memories the “three founding myths” of the Federal Republic: ignorance, resistance, victimization.⁶⁵ These myths spelled out that most Germans had been ignorant of the crimes perpetrated by their neighbors and relatives, most Germans felt that they had been part of the “other Germany,” that is, they had been conscientious citizens who

⁶⁴ Zanuck Memorandum for *The Desert Fox*, page 50, December 5, 1950. 20th Century-Fox Collection, USC Cinematic Arts Library.

⁶⁵ Marcuse, *Legacies of Dachau*, 73-77.

had resisted Nazism as much as they had been able, and that the German people themselves had been victimized by the Nazis.⁶⁶ Each of the myths contained elements of truth and assumptions about Nazi-era Germans that not only explain their potency and longevity, but also why Nunnally Johnson and Darryl Zanuck, self-identified American patriots, independently incorporated comparable discourses into their film and mimicked the selective memory of the Germans as if it was legitimate history.

The parallels between these three founding myths of the FRG and *The Desert Fox* are visible in the film's portrayal of Germans and especially Erwin Rommel. Consider the first myth, ignorance. It is laid out in Johnson's script as Rommel slowly and gradually realizes the inhumanity of Hitler's rule. In the beginning of the film at El Alamein in 1942, Rommel reacts to Hitler's "Victory or Death" order by asserting, "It's not [Hitler] I tell you," and then blames Hitler's cronies for the senseless military order. Successive experiences the film depicts in 1943 and 1944, Hitler's abandonment of the *Afrikakorps*, Rommel's realization that he was now kept under surveillance, Strölin's pressure to confront honestly the consequences of Hitler's leadership, and Hitler's ranting delusions about miracle weapons, enlighten Rommel so that by the end of the film he finally knows the realities of Nazi rule and is ready to accept the consequences of a show trial, namely death by garrote. He takes this stance because, as he explains to Hitler's henchmen:

It may be as you say a futile defense but I think that it should be heard nevertheless. There might be some value in it for those who hear it. It might even move some to stop and think for a moment or two as finally I did. Unfortunately too late.

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Heineman, "The Hour of Women: Memories of Germany's 'Crisis Years' and West German National Identity," in *The American Historical Review* 101, no. 2 (April 1996): 354-395; Jeffery Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Marcuse, *Legacies of Dachau*; Robert G Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Norbert Frei, *Adenauer's Germany and the Nazi Past: The Politics of Amnesty and Integration*, trans. Joel Golb (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

This statement had no evidentiary basis and implies that most Germans were ignorant of the nature and scale of the crimes perpetrated by Hitler's regime.⁶⁷

The second of these myths, resistance, is the one the film most overdramatizes. The 1950 source base did validate a representation of Rommel as an active member of the German resistance. However, Johnson's decision to depict the German marshal as a *moral* resistor who turned against Hitler because it was "right" hinged upon accepting Rommel's upstanding character and absolving his tardy recognition of Hitler's evils. This was a perspective critics of Rommel consistently rejected. The film also implied that those Germans who were not ignorant of the criminal nature of Third Reich wanted to resist in some way. Rundstedt laments being "too old to revolt" against authority, "however evil," yet wishes Rommel luck for the *Attentat* that he feigns ignorance about. Or consider the "The Conspiracy Grows" scene set in Rommel's home that depicts Strölin trying to convince an uncertain Rommel about the scope and rectitude of the resistance. When Rommel initially rebuffs these advances by saying, "I'm surprised at you. That's a communist position." Strölin's response and the subsequent conversation imply the Resistance movement was a *German* movement (as opposed to Communist – this was an intentional distinction according to Johnson as laid out below) and had far greater depth and coherence within German society than can be historically substantiated:

Strölin: Would you call General Beck a Communist?

Rommel: Of course not.

Strölin: Or Carl Goerdeler, the Lord Mayor of Leipzig?

Rommel: I've never heard that he was.

⁶⁷ The sources do not agree how the historical Rommel reacted to the charges of treason, though none go so far as to suggest he would have taken the docket to "move some to think." For literature on what Germans knew during the war, Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) and Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008) are insightful.

Strölin: What about Falkenhausen?

Rommel: No, but...

Strölin: What about Heinrich von Stülpnagel? And von Neurath, and von Hassell? Are they Communists?

Rommel: Are you trying to tell me seriously that men like that are questioning his leadership?

Strölin: Not just questioning it. They intend to end it.

Rommel: You mean you talked to those fellows yourself?

Strölin: To them and to many others. Not only soldiers either. Churchmen, labor leaders, lawyers, doctors. Members of the government even. Not too many of them, but sound men, every one.

Rommel: How long has this been going on?

Strölin: Since '38.

While there were brave men and women in the German resistance, many of its participants had questionable anti-Nazi credentials and Strölin's dialog highly exaggerated the scope of the movement. It was technically not a falsehood to state the Resistance had been active since 1938 when General Beck and a few rank officers toyed with the idea of deposing Hitler during the Czechoslovakian crisis (for military reasons), but it was historically incorrect to portray a coherent opposition as it petered out after Hitler's subsequent diplomatic and military triumphs and was thus relegated to the hands of a few brave and perceptive people such as General Hans Oster or the cabinetmaker Georg Elser. Coherent opposition only reemerged once Germany's military fortunes waned noticeably in 1943.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ The classic study of the German Resistance is Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance, 1933-1945*, trans. Richard Barry, 3rd ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996 originally published as *Widerstand, Staatsstreich, Attentat der Kampf der Opposition gegen Hitler* (München: R. Piper, 1969). In the 1960s, younger historians such as Hans Mommsen and Martin Broszat argued that many of the conspirators were nationalists and anti-democrats and that their motivations for overthrowing Hitler were aimed to preserve what was left of the "Greater Germany" that the Nazis had created. In the early 2000s, Mommsen consolidated his arguments in *Alternatives to Hitler: German Resistance under the Third Reich*, trans. Angus McGeoch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) originally published as *Alternativen zu Hitler: Studien zur Geschichte des deutschen Widerstandes* (München: Beck, 2000). In 1995, Christian Gerlach strongly criticized key members of the plot from Army Group Center for their knowledge and participation in war crimes on the Eastern Front. A translated version is Christian Gerlach, "Men of 20 July and the War in the Soviet Union," in Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann (eds.), *War of Extermination: The German Military in World War II 1941-1944* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 127-145. The motivations behind the conspiracy are still debated.

Twenty years after making the film, when asked why he made it a point to portray the resistance members as non-Communists, Johnson responded:

The particular reason was that the men who wanted to get rid of Hitler were Germans, not of any Communist leaning. Von Rundstedt, who was the number one general, constantly referred to Hitler as “The Corporal,” and men who just had complete contempt for him. They didn’t have to be Communists. I wanted it clear, if I could make it so, that these were Germans who did not approve, who in fact disapproved of him so much that they wanted to blow him to death. There were plenty of Germans who didn’t approve of Hitler and didn’t back him in his idiotic and barbarous projects. Yes, I wanted to make that very clear, that don’t think that this was just Communists ... It’s quite a different thing from an opposition by men who were devoted to Germany, not to any other ideology or nation.⁶⁹

Johnson thus wanted to represent the Germans as such because he believed that was an accurate portrayal. While it is important to acknowledge the filmmaker’s political desire to distinguish Germans from Communists given the overarching Cold War framework, it would be a mistake to exaggerate its importance. The author had a consistent track record of believing there were “good” Germans, and such a perspective of the German Resistance was in line with contemporary perceptions. For many years in the West, the conservative-military resistance centered on July 20 overshadowed other elements of opposition against the National Socialist regime, particularly those from the political Left.⁷⁰

The last of these mythic tropes, victimization, naturally characterized the protagonist as the plot centers on Rommel’s turn against Hitler and forced suicide. Other Germans victimized by the Nazis mentioned in the film were the *Afrikakorps* (in which Hitler had “no further interest” and declined to evacuate), the army at Stalingrad (which Hitler refused to let

⁶⁹ “Recollections of Nunnally Johnson,” 305-306.

⁷⁰ For an overview of the significance of July 20, 1944 in German society, see David Clay Large, “‘A Beacon in the German Darkness’: The Anti-Nazi Resistance Legacy in West German Politics,” in Michael Geyer and John Boyer (eds.), *Resistance against the Third Reich, 1933-1990* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 243-256.

von Paulus withdraw from a hopeless situation), and the five thousand who were killed in the aftermath of the failed *Attentat*. Important in these examples was that it was specifically the Nazi regime that had victimized these Germans, not the wide-ranging horrors of war. Each of them *could* be argued as victims given a particular perspective, but selectively focusing on them obfuscates the greater reality. For instance, there were roughly five thousand Germans who lost their lives in the aftermath of July 20, but the many more non-German victims of the war are never mentioned in the original US version and thus afforded Germans a monopoly on being victimized.

Johnson was convinced at the time and nearly two decades later in retrospect that he had succeeded in getting the story right. In his 1969 oral history, he said that he “went to a lot of trouble to make sure of my facts” and “I knew about five times as much about [Rommel] as [the *New York Times*] did because they hadn’t done the research I’d done, and I knew he was not a Nazi.”⁷¹ Still indignant about Crowther’s charge that he had falsified history, several times Johnson made it a point to cite sources he felt vindicated *The Desert Fox*. In response to a query about Desmond Young’s suitability for playing himself, Johnson responded that Young’s voice would crack and added:

Oh, dear man. He was so eager and anxious and he helped me so much in getting to these generals. I also pointed out to Crowther that the British General Staff had been invited to a showing of the picture and they had nothing but praise for it. Not whether it was a good picture or not, but the truth, the accuracy of as much of it as they knew about.⁷²

The filmmaker certainly believed he had a grasp on historical truth. Since he found numerous sources that confirmed his views, it would be more accurate to assert that Johnson did not so much create a myth as he synthesized perceptions that were already in place.

⁷¹ “Recollections of Nunnally Johnson,” 294, 297.

⁷² “Recollections of Nunnally Johnson,” 302.

In response to questions concerning the wisdom of making a film featuring a Nazi general, Johnson noted every scene could be defended on a historical basis and cited Winston Churchill, who wrote the following in his war memoir, *The Grand Alliance* (1950):

[Rommel's] ardour and daring inflicted grievous disasters upon us, but he deserves the salute which I made him – and not without some reproaches from the public – in the House of Commons in January, 1942, when I said of him, “We have a very daring and skillful opponent against us, and, may I say across the havoc of war, a great general.” He also deserves our respect because, although a loyal German soldier, he came to hate Hitler and all his works, and took part in the conspiracy of 1944 to rescue Germany by displacing the maniac and tyrant. For this he paid the forfeit of his life. In the sombre wars of modern democracy chivalry finds no place. Dull butcheries on a gigantic scale and mass effects overwhelm all detached sentiment. Still, I do not regret or retract the tribute I paid to Rommel, unfashionable though it was judged.⁷³

The filmmaker boasted in 1951, “When we take our position we take it in very good company.”⁷⁴ This reply neatly illustrates this chapter's thesis: it shows that Nunnally Johnson was informed of the most recent relevant literature, yet what he derived from this was mostly confirmation bias. Churchill's excerpt was such a natural validation of Johnson's screenplay that Twentieth Century-Fox inserted it in the film's epilogue. Voiced over a shot of Rommel riding atop a tank in the desert, the narrator remarks: “In any case his life and fate have best been summed up, ironically enough, in the words of Nazi Germany's sternest enemy, the honorable Winston Churchill,” after which the audience hears Churchill's emotive words as if to render immediate validation to the previous eighty-eight minutes of a film that featured many “good” Germans and a few “bad” Nazis.

⁷³ Winston S. Churchill, *The Grand Alliance* vol 3 of *The Second World War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1950), 200.

⁷⁴ See Thomas F. Brady, “Hollywood's Shifting Sands,” *New York Times*, February 25, 1951, 93.

Chapter 10

A Resounding Box Office Success: Reception of The Desert Fox

In his later years, Johnson was convinced *The Desert Fox: The Story of Rommel* had been a critical and commercial success. As his daughter reminisced, “Except for Bosley Crowther and *The New Yorker*, the picture got an excellent reception, though some reviewers reacted nervously to its surprising position.”¹ This recollection was faulty. The opposition the film incited did not react “nervously”; it was politically committed and its advocates were well known and diverse. The US State Department, the US High Commissioner’s Office for Germany, a signed declaration from six Congressional representatives, most of America’s Jewish organizations, the *New York Times*, Communists, and some ordinary citizens all voiced strident opposition to what they charged was a whitewash of Nazism. As Johnson noted in a letter at that time to Young, “That’s a hell of a line-up.”² Nevertheless, this formidable opposition proved fleeting and, as the American Film Institute plainly put it: “Despite the widespread criticism, the picture was a resounding box-office success.”³ The film’s critics were not intellectually defeated nor eventually convinced of the movie’s veracity. Instead they were overshadowed by long lines of moviegoers.

This chapter examines the reception to *The Desert Fox* and concludes the film succeeded because it portrayed representations of Nazi-era Germans that were believable to many Americans and Britons at that time. It becomes apparent from the recorded commentary on the film, from both champions and critics, that we see the recurrent

¹ Nora Johnson, *Flashback*, 204.

² Nunnally Johnson letter to Desmond Young, December 6, 1951. Nunnally Johnson collection, Desert Fox-Desmond Young folder, HGARC

³ Entry for “The Desert Fox (1951),” *American Film Institute*, 2017
<https://catalog.afi.com/Catalog/moviedetails/50076>, (accessed July 6, 2018).

correlation between attitudes toward the film and beliefs regarding the culpability of Nazi-era Germans for the crimes of the Third Reich. Those who were unwilling to dissociate Rommel from the Nazi atrocities thought the film portrayed an offensive and potentially dangerous version of history. They acknowledged the film was a quality production and were aware of the arguments in favor of Rommel, yet they remained steadfast in their view. Audiences do not just accept what they see on the screen.⁴ The problem for the detractors was that most moviegoers did not perceive *The Desert Fox* as an affront to history. This did not necessarily mean they felt the film was accurate, although a vocal minority did. Some of the positive reviewers acknowledged the position taken by the detractors, yet they did not see the film as a problem and recommended it. Others admitted that not all the historical facts were known, nonetheless they still enjoyed the movie or felt that its presentation was plausible. This suggests the crux of *The Desert Fox*'s reception lay with the willingness of moviegoers to accept the premise that important Germans such as Rommel, Rundstedt, Strölin, etc., were disconnected from the Nazi atrocities enough that they could see the film as history-based entertainment instead of it provoking outrage.

Reception of *The Desert Fox*

The rapid and anti-climactic nature of Twentieth Century-Fox's triumph over its opponents and the film's large box office revenue make it easy to underestimate the strength of the opposition it spawned. However, examining the film's opposition is important because it demonstrates that critics of the film prioritized meanings that emphasized the responsibility of Germans for National Socialism. This is best illustrated in a draft statement

⁴ Janet Staiger, "Class, Ethnicity, and Gender: Explaining the Development of Early American Film Narrative," *Iris* 11 (Summer 1990): 21.

by the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, the heart of which was eventually signed in a press release by many Jewish organizations:

We regard this film as a cruel distortion of history, an affront to the memory of the brave soldiers of all the allied nations, a gratuitous insult to the free peoples who spent their strength and their substance to save a world from engulfment by Nazism ... There is only one major villain in this picture – Hitler. The audience is asked to believe that only he was both a buffoon and an evil man; that the soldier, Rommel, – and other German generals – were military men, without “political” aims or motivations, carrying out orders ... The world knows that totalitarianism infects the whole body politic of a nation, that neither fascism nor communism can be sustained except with the active collaboration in its depravity of politicians, diplomats, and generals—especially generals. To depict Rommel as less than such an active collaborator in Nazism is to twist history beyond recognition.⁵

Detractors of the film were not just concerned about the past. Six Congressmen on the House Foreign Affairs Committee cabled US High Commissioner for Germany John J. McCloy that they were “deeply concerned” of film’s potential in fostering “neo-Nazi and ultra nationalist revival.”⁶ The New Haven Veterans Council considered it “almost criminal” to permit the “glorification of the Nazi General Rommel” as it would give “the Nazi bully boys still remaining in Germany – and there are many – something to cheer about.”⁷ These denunciations were unequivocal regarding Rommel’s responsibility for the crimes committed by Hitler’s regime and the danger of postwar fascism in Germany.

New York Times film critic Bosley Crowther, whose columns were widely read and carried a powerful voice in the film industry,⁸ was the critic that infuriated Johnson the most. Crowther, who held a degree in history from Princeton University, found the film morally

⁵ Draft Statement, October 18, 1951, National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, Box 49, American Jewish Historical Society Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York.

⁶ Telegram from John J. McCloy to Secretary of State, November 21, 1951 in RG 59, DoS, CDF 1950-1954, 811.452/11-2151.

⁷ Letter from Harold M. Mulvey to Geoffrey W. Lewis, December 3, 1951 in RG 59, DoS, CDF 1950-1954, 811.452/12-351.

⁸ Frank Eugene Beaver, *Bosley Crowther: Social Critic of the Film 1940-1967* (New York: Arno Press, 1974).

objectionable, because of its “strange disregard for the principles and the sensibilities of those who suffered and bled in the cause of defeating German aggression.” He deemed that the decision to make the film had “overridden moral judgment and good taste.” In asserting the “notorious Rommel” was the leader “responsible for the deaths of thousands upon thousands of British troops” “and killed Allies for the Fuehrer so long as he thought that Germany could win,” the film critic thus accentuated memories on the political vector that emphasized German aggression, Rommel’s support for Hitler, and subsequent responsibility for the deaths in the Second World War; in sum, the hallmarks of the view that Germans were inherently responsible for the crimes of the Third Reich. Crowther rejected the presentation of Rommel as a “good” German, claiming that “Mr. Johnson and his associates have used all the tricks in the book” to “build up the illusion of his having been one of nature’s truest nobleman.” The end of the review epitomized the wartime narrative that Crowther adhered to: “If, nine years ago somebody had forecast this film on the Globe’s screen, we would have thought the person crazy – or that the Allies were going to lose the war.”⁹ Indeed, but it was no longer 1942.

Opponents of the film consistently prioritized the German-as-Nazi representations of the 1940s. Take the instance of the famed gossip columnist Walter Winchell, who vented his furor over the film when he printed in the *New York Mirror*, “Churchill’s voice is heard in the picture praising the worst sunuvabitch ever born, next to Hitler and Himmler.”¹⁰ John Stone, the man chosen by top American Jewish organizations to represent their collective interests in Hollywood, raised serious objections to the film and tried to mobilize Jewish and

⁹ Bosley Crowther, “The Screen: Quartet of Newcomers Here,” *New York Times*, October 18, 1951, 32; Bosley Crowther, “Curious Twist,” *New York Times*, October 28, 1951, 89.

¹⁰ Clippings Collection in *The Desert Fox* 1950-1952 folder at the Academy Film Archive, Margaret Herrick Library.

government groups to prevent the film's release in Germany. When queried by a Twentieth Century-Fox representative whether Rommel's opposition to the Nazis and Hitler coincided with Jewish attitudes, Stone denied Rommel's motives were altruistic and plainly remarked, "Jews could never be objective to Nazism." Stone's reply to the studio illuminates his adherence to wartime representations that no longer met the standards of historical evidence: "At least show Rommel for what he really was ... a former street fighter, and had an eye toward grasping power for himself."¹¹ Most critical assessments of Rommel had by 1951 stopped claiming he was a street fighter and admitted he had had no desire for a leadership position in a post-Hitler Germany.¹² Who Rommel "really was" according to Stone – like Nunnally Johnson – was based on the information that he accepted as true.

Critics from both sides of the Atlantic rejected Johnson and Zanuck's belief that they remained true to the historical record. John Howard Lawson, head of the Hollywood division of the Communist Party, wrote that film represented a trend in Hollywood such that, "the glorification of Nazi methods and ideas is now offered without apologies: one of Hitler's leading generals becomes the hero of a Hollywood film." Lawson continued:

[*The Desert Fox*] offered proof of the threat of fascism in the United States. ... Hitler is the killer who gets out of hand and betrays the interests of the class that put him into power. Thus, the "good" Nazis, whose reliance on war as an instrument of policy was intended to "contain Communism" and crush the Soviet Union, are separated from the "madman" who was so unwise as to wage war against the United States.¹³

British screenwriter Simon Harcourt-Smith condemned the film because "you cannot make a hero out of [Rommel] without considerable dishonesty." Harcourt-Smith belittled the

¹¹ John Stone's Report #28, March 1, 1951, National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, Box 51 American Jewish Historical Society Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, New York.

¹² See for instance H.R. Trevor-Roper, "Hitler's Generals Create a Dangerous Myth," *New York Times*, February 19, 1950, SM6.

¹³ John Howard Lawson, *Film in the Battle of Ideas* (New York: Masses & Mainstream, 1953), 25-26.

emotive intent of the film: “As for Rommel in the last phase, let us waste no tears over the incompetent conspirators of July, 1944,” because they did not oppose Hitler’s dreams of European hegemony.¹⁴ Upon reading a review of *The Desert Fox* in the *Los Angeles Times*, a reader objected to the paper’s failure to identify the political and moral issues in a letter to the editor:

Reviewing the “Desert Fox” as just another film is acquiescence to the campaign to glorify and forgive Marshal Erwin Rommel for his part in the cancerous cabal of Nazism ... The moviemakers and the reviews may forgive Rommel, but the victims of Buchenwald, Maidanek, Auschwitz, Dachau and the rest will not.¹⁵

Richard L. Coe, a reviewer for the *Washington Post*, blasted the film as an “immensely sympathetic study of a man whose professional life was dedicated to destroying our civilization” and adamantly rejected the notion that Rommel was a genuine resistor.¹⁶ *The New Yorker* was concerned the film would “make careless spectators forget that Rommel was Hitler’s favorite military figure, that he condoned the Nazi atrocities, and that he didn’t go against the Führer until the German cause looked hopeless.”¹⁷ Many of the negative reviews did acknowledge the film had artistic merits, but these qualities merely aggravated their objections that the film was a “real job of whitewashing” and that “glorifying the achievements of leaders, military or political, whose ideals are in direct conflict with Democracy is not to be commended.”¹⁸ These objections had little to do with Rommel per se and instead reflected hostility toward representations of a military figure who failed to acknowledge his responsibility for both the rise of the Third Reich and its policies.

¹⁴ Simon Harcourt-Smith, “Growth of a Legend - Rommel,” *Sight and Sound* 21, no. 3 (Jan/Mar 1952): 134.

¹⁵ Arel Hamlin Cahn, “Not Forgiven,” Letter-to-the-editor, *Los Angeles Times*, October 28, 1951, B4.

¹⁶ Richard L. Coe, “Rommel Converted Only by Disaster,” *Washington Post*, October 22, 1951, B9.

¹⁷ *The New Yorker*, October 27, 1951.

¹⁸ See for instance *Hollywood Citizen News*, December 7, 1951 and the Clippings Collection in *The Desert Fox* 1950-1952 folder at the Academy Film Archive, Margaret Herrick Library.

These critics were in the minority not so much because they grasped the historical problems in *The Desert Fox*, rather it was that they were among the few who felt strongly affronted by them. Contemporaries did comprehend the political and moral issues raised by its critics, but many shrugged their shoulders at the controversy and acknowledged the film was a quality production. Reg Whitley of the *Daily Mirror* penned: “Whether this is the time to whitewash the Nazi generals is not a matter I propose to discuss here – I can only express the opinion that film provides a good and really first class entertainment.”¹⁹ That such an opinion could stem from the left-wing paper perhaps hints at the number of people in Great Britain and the United States who were indifferent about this issue at the time. *The Manchester Guardian*, another paper that had often been critical of Rommel, similarly introduced the film, stating:

There has been a good deal of understandable fuss about “Rommel – Desert Fox,” but its critics ought surely to admit that Rommel became a legend and that it is a privilege of legend not to have to stand up everywhere to the full searchlight of factual truth. Judged purely as a film, there is much to recommend it..²⁰

Mandel Herbstman of *The Motion Picture Daily* rhetorically asked, “One wonders whether a protest might not arise from some quarters considering this picture a whitewash of Rommel and his deeds,” and then proceeded to praise James Mason’s performance as “colorful and convincing,” and the film as “highly dramatic entertainment.”²¹ Finally, the *Times* disregarded the gravity of the film’s criticism by asserting, “it must be remembered that the process [of making Rommel a hero] was in full swing while our troops were actually

¹⁹ Reg Whitley, “All Rommel...And No Lili Marlene!” *The Daily Mirror*, October 12, 1951, 4.

²⁰ “Picture Theaters,” *The Manchester Guardian*, November 27, 1951, 5.

²¹ Clippings Collection in *The Desert Fox* 1950-1952 folder at the Academy Film Archive, Margaret Herrick Library.

engaged in fighting him ... And Rommel is a very good film.”²² These contemporaries who enjoyed the movie recognized the argument the film’s opponents were advancing. However, they did not possess deep enough reservations or the same level of disgust toward the film’s representation of Nazi-era Germans to find the film objectionable.

If moviegoers followed this same pattern, then it suggests many contemporaries did not perceive presentations of “good” Nazi-era Germans to be problematic. Thus, the “hell of a line up” was without popular support and in effect marginalized. Indeed, Johnson eventually could not remember that line up, and the film enjoyed sustained popularity. There were signs that American and British societies were not interested in debating the controversy over the representation of Rommel. In the House of Commons, an MP broached the subject by asking the Home Secretary “Whether he was aware that the film titled [*The Desert Fox*] glorified a general who upheld the Nazi creed” and what action he intended to take given “incidents likely to induce a breach of the peace.” The response was simply, “I have no power to take any action in the matter,” and the issue was promptly dropped.²³ In New York City, one Board of Education member implored his colleagues to ban Desmond Young’s *Rommel* from school libraries because the German marshal, “over which the author fairly drools, is a man who was opposed to everything in our system of government and yet is built up idealistically as a man our youngsters can worship.” None of the other members voiced any opposition; the matter was not even voted on and *Rommel* made its way into libraries.²⁴ There were stories in the newspapers about protests against the film and letters to the editor debating its merit, so informed citizens were aware of the moral and political

²² “Odeon Cinema,” *The Times*, October 10, 1951, 6.

²³ “House of Commons,” *The Times*, November 30, 1951, 4.

²⁴ “School Libraries to Get ‘Desert Fox,’” *New York Times*, April 10, 1952, 31.

issues.²⁵ Indeed, there were sometimes small groups of about a dozen who picketed theaters that showed the film.²⁶ But that was precisely the problem for the film's opposition: the contrast between the few picketers outside these theaters and, to take one example, the twenty-five day run of "standing room only" in London's West End the film enjoyed.²⁷ Individuals such as the movie mogul Harry M. Warner could and did cancel showings of *The Desert Fox*,²⁸ but they did not dissuade contemporaries from going elsewhere or future viewers from tuning in on a network television showing. This was less a society in debate than a committed minority that was unable to mobilize broad support.

In fact, judging from some magnanimous reviews, the film's emphasis on the romanticized aspects of Rommel's legacy reinforced the viewpoints of audiences who believed Germans of the Hitler era were not all Nazis. Indeed, they applauded the film for its representation of the sharp division between Germans and Nazis. The Southern California Motion Picture Council, a group with a strong conservative slant, lauded the film as an "outstanding achievement" and "a motion picture masterpiece, a truly great human interest drama, creating sympathy and respect for a war enemy of our country." In categorizing the film as a "gripping, tragic and tremendously human interest story of the life of the great German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, contrasting his home life, his indomitable courage and dignity with the mad Fueher [sic]," the Southern California Motion Picture Council *wanted* the film to elicit sympathy for Rommel.²⁹ *The Showman's Trade Review* rejected the

²⁵ See for example "Opinions Culled from the Mail," *New York Times*, November 4, 1951, 117; Jack Raymond, "'Desert Fox' Starts Hue and Cry in Germany," *New York Times*, November 25, 1951, 125; "Jewish Objections to Rommel Film," *The Times*, November 17, 1951, 5.

²⁶ "Film on Rommel Is Picketed," *New York Times*, December 9, 1951, 87; "Gone to Earth," *Daily Express*, November 28, 1951, 5.

²⁷ Stephen Watts, "Notes on the London Screen Scene," *New York Times*, November 18, 1951, X5.

²⁸ Entry for "The Desert Fox (1951)," *American Film Institute*, 2017.

²⁹ Southern California Motion Picture Council review of *The Desert Fox*, October 23, 1951, Nunnally Johnson collection, HGARC.

thesis of Johnson's critics by noting the picture "in no way glorifies the common enemy of the free world in World War II. Indeed, it is a further indictment of Hitler and his gang."³⁰ Such a position was tenable only if they accepted that Rommel was not part of Hitler's "gang." The British *Spectator*, which was generally supportive of the Conservative Party, contended that if viewed objectively, *The Desert Fox* was "a very good film indeed; intelligent, smartly written, philosophical and extraordinarily powerful." *The Spectator* reiterated the film's validity one month later when it rebuffed the arguments against the film being shown in Germany by claiming the film "brings Hitler and Hitlerism continuously into disrepute" and it "should make a favourable impression on every thoughtful German."³¹

And, not surprisingly, this was the perspective of Twentieth Century-Fox.

Immediately upon seeing Crowther's aforementioned scathing review in the *New York Times*, Zanuck, incensed at what he felt was a personal attack, wrote Twentieth Century-Fox's head of advertising and publicity Charlie Einfeld and claimed, "this is not a review of a picture, it is an attack on the integrity, judgment and patriotism of an American company." Zanuck went on to say, "this so called intellectual liberal is guilty of advocating the worst form of political censorship" because Crowther admitted it was a fine picture but disapproved of the subject. Zanuck concluded his letter with what he felt was the crux of the issue over Rommel's portrayal, its purported historical accuracy:

After all, we are only saying about Rommel *exactly what history said* and in this instance we are in pretty good company, namely Brigadier General Desmond Young, General Auchinleck and Winston Churchill ... Every

³⁰ Clippings Collection in *The Desert Fox* 1950-1952 folder at the Academy Film Archive, Margaret Herrick Library.

³¹ "A Spectator's Notebook," *The Spectator*, November 23, 1951, 697. Also, in the Nunnally Johnson collection, Desert Fox-Desmond Young folder, HGARC. Another movie reviewer of *The Spectator* went as far to claim that "Rommel is such a legendary figure ... that Mr. James Mason's [sincere] impersonation cannot fail to fall sadly short of it." *The Spectator*, October 12, 1951, 472

movement in or picture can be authenticated by existing documents and testimony at the Nuremberg Trials” [Emphasis added].³²

This was the same stance taken by Nunnally Johnson as seen in the previous chapter. Like Crowther, Johnson and Zanuck’s selective focus on particular aspects of Rommel’s character (the military and conspiracy against Hitler) convinced them that history substantiated them.

Viewers flocked to the theaters and the protests quickly dissipated. In London, twelve men donned their war medals and marched with banners on the Odeon Cinema stage in protest. How effective these conspicuous men were at disseminating their message is an open question as “police were unable to locate them.”³³ Twentieth Century-Fox smugly pointed out that the “rabble front” that initially picketed New York showings quickly fizzled out and that the film was scoring at the box office.³⁴ The studio’s publicity head urged Zanuck to ignore Crowther’s scathing review: “If I felt agitation would increase business, I would be the first to cash in on it, but I don’t think we need the agitation because we are doing so darn well.”³⁵ Zanuck agreed, stating there was no need since “apparently the public in New York is not interested in Bosley Crowther’s review ... You might want to take him up and let him see the lines in front of the Globe Theatre.”³⁶ Zanuck did not even feel the need to fly to Germany to “satisfy the necessities” about distributing the film in the FRG.³⁷ Johnson epitomized the studio’s attitude in a letter to Young on the criticism the film received:

³² Behlmer, *Memo from Darryl F. Zanuck*, 203-204.

³³ “Gone to Earth,” *Daily Express*, November 28, 1951, 5.

³⁴ Charlie Einfeld letter to Darryl Zanuck, October 22, 1951, Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC.

³⁵ Charlie Einfeld letter to Darryl Zanuck, October 22, 1951, Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC.

³⁶ Darryl Zanuck letter to Charlie Einfeld, October 22, 1951, Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC.

³⁷ Darryl Zanuck letter to Nunnally Johnson, January 7, 1952, Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC.

I was indignant about this for a while but I find that big box office reports give me a great philosophical attitude toward bad reviews. I am wise and mellow and understanding about such things, as long as the people keep coming in. The minute they stop, Crowther is a son-of-a-bitch in spades.³⁸

The people, whether Britons, Americans, or (eventually) Germans,³⁹ kept coming in to theaters “packed to capacity.” So much so that nearly two decades later, Johnson did not recall the “hell of a line-up” of critics arrayed against the film – except for the “son-of-a-bitch” Crowther.

The evidence from the written commentaries indicates views of *The Desert Fox* were linked to their attitudes toward responsibility for the crimes of Hitler’s regime. There was less dispute over facts than the interpretation or meaning of those facts; detractors interpreted Rommel’s turn against Hitler as characteristic of the opportunism that allowed for the Nazi Regime to come to power whereas the film’s proponents believed Rommel’s opposition to Hitler was evidence of his decency and thus commendable. That the film’s doubters were soon overshadowed by masses of consumers suggests the British and US publics were amenable to the notion that a German general could be professionally rather than politically motivated, and someone who was removed enough from the regime’s criminality not to bear responsibility for it. Something else to consider is that even the film’s detractors admitted it had redeeming qualities. A good film will shift positions that were previously open or not hardened. Recalling the review from *Spectator* is enlightening in this respect. The author admitted, “it may be a long time before we find out exactly how Rommel was implicated in

³⁸ Nunnally Johnson letter to Desmond Young, October 26, 1951, Nunnally Johnson collection, Desert Fox-Desmond Young folder, HGARC.

³⁹ “Rommel Film in Germany,” *The Manchester Guardian*, August 25, 1952, 10; “Recollections of Nunnally Johnson Oral History Transcript,” 295-296; “‘Desert Fox’ Fills German Theaters,” *New York Times*, August 23, 1952, 9; “Germans Fill Theaters for Rommel Movie,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 23, 1952, 5.

the plot against Hitler, and precisely how he met his death.” Just the same, the reviewer commented: “we can only say that the manner of these things suggested in the picture ... appears to be highly plausible, and indeed very probable, and bears out the known character of the Field-Marshal both as a soldier and a man.”⁴⁰ The author did not know the entirety of the historical situation, yet deemed the film’s presentation to be plausible.

Recent Scholarly Assessments of the Reception of *The Desert Fox*

Recent investigations into the film’s reception have tried to uncover why masses of viewers intuitively leaned away from the widespread criticism to make the picture a resounding box-office success. There were contextual factors that made the idea of Rommel as an honorable warrior attractive at the time. These undoubtedly played a role and nudged some people who did not have strong predispositions about Nazi Germany to accept the film. I would, however, posit not enough attention has been given to what I think is the most important factor: the poor historical understanding of the *Wehrmacht*’s complicity in genocide and how interconnected the Nazi regime and German society had been. Since these were poorly understood, moviegoers and the general public could more easily envisage that Rommel was the gallant and gentlemanly soldier who Desmond Young and Nunnally Johnson claimed he was.

In 2008 Patrick Major explored the multifaceted success of *The Desert Fox* in Great Britain in the scholarly journal *German History*. He correctly points out that the military aspect of Rommel’s reputation, or more generally the image of *Wehrmacht* as a depoliticized and remilitarized “worthy enemy,” suited a “reconstructed postwar *British* identity,

⁴⁰ C.A. Lejeune, “At the Cinema,” *The Spectator* 215, October 24, 1951, 426.

remasculinized and de-Americanized” [emphasis in original].⁴¹ The context of potential German rearmament was important, but so were factors in British culture such as the loss of Empire, the fear of American hegemony, and a bellicose strain in British society that made the military imagery of the “Desert Fox” appealing to many Britons. In particular, his interpretation of the appeal of Rommel’s masculinity is insightful and conforms to this paper’s investigation of the values esteemed in military traditions in Chapter Two.

According to Major, many Britons, too, fancied themselves as a “warrior nation” and envisioned in Rommel as a kindred spirit who not only played the game well, but also played it fair. As one reviewer of the film proclaimed:

The whole business of the gentleman’s code is an affair of men with a special outlook, of manly men, of men who regard war as a game and who can avert their eyes from the political and human significance of it ... The fact that they enjoy discipline by stronger men, and admire manly, rather than womanly, virtues makes them excellent warriors ... [Rommel] was the one German general who gave us a hiding and was defeated after a close thing.⁴²

These observations further support the contemporary estimate in Johnson’s files that 80 percent of the British public accepted the premise of Rommel as an admirable military figure.

I think it would have added more clarity if Major had investigated the negative British reception more deeply. For instance, he states, “[The film] received almost universal positive reviews in Britain ... If it did cause annoyance, it was the suggestion that *Afrika Korps* defeat had been caused by Führer meddling, rather than Allied superiority.”⁴³ As shown above, there was strident criticism that *The Desert Fox* was a whitewash of Nazi Germany. That was what motivated Esther Seares to shout in public protest of the film, “He killed our lads

⁴¹ Patrick Major, “‘Our Friend Rommel’: The *Wehrmacht* as ‘Worthy Enemy’ in Postwar British Popular Culture,” *German History* 26, no. 4 (2008): 520-535.

⁴² Quote taken from Major, “Our Friend Rommel,” 525.

⁴³ Major, “Our Friend Rommel,” 531.

and now they want to make him a hero,” when she was arrested for disturbing the peace. Likewise for what prompted the widowed Mrs. A. F. Brittain to complain to the *Daily Mirror* about the injustice of Seares’s arrest and for the *Daily Mirror* to respond: “The people we Old Pair would kick are the people who allowed the film lauding Rommel to be shown in this country.”⁴⁴ It was the failure to include Rommel’s willing association with National Socialism that prompted the *Contemporary Review* to dub the film “pernicious.”⁴⁵ This was more than annoyance. Letters to the editor in the *New York Times* reveal a similar pattern in US reception: people censured the film for forgetting the death and destruction perpetrated by the regime Rommel fought for, and took the filmmakers to task for “trying to make the United States populace forget.”⁴⁶ The common thread binding the film’s detractors suggests that before the 80 percent could appreciate and find meaning in Rommel’s military appeal, they first had to deem it plausible that a distinction ought to be drawn between him and the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime.

Revisiting the Cold War’s influence upon public opinion, historian Brian C. Etheridge perceptively notes that presuming the Western Allies felt this film suited their Cold War purposes is mistaken: the governments of the United States and the Federal Republic of Germany were hostile to Johnson’s screenplay and did not want this film released. Etheridge asserts the Cold War’s influence was important, but subtle in privileging certain narratives of German history over others. Washington and Bonn wanted to portray Germans as committed democrats *after the Second World War*, but believed that projecting such a representation of

⁴⁴ “Jailed Protesting Rommel Film,” *New York Times*, November 4, 1951, 70; Mrs. A. E. Brittain, “Daft,” Letter-to-the-editor, *The Daily Mirror*, November 9, 1951.

⁴⁵ Simon Harcourt-Smith, “Growth of a Legend - Rommel,” *Sight and Sound* 21, no. 3 (Jan/Mar 1952): 134.

⁴⁶ “Opinions Culled from the Mail,” *New York Times*, November 4, 1951, 117; Letters in the Nunnally Johnson Collection, Box 7, HGARC.

Germans back into the Nazi era was counterproductive as maintaining the image of Nazism was useful to justify the rhetoric of the Soviet totalitarian threat.⁴⁷ As Johnson's overt rehabilitation of Nazi-era Germany upset this nuanced image, the filmmaker was put on the defensive *vis-à-vis* Washington. Hence why sectors of the US government such as the State Department, House Foreign Affairs Committee, and the US High Commissioner's Office for Germany wished the film had never been made.

This is an important fact worth emphasizing given the casual connections often drawn between Cold War policy and the reputation of Rommel. Etheridge uses US High Commissioner for Germany John J. McCloy to illuminate the matter. What worried McCloy most about *The Desert Fox* was that the film insinuated that Germany would have won the war if Hitler had not interfered with his generals. In a 1951 letter to the newscaster Kaltenborn, who was an intermediary between Twentieth Century-Fox and the High Commissioner's office, McCloy wrote that lending credence to this thesis was precarious in Germany as "There is a strong tendency in this country always to explain the German failure to obtain the felicity of victory through some evil design for which the German people had no fundamental responsibility." McCloy knew the process of rearming Germany was underway and supported this practical policy. Yet McCloy contradicted the notion that US Cold War policy created a supposed need that Rommel's political rehabilitation fulfilled, stressing instead that German militarists should not be easily rehabilitated:

We are about to accept Germany as an equal partner in the free community of nations. This involves her taking a self-respecting part in the defense of those nations. This involves rearming of the Germans. It is extremely important that at this time when Germany prepares to defend herself, she should do so on a fundamental democratic basis, with all steps possible being taken to avoid the revival of the old militarist tendencies which have played so large a

⁴⁷ Brian C. Etheridge, "The Desert Fox, Memory Diplomacy, and the German Question in Early Cold War America," *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 2 (April 2008): 207-238.

part in Germany's history. German militarists and German professional officers have much to answer for in the Hitler crime; they cannot be entirely absolved from heavy responsibility for many of them were quite prepared to accept Hitler's aid in return for their own preferment.⁴⁸

McCloy did not believe that Germans were present-day democrats. He made it clear to Johnson that Germans bore a "heavy responsibility" for National Socialism and militarism was a hallmark of German history, both of which shaped his objection to the film. McCloy never accepted Johnson's rejoinder that the film served a useful purpose by improving attitudes between Americans and Germans. He replied that Rommel was a gallant soldier but "he only turned against Hitler when he felt that he had been personally affronted," the German marshal was a poor representative of legitimate resistance, and repeated his wish that the film not be shown in Germany.⁴⁹

The US State Department and the High Commissioner of Germany could ask Twentieth Century-Fox not to distribute *The Desert Fox* in Germany, but neither possessed the authority to prohibit its distribution. Thus none of the studio's arguments or justifications that it was politically helpful mattered,⁵⁰ which was fortunate since those who objected to the film's premise, such as McCloy and Crowther, remained unconvinced. *The Desert Fox* was not released in the FRG because the Western Allies wanted to rehabilitate the image of German soldiers. It was released because an American studio went against the desire of its government to make a profit, which Twentieth Century-Fox estimated at over \$1 million.⁵¹ Washington's fight against the film is a strong indicator that it was by no means obvious to

⁴⁸ John J. McCloy letter to H. V. Kaltenborn, December 18, 1951 Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC.

⁴⁹ See especially H. V. Kaltenborn letter to Nunnally Johnson, November 23, 1951; John J. McCloy letter to H. V. Kaltenborn, December 18, 1951 Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC; Nunnally Johnson letter to H. V. Kaltenborn, January 7, 1952, Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC.

⁵⁰ Nunnally Johnson letter to Lucie Rommel, November 18, 1953 in Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC.

⁵¹ Darryl Zanuck letter to Nunnally Johnson, January 7, 1953, Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC.

contemporaries what *Wikipedia* presumes: that *The Desert Fox* would serve as a “suitable tool to effect the reconciliation among the former enemies.”⁵² An interesting footnote suggests West Germans who were keen on closer integration with NATO were also cautious of the film’s prospects in that regard. Hans Speidel, the man whose postwar political career in the FRG was so dependent on the good reputation of Rommel and desperate to propagate the notion of the *Wehrmacht* as “clean” and professional, declined to get involved in the film when approached by Desmond Young (which is why his historical person is not in it).⁵³

Etheridge saw the film’s success as the unintended consequence of Washington dissuading narratives emphasizing Germany’s aggressive and militaristic past. In emphasizing the how democratic Germans of the early Cold War were, the narratives of how undemocratic they were before then were inadvertently muzzled: “In particular [the ‘forgetting’ of oppositional memories] shows the cultural power of the state in both shaping behind-the-scenes debates and discouraging dissenting narratives.”⁵⁴ To a point this is correct. The ideological clash between the two postwar superpowers had fractured what was once a Hollywood community of Communists, liberals, and other leftists – a “cultural front” – and the 1947 incarceration of the high profile “Hollywood Ten” for contempt of Congress meant that *The Desert Fox*’s most ostensible critics were on the defensive, facing the blacklist, dealing with their own legal and professional troubles, and fractured amongst themselves.⁵⁵

⁵² “The Desert Fox: The Story of Rommel,” *Wikipedia*,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Desert_Fox:_The_Story_of_Rommel, (accessed June 13, 2018).

⁵³ Desmond Young letter to Nunnally Johnson, October 2, 1950 in Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, Desert Fox-Desmond Young folder, HGARC.

⁵⁴ Etheridge, “*Memory Diplomacy*,” 223-224.

⁵⁵ For the 1930s “Cultural Front” in Hollywood, see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997); Saverio Giovacchini, *Hollywood Modernism: Film and Politics in the Age of the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001). An incisive study into the conservative attack and eventual dissolution of this front in the late 1940s is John

But ultimately this boils down to how much power the state has in influencing public opinion and whether or not London or Washington or Bonn's promotion of certain narratives is decisive such that it ought to be highlighted. Wulf Kansteiner's examination of German postwar memory is one insightful study in this regard as he makes a compelling case that scholars of collective memory have overemphasized the reach and influence state sponsored and elite discourse have on the public because most people acquire memories through popular mass media such as motion pictures, television, bestselling books, etc.⁵⁶ This is certainly the case with Rommel. Since 1945, the US and British publics learned Rommel's history almost exclusively through Young and Johnson's chart-topping creations, and perhaps going further back to Waldeck's *Reader's Digest* article. Moreover, it ought to be recalled that even though GIs were given their *Pocket Guides* and Washington pleaded and ordered them not to fraternize, they did so anyway. The case studies and examples in this study support a more indirect "top down" influence when considering the reception of Erwin Rommel or Nunnally Johnson's film. Every individual examined so far in this paper going back to 1942, be they champion or critic of Rommel – Countess Waldeck, Hanson Baldwin, Willi Frischauer, David Fraser, "Artifex," Charles Marshall, William Harden Hale, Desmond Young, Bosley Crowther, Nunnally Johnson, John J. McCloy, among others – came to their assessments of Rommel from their individual intellectual idiosyncrasies, many of which contradicted what was the predominate narrative. If the state's sponsorship of the "Cold War" narrative of German history was strong, why did Regnery admit it was unwise and unpopular to publish books sympathetic to Germany? Why did Harper and Brothers strive to

Sbardellati, *J. Edgar Hoover Goes to the Movies: The FBI and the Origins of Hollywood's Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

⁵⁶ Kansteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory*.

preempt criticism when publishing *Rommel*, a book its editorial staff incorrectly initially thought was not commercially viable? Many people who were critical of exculpatory narratives of Germany's past did not feel inhibited in expressing their opposition to the film, if anything Nunnally Johnson felt he was on the defensive at the time because of the "hell of a line-up" arrayed against him. Thus I think it is a mistake to overestimate the power of state sponsored attempts to forge a national historical consciousness.

It is clear that most people who deemed Nazi-era Germans, even gallant soldiers who tried to kill Hitler as Rommel reportedly had been, responsible for the crimes of the Third Reich would not put aside what they felt was the most important proverbial lesson of the Second World War. As for the majority who differentiated between "good" and "bad" Germans, it ought to be remembered that there was continuity here as Allied citizens during the war made distinctions between the Nazi regime and German people because the Allied governments were incapable of forging a consensus of public opinion on Germany in the first place. The commercial blockbuster of *The Desert Fox* was a manifestation of a narrative of German history toward which public opinion was already leaning.

The crux of the film's reception is why the "hell of a line-up" that campaigned against the film did not have much effect on the moviegoer masses. As this appears linked to a greater context of British and US perceptions of the German military's responsibility for Third Reich criminality, ultimately more specific and focused research into the level of historical awareness in British and US societies will shed light on why the presentation of high-ranking Germans in the Third Reich was within acceptable boundaries. It is complex,

and hard enough to figure in the case of Nunnally Johnson, where we have good evidence such as:

I've done my best to portray the enemy soldiers exactly as I portrayed the American soldiers because my guess is that soldiers are all alike. There are very few professional armies. They're all civilians in uniform, and they vary the way civilians do.⁵⁷

He was consistent, but why did he continue to guess that “soldiers were all alike” after seeing the pictures of Belsen and encountering the testimony at the Nuremberg trials demonstrating the connections between the German Army and systematic mass murder, which his critics raised to him? Why he and others held onto their instincts is something that is perhaps best explored via psychological theories of confirmation bias.⁵⁸ Still, there are patterns and themes to draw upon and build some hypotheses why Americans and Britons were willing to accept Rommel’s representation as the embodiment of the honorable warrior ethos.

By war’s end in 1945, both American and British societies knew the Germans had killed countless people and General Eisenhower’s “media blitz” coverage of the camp atrocities eliminated much doubt – a May 1945 poll had 84% of American respondents saying the “reports that the Germans have killed many people in concentration camps or let them starve to death” were true.⁵⁹ Yet, Americans continued to assert that the German government was their enemy, GIs drew distinctions between the professional *Wehrmacht* and political SS, occupation troops quickly formed cordial relations with Germans, and in general attitudes toward Germans were trending upwards by 1945. More specifically with Rommel, there is evidence that he still evinced a “strange hero-worship” despite the preponderance of

⁵⁷ “Recollections of Nunnally Johnson Oral History Transcript,” 271.

⁵⁸ For example, see Raymond S. Nickerson, “Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises,” *Review of General Psychology* 2, no. 2 (1998), 175-220.

⁵⁹ An addition 9% responded they were “true, but exaggerated.” Among those venturing a guess as to how many, the median average was 1 million. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1945): 246.

anti-German narratives. So, there is continuity in this respect. Indeed, as *The Times* accurately noted its review of the film, the mythology of the “Desert Fox” was already underway during 1942.⁶⁰

Young’s *Rommel* and Johnson’s *The Desert Fox* were quality productions that even their critics acknowledged. As the *Irish Times* aptly put it, “apart from the fact that this film should never have been made, it is still good entertainment.”⁶¹ Good literature and film will open people to new horizons of expectations. I have browsed through hundreds of Rommel-themed Internet sites and discussion threads and this qualitative crucial factor is all but absent in speculations why people accepted the “Rommel myth.” It is folly to ignore artistic quality in reception, especially as it can prompt people to accept views that contradict ostensible geopolitical needs. Historian Gavriel Rosenfeld’s research into the reception of the talented journalist William L. Shirer’s *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* in 1960-1962 – arguably the height of the Cold War marked by the erection of the Berlin Wall and the Cuban Missile Crisis – is one such example. Shirer’s 1,250 page epic is significant for two reasons: it unequivocally blamed the German people rather than Hitler for the Nazi disaster and it was a commercial sensation and became the best-known book ever published on the Nazi period.⁶² President John F. Kennedy may have famously remarked in his June 1963 speech in Berlin, “Ich bin ein Berliner,” but many US consumers applauded Shirer’s thesis that those same Berliners had direct lines of continuity with the Third Reich and were not to be trusted. The strident debates in British and US societies over Rommel’s place in history shows the issue of German responsibility for the crimes of the Third Reich was ambiguous and interpretative.

⁶⁰ “Odeon Cinema,” *The Times*, October 10, 1951, 6.

⁶¹ “London Letter,” *Irish Times*, October 15, 1951, 7.

⁶² Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, “The Reception of William L. Shirer’s *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* in the United States and West Germany, 1960-62,” in the *Journal of Contemporary History* 29 (1994): 95-128.

Quality works of art and literature like *The Desert Fox* and *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* that enabled people to make sense of those historical events were going to have a perceptible effect on the many people who did not have strong preconceptions.

Another consideration is sentimentality. One paragraph Desmond Young wrote in *Rommel* suggests he did not think very differently from those detractors who criticized his book as a whitewash:

One need not be psychic or even unduly sensitive to atmosphere to feel that something evil, not to be registered by Geiger counters, still hangs in the air of Germany to-day. Miasmas no longer arise from the ruined cities, the countryside is clean and beautiful. Relieved from the worst of their material distress, the Germans go cheerfully enough about their work. In the village inns in the evenings they sing and dance and drink their beer more lightheartedly than most of us. Hatred of the occupying troops and their camp-followers is doubtless there but it is well concealed. Why, then, is one seldom quite at ease? Perhaps because one knows that so many of the Gestapo and S.S. are still at large, with false papers or free because those who might accuse them are buried; that the polite young man who waits on one so attentively in the hotel may have the blood of hundreds on his hands. ... Perhaps the reason is a little more remote – that the taint of the Nazi regime, which has not disappeared with the suicide or execution of its leaders, will not vanish with the death of the last of their accomplices. The acid of the unceasing spying and suspicion, of arrests at dawn, of torture and sadism and murder in cellars, above all, of the lying and hypocrisy which pervade a police state, has eaten in too deep. Like the fission products, it cannot be washed out. The shadow of Hitler still darkens the German scene.⁶³

Yet this respected journalist accepted at face value what Rommel's family, friends, and associates told him. He did not probe deeper and dismissed the "left-wing boys" who panned his book (ironically by using much the same logic as Young's analogy about the taint of the Nazi regime ranging far and wide). Young valued military ethos and when in the course of his research he learned that Rommel was an honorable soldier, destroyed Hitler's criminal orders, and was compelled to kill himself because of the Nazi regime, it intimated that the

⁶³ Young, *Rommel*, 216.

“Desert Fox” was the military exemplar he had already imagined when his captor from 1942 acknowledged Young’s adherence to the military code and gave “the ghost of a smile.”

Young suspected many of the people he came across in Germany were complicit with the crimes of the Nazi regime. He nevertheless liberally interpreted evidence that suggested the Germans he interacted with and genuinely liked were not responsible for those crimes and tried to curb them. This was rationale that made Young feel better about the world: there could still be “good” Germans and a “war without hate.”

Earlier in this study, we came other examples of people seeing the best in Germans even during the latter stages of the war, such as in 1944, when Kansas farmwives baked cakes for the German POWs who worked on their farms and in April 1945 when Canon Peter Green posited that Rommel “was a gallant officer and gentleman of whom any nation might be proud.”⁶⁴ This continued in the immediate aftermath of the war and the liberation of the death camps, when US and British soldiers, administrators, and journalists fraternized with Germans and began advocating on behalf of the them. While “Nazis” were viewed as perpetrators, Germans were often not. Indeed, as noted in Chapter Eight, a 1949 CARE assessment concluded that “the greatest victim of that war was Germany itself.”⁶⁵

This sentimentality and the plausibility of positive Rommel portrayals was easier because of one common thread that runs through much of the literature and various reviews, statements, pronouncements, etc., on Erwin Rommel (and more broadly the Nazi era and the Second World War) from this time period: a lack of historical understanding. Much of the Rommel commentary comes across as naïve, particularly from those who argued his

⁶⁴ Ziffer, “Higher Education at Camp Concordia: Denazification in Kansas”; Artifex, “Above All Nations,” *The Manchester Guardian*, April 24, 1945, 3.

⁶⁵ Hoenicke-Moore, *Know Your Enemy*, 338.

ignorance of Nazi criminality. While some of those authors may have been naïve, I believe it is a mistake to leave it at that or attribute Rommel's reputation to a willful ignorance in which people blatantly avoided well-founded arguments to the contrary. The historiography of topics such as the connections between the Nazi Regime and German society, the Holocaust, and the *Wehrmacht's* participation in war crimes all lay years, sometimes even decades, into the future. Even reputable and acclaimed books like Chester Wilmot's *The Struggle for Europe* (1952) had a single index citation for "Jews, Nazi persecution of" in a 197 page book.⁶⁶ It was not until the early 1960s when Raul Hilberg wrote the landmark *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961) and mass public exposure to events such as the trial and execution of Adolf Eichmann (1961-1962) raise overall historical understanding of the victims of Nazi criminality.⁶⁷ The rhetoric that the German Army and its generals had been ignorant of genocide and had conducted themselves in accordance to the soldierly tradition was already considered acceptable in public narratives just as Desmond Young's *Rommel* went to the presses.⁶⁸ The Rommel literature and reviews from this time seem naïve because their authors lacked the benefit of seventy plus years of historical scholarship. As contemporaries had to rely on stereotypes and their pre-existing worldviews to fill in the gaps, it made them more susceptible to accepting the myth of Erwin Rommel.

We recall that some critics of Rommel were also partial, imputed their own biases, and often had a worse grasp on the facts than supporters of Johnson's film *The Desert Fox*. When Bosley Crowther, William Harden Hale, Harvey A. DeWeerd, etc., claimed that

⁶⁶ Chester Wilmot, *The Struggle for Europe* (New York: Harper & Brothers: 1952).

⁶⁷ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961); Michael R Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (Toronto: Key Porter, 2006); Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York: Owl, 2000),

⁶⁸ Bloxham, *Genocide on Trial*; Bartov, *Germany's War and the Holocaust*; Smelser and Davies, *The Myth of the Eastern Front* each offer perceptive insights.

Rommel was a “hoodlum,” joined the Nazi Party, had contempt for his British opponents, or represented a “Teutonic form of Social Contract,” they were privileging what they wanted to believe and (incorrect) hearsay that derived from reporting during the Second World War. When Nunnally Johnson remarked about McCloy’s objection to showing the film in the FRG by asserting, “to judge from some of Mr. McCloy’s statements about Rommel, my research has been a little more thorough than his,” he was not wrong.⁶⁹ Indeed, what steeled Johnson’s conviction was that he had a better grasp of Rommel’s biographical facts than many of his critics, which prompted him to interpret their assessments as being borne from ignorance.

Historiography is always in flux as old orthodoxies are replaced by new interpretations. There had always been two images of Rommel, the gallant “Desert Fox” and the “Favorite of Hitler.” In the early 1950s, the balance had shifted in favor of the “Desert Fox.” The Nuremberg trials had established that he had fought cleanly, most of his detractors agreed he was in the conspiracy against Hitler (even if they questioned his motives), and much of the negative publicity that was associated with him, such as sleeping outside Hitler’s door, had been debunked. The state of historical knowledge at that time weighed against the estimated 20 percent of the public who felt it was harmful to admire Rommel, especially as *The Desert Fox* was a quality production. The notion that the responsibility for genocide lay just with a fanatical Nazi clique and that the apparent humanity demonstrated by an enemy general who “burned” Hitler’s orders made intuitive sense, an attractive viewpoint as it allowed people to believe that most of humanity is inherently good.

⁶⁹ Letter to H.V Kaltenborn, January 7, 1952, Nunnally Johnson collection, Box 7, HGARC.

Chapter 11

Brilliance and Blind Spots: Liddell Hart and the German Generals

Sir Basil H. Liddell Hart (1895-1970), often referred to as Captain Liddell Hart, is at first glance the most straightforward of the creators of the three seminal Rommel hagiographies. He was seen as the intellectual godfather of the famous German *Blitzkrieg* strategy until the 1980s, when scholars began to uncover evidence that this was a legend fostered by the English military theorist himself, who unfailingly and incorrectly claimed that the Germans had adopted his ideas. That it was Liddell Hart who edited the English language edition of Rommel's memoirs and published them in 1953 makes for an almost ineluctable conclusion, best expressed by US scholar John J. Mearsheimer in 1988:

To portray the German generals in highly favorable terms and then link himself with the most highly regarded among them ... His ultimate goal was straightforward: to convince others that the roots of the great German victory [in 1940 France] could be traced back to him; that not only was he not responsible for the allied defeat, but he bore much of the credit for the German victory.¹

While this hypothesis is difficult to argue against, it nevertheless fails to address *why* he did so. Liddell Hart was not a conniver intent on falsifying history, instead he imputed meanings into historical events to make the unfolding of history meaningful to himself. He portrayed the German generals as honest professionals because his political passions blinded him to the scale of Nazi atrocities. He anointed Rommel as a "Great Captain" of history because he had convinced himself that the "Desert Fox" best personified his military theories on the battlefield (and thus demonstrated their excellence). Liddell Hart's inner make-up warped the perceptions of this otherwise intelligent and learned man that resulted in an almost

¹ John J. Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History* (Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press: 1988). 184.

reverential perspective on the German military and specifically Rommel, which he adamantly believed was correct.

Basil Liddell Hart: Defender of Democracy and Champion of the *Wehrmacht*

During the twentieth century, Liddell Hart was heralded by perceptive observers from British historian A.J.P. Taylor to US President John F. Kennedy as “the unique authority in military affairs” and given plaudits such as “no expert on military affairs has better earned the right to respectful attention than B.H. Liddell Hart.”² Much of his towering reputation rested on the belief that he had foreseen the devastating German *Blitzkrieg* tactics, warnings of which his own country had foolishly ignored. Writing in 1977, British military historian Brian Bond considered that he was “universally recognized” as the intellectual godfather of armored warfare.³ Yigal Allon, one of the founders of the Israeli Defense Force, bestowed on him the oft-repeated tribute of “the Captain who teaches Generals.”⁴

Yet he was not always seen as such. In fact, Liddell Hart’s reputation was in tatters by 1945. Scholars disagree to what extent the English military theorist selectively chose his own modified theories to support his claim that the *Blitzkrieg* was his brainchild. Nevertheless, there are some salient points in his biography that we can state with confidence. During the 1920s Liddell Hart was not the only military pioneer theorizing about the dynamic potential tanks offered in offensives; fellow countryman Colonel J.F.C. Fuller was particularly influential, and theorists such as Mikhail Tukhachevsky, Charles de

² A.J.P. Taylor, “A Prophet Vindicated,” “Review of *The Memoirs of Captain Liddell Hart*, vol. 2,” in *The Observer*, October 31, 1965, 27; John F. Kennedy, “Book in the News,” review of *Deterrent or Defense*, by B.H. Liddell Hart, *Saturday Review of Literature*, September 3, 1960, 17.

³ Brian Bond, *Liddell Hart: A Study of His Military Thought* (London: Cassell, 1977), 4.

⁴ Allon’s tribute in an inscribed photograph that was given as a gift to Liddell Hart and is now on display in the Liddell Hart Center for Military Archives at King’s College in London. Liddell Hart had similar photographic tributes paid to him from noteworthy generals such as Heinz Guderian and Israeli general Ariel Sharon, among others.

Gaulle, and Heinz Guderian similarly envisioned mechanized offensives. By the 1930s, Liddell Hart had altered his emphasis from tanks and argued that modern weaponry had given predominance to the military defensive. Also contrary to popular myth, his standing gave him considerable influence in British military policy. He helped shape the disastrous decision by Chamberlain's government to cut funding for the British army, which rendered it unprepared for war. When war came, his predictions about the 1940 French campaign were completely wrong. Rather than cementing his reputation, the *Blitzkrieg* shattered it.⁵

It took roughly a decade for Liddell Hart to emerge from eclipse. During the Second World War, Liddell Hart's politics made him, in the words of his biographer Alex Danchev, "mad, bad and dangerous to know."⁶ He spent much of the war in isolation (and under surveillance from the British government) from where he continuously condemned the Allied conduct of war as barbarous. In contrast, he erroneously assumed the elegance with which the Germans waged "the art of war to a new pitch of skill" was evidence of the opposite.⁷ His strident condemnations of the Allied conduct of war were so out of step with British public opinion that George Orwell supposed the English military theorist as "inclined to pro-German subjectivity."⁸

After the war, Liddell Hart maintained his sympathetic stance toward the German military and reached out to its defeated generals, many of them languishing in prison. He

⁵ A good contemporary assessment of Liddell Hart's association with the military defense is Irving M. Gibson "Maginot and Liddell Hart: The Doctrine of Defense" in Edward Mead Earle, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943), 365-387. For an overview of Liddell Hart's career, see Bond, *Liddell Hart*, Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History* and Alex Danchev, *Alchemist of War, The Life of Basil Liddell Hart* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson: 1998). Alaric Searle, "A Very Special Relationship: Basil Liddell Hart, Wehrmacht Generals and the Debate on West German Rearmament, 1945-1953," *War in History* 5, no. 3 (July 1998): 327-357 provides a good insight into the overarching political context.

⁶ Alex Danchev, *Alchemist of War*, 214.

⁷ See Bond, *Liddell Hart*, 119-163 and Danchev, *Alchemist of War*, 214-239.

⁸ Taken from Danchev, *Alchemist of War*, 227.

personally visited them, supplied them with food parcels, and energetically criticized what he judged was their unjust treatment. He did so because he was a kind-hearted man who, in Bond's judgement, had "feelings of compassion for a beaten enemy who, in his opinion, had fought honourably and with great skill."⁹ Liddell Hart's intentions were noble and professional, however he had an overinflated sense of his own influence and interpreted what he wanted to hear from the German generals. Thus, the English military theorist put words in their mouth through his own publications such as *The Other Side of the Hill* (1948) and speciously connected his 1920s musings on mechanized warfare with the early German *Blitzkrieg* victories, which also obscured his erroneous predictions of the 1930s.¹⁰ By the time *The Rommel Papers* was published in 1953, he was so associated with the German *Blitzkrieg* that he was not seen as an impartial voice. In its review of the book, *The Times* noted the latent partisanship and asserted that Liddell Hart was "a doubtful choice for the post of editor of *The Rommel Papers*: a suspicion arises that the portrait painter is sometimes looking in the mirror."¹¹

The was much validity in the critique raised by *The Times*, however *The Rommel Papers* was not edited with the conscious attempt to deceive. Rather, it was the product of a man whose intellectual idiosyncrasies led him to believe that Rommel was a "Great Captain"

⁹ Quote taken from Bond, *Liddell Hart*, 228. See also Danchev, *Alchemist of War*; Jay Luvaas, "Liddell Hart and the Mearsheimer Critique: A Pupil's Retrospective" in *Parameters* 20 (March 1990): 9-19 available here: <http://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/parameters/articles/1990/1990%20luvaas.pdf>, (accessed March 18, 2018).

¹⁰ There are various interpretations regarding Liddell Hart's relationship with the German Generals. Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History*, is highly critical and argues that Liddell Hart himself had failed to appreciate the potential of *Blitzkrieg* and manipulated the historical record to make it appear otherwise. Jay Luvaas, "Liddell Hart" is a crucial counterpoint. Bond, *Liddell Hart* and more generally Danchev, *Alchemist of War*, provide a more nuanced interpretation that acknowledges Liddell Hart's altruistic motives for contacting the German generals and also do not understate his influence as a theorist. Searle, "A Very Special Relationship" notes the importance of German rearmament.

¹¹ "German Generals Recent Books," *The Times*, April 22, 1953, 8.

and the embodiment of the honorable warrior ethos. US military historian Jay Luvaas, who as a student had lived with Liddell Hart, recounted an anecdote indicative of how the English military theorist was convinced of his correctness in hindsight:

...when he read proofs to a book I was about to publish he did insist that I insert the word “deep” before “strategic penetration” in a part characterizing some past writings of his own. I could not understand why the point seemed so important, and when I retorted that this was not the way it was worded in his analysis of the Mongol campaigns, he replied that it should have been obvious from the context that it was what he had meant. I conceded the point, but wondered at the time why he was being such a stickler about it. It makes some sense to me now, but I do not accept the notion that he was mounting a deliberate campaign [of deception]. It was evident from his manner that he honestly believed it.¹²

When interpreting the past, Liddell Hart often justified why the evidence supported what he wanted to believe. British historian Brian Bond, who knew Liddell Hart well, likewise noted that the English military theorist allowed his preoccupations and prejudices to affect his judgment and was “not as dispassionate and ‘scientific’ as he liked to imagine.”¹³ There are three recurring themes in which this thought pattern led Liddell Hart to questionable conclusions: his penchant for undervaluing the importance of non-military factors in warfare, his admiration of military brilliance, and his obstinance in believing that he was always right.

Throughout his career, Liddell Hart’s professional writings on military history reveal little analysis of the political and ideological currents of war. This was the judgment he made of Germany after the First World War:

Finally, *whatever be the verdict of history on her policy*, unstinted tribute is due to the incomparable endurance and skill with which Germany more than held her own for four years against superior numbers – an epic of military and human achievements” [emphasis added].¹⁴

¹² Luvaas, “Liddell Hart and the Mearsheimer Critique,” 13.

¹³ Quote taken from Bond, *Liddell Hart*, 113.

¹⁴ Basil Liddell Hart, *The Real War, 1914-1918* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1930), 476.

Similarly, his study of the US Civil War portrayed it as more a competition between commanders and tactics rather than a larger conflict fundamentally rooted in a clash of different economies and societies.¹⁵ This was characteristic of a mind that conceived of war as an art to be studied and admired, much like a game of chess. It was precisely the mindset that would be attracted to the “war without hate” narrative of the campaign in the Western Desert and made him vulnerable to the notion that the German generals of the *Wehrmacht*, those he believed “brought the art of war to a new pitch of skill,” were upstanding men.

Liddell Hart had a strong affinity for soldiers and the profession of soldiering. In his later years, he liked to mock something he recorded during his training as an officer: “If you could have war without its *explosive* horrors it would be a good thing. I worship brilliance and brilliance seems to find its truest and fullest expression in the art of generalship” [emphasis in original].¹⁶ However, his writings spanning his career indicate this pining for a “pure” war never went away and that brilliant military commanders were heroes to him. While dining with T.E. Lawrence, the British colonel had to remind Liddell Hart that Lawrence of Arabia was not “the Spirit of Freedom come incarnate to a world in fetters” as he had written in his biography.¹⁷ This mindset is what prompted him to call the alleged war criminal Rundstedt in 1948 a “gentleman to the core” who had a “quiet dignity in adversity and uncomplaining acceptance of hard conditions – that were not credit to his captors.”¹⁸

In social interactions, Liddell Hart was a modest man and at times quite deferential. Yet when it came to intellectual matters that he had committed to publication, he was

¹⁵ B.H. Liddell Hart, *Sherman: Soldier, Realist, American* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993). Originally published in 1929 by New York: Dodd, Mead & Co.

¹⁶ Taken from Bond, *Liddell Hart*, 15-16.

¹⁷ Bond, *Liddell Hart*, 84-85.

¹⁸ B.H. Liddell Hart, *The German Generals Talk* (New York: William Morrow, 1948) ix, 71.

ceaselessly convinced of his correctness. In jest, Luvaas noted that in all of his host's voluminous files, he not once found the phrase, "I was wrong."¹⁹ Liddell Hart was not the sort of thinker who through introspection amended his beliefs. Instead, he seized selective evidence and use the benefit of hindsight to prove to himself and others that he had been right all along. During the Second World War, he pointed to examples of Allied war crimes in his personal papers to defend his dubious assertion that the Germans were waging war more "correctly." Even his friends felt that Liddell Hart was unconsciously applying two different standards.²⁰ After the war, he condemned the Nuremberg trials and took Goebbels's diary entries complaining of the humanitarian nature of the German generals as evidence the German army should not be judged differently than those of the Allies.²¹ When *The Manchester Guardian* challenged Liddell Hart for having an "overdeveloped sense of fair play that blinds him to the moral rottenness of the men he so assiduously whitewashes," he retorted that it was "remarkable" to the "extent to which [the German generals] had managed to maintain a code of decency that was in constant conflict with Nazi ideas."²²

Liddell Hart came to such a conclusion because for him, how one waged war revealed something about that person's character, and he was not interested in the nexus between non-military elements and warfare. It was from such a perspective that this intelligent, learned, kind-hearted man, and steadfast defender of democracy could have exhibited such bad judgment. It was also how someone who proudly recounted in his memoirs his sympathy for Jews predated the founding of the state of Israel, yet in his book on the Second World War –

¹⁹ Luvaas, "Liddell Hart and the Mearsheimer Critique," 13.

²⁰ Bond, *Liddell Hart*, 153-154.

²¹ For his reference to Goebbels's diary, see "Case against the War Trials," taken from Bond, *Liddell Hart*, 182-183.

²² "The German Generals Oblige," *The Manchester Guardian*, April 22, 1948, 4; Liddell Hart, Letter to the Editor, *The Manchester Guardian*, April 29, 1948, 4.

published in 1970, nearly a decade after Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* – made no mention of Auschwitz and had no commentary on Nazi Germany's murderous occupation policies.²³ The peculiarity of Liddell Hart's approach to military affairs can be gleaned from the numerous inscribed signed photographs lined up in his office featuring generals from the *Wehrmacht* such as Guderian and Hasso von Manteuffel intermixed with those of Allon and Ariel Sharon from the Israel Defense Force.

Liddell Hart's Infatuation with Germany's Generals

Almost immediately after the fall of France, Liddell Hart judged that the German victory in that campaign had validated his theory of the "indirect approach" from the 1920s.²⁴ Although this view was sharply challenged as "entirely antiquated and obsolete" as soon as Liddell Hart put it into print,²⁵ that did not deter him from believing what he supposed was true. He wrote the following to the poet Robert Graves in 1943:

Germany's greatest generals – Rommel, Guderian, Manstein – have said that they won their victories early in the war by applying my ideas – and that *our* defeats could have been prevented if our leaders had applied them. It should thus be plain that I could have saved the West in 1940, if officialdom had let me help – and that I might do so again."²⁶

This is selective memory. Liddell Hart always wanted the British military establishment to adopt a potent armored force, but abandoned such pie in the sky notions and instead advised British officialdom not to repeat a 1914-1918 continental involvement (which Chamberlain's government promptly followed). Liddell Hart told himself this fiction so many times he

²³ B.H. Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1970).

²⁴ To oversimplify a complicated topic, Liddell Hart argued that direct frontal assaults against enemy strongpoints rarely achieved decisive results. He instead advocated that advances should follow the line of least resistance, even if this meant moving away from the primary objective, as this was likely to upset the defender's balance. It was an attempt to avoid a repeat of the prolonged costly battles of the First World War.

²⁵ "A Depressing Prophet," *National Review* 116, no. 698 (April 1941): 494-495.

²⁶ Taken from Danchev, *Alchemist of War*, 189-190.

convinced himself and eventually many contemporary observers of its veracity by the time of his acclaimed 1965 memoir.²⁷

Liddell Hart's first public writing on Rommel after the war was in January 1946 for the popular US periodical *Harper's*. Interestingly, he characterized Rommel as a disciple of Nazi expansionist ideology who had left the army in the 1930s to "become a minor leader of Nazi storm troopers." This was utterly inconsistent with Liddell Hart's public statements about the professionalism of the *Wehrmacht* and ought to be taken as indicative of how pervasive the "Hitler favorite" representations of Rommel were in the immediate aftermath of the war. At any rate, the presumed Nazi connections did not seem to devalue his appraisal. The English military theorist still disassociated the *Wehrmacht* from responsibility for Third Reich policy by remarking that "the ex-corporal and his Nazi amateurs" had exerted their authority "over the professionals." He then hailed Rommel's military ability by affording him the lion's share of the credit for successes, blaming others for his defeats, and summed up with very high praise: "he was a military genius – more so than any other soldier who succeeded in rising to high command in the war."²⁸

These assessments were characteristic of what Liddell Hart wanted to believe. Even though he admitted Rommel was a disciple of Nazi ideology, the English military theorist still argued that the army "professionals" had lost their authority. Moreover, while Rommel was an excellent tactical commander, he did not possess the military resume to live up to the superlative reputation Liddell Hart gave him. For instance, British General William Slim attained strategic victory in a military theater with limited resources whereas Rommel did

²⁷ B.H. Liddell Hart, *The Memoirs of Captain Liddell Hart* (London: Cassell, 1965).

²⁸ "The German Generals I. Seeckt, Brauchitsch, Halder, Bock, and Especially Rommel" *Harper's Magazine* 192 (Jan 1946): 57-66.

not, and Soviet Marshal Georgy Zhukov's accomplishments at the operational level on the Eastern Front was something Rommel never attained. A keen student of military affairs, Liddell Hart should have recognized this. His selective emphasis on the ephemeral brilliance of the "Desert Fox" hampered his professional judgment.

Liddell Hart's best-known book, *The Other Side of the Hill* (1948),²⁹ is most important for its political message that the German generals were honest professionals in fundamental opposition to National Socialism. It was a forceful articulation of the clean *Wehrmacht* thesis that was gaining momentum in Great Britain and the United States, and which would buttress Rommel's reputation, as well as those of other German generals. Liddell Hart's motivation in writing this book is best encapsulated by a reply he made to a Jewish friend who suggested he was too benevolent in viewing the German generals: "My attitude to the German generals is not one of benevolence, but one – I hope – of understanding: understanding human nature and the situation in which they were placed." He then argued the German generals "almost fell over backwards" to keep out of politics and, citing General Blaskowitz's objection to SS atrocities in Poland, was surprised by how much they protested and maintained a code of decency.³⁰ In the previous chapter, I argued that some people accepted positive images of Rommel because it might have made them feel good about themselves and the world. That is particularly relevant with B.H. Liddell Hart, who was a kind-hearted man who pined for a romanticized war unadulterated by politics, civilian deaths, or the slaughter of 1914-1918, which he had personally experienced, suffering a serious gas injury during the Battle of the Somme.

²⁹ The book was titled *The German Generals Talk* by US publishers. There are a few differences between the two versions, though the substance and Liddell Hart's message is the same. I cite the US version for convenience.

³⁰ Taken from Bond, *Liddell Hart*, 180-181.

Based on two years of cordial talks with many of the *Wehrmacht*'s high-level commanders in Allied prisons, Liddell Hart accepted what his interviewees told him. *The Other Side of the Hill* purports to correct historical narratives of the German perspective, which the author alleged were colored by "legends" and "delusions." The book's overarching theme is that the German generals were "essentially technicians, intent on their professional job, and with little idea of things outside it." Liddell Hart asserted that the German General Staff "tended to be more of a brake upon [Hitler's] aggressive plans than an impetus to them."³¹ Liddell Hart also attributed much of the blame for Germany's defeat to Hitler's interference; he claimed that the British evacuation at Dunkirk was successful because "Hitler's intervention saved them – when nothing else could have."³² He concluded:

The German generals of this war were the best-finished product of the profession – anywhere. They could have been better if their outlook had been wider and their understanding deeper. But if they had become philosophers they would have ceased to be soldiers.³³

This was the assessment of someone who wanted to believe and engaging in uncritical thinking. He extolled T.E. Lawrence as a soldier and philosopher in his 1934 biography.³⁴ Liddell Hart was looking for excuses to rationalize how the Germans generals could be brilliant soldiers yet naïve in matters beyond the military.

Comparing Liddell Hart's assessments of Rommel in 1948 with 1946, the English military somewhat tempered his enthusiasm. He pointed out more of Rommel's defects and included the biting criticism from the German General Staff trained officers he interviewed

³¹ Liddell Hart, *German Generals Talk*, x, 5, 27, 32-33, 81, 113.

³² Liddell Hart, *German Generals Talk*, 106.

³³ Liddell Hart, *German Generals Talk*, 300.

³⁴ Liddell Hart, *Lawrence of Arabia* (New York: De Capo Press, 1989). Originally published as 'T.E. Lawrence' in *Arabia and After* (London: 1934)

that Rommel was “only less of an amateur than Hitler.”³⁵ The book gave the highest praise to Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, “the ablest of all German generals” and “the Allies’ most formidable military opponent.”³⁶ Although Liddell Hart may have found a new military favorite, the book was hardly a devaluation of the “Desert Fox.” He did not elaborate on the negative opinion of Rommel’s peers, let alone note the validity of their criticisms, and instead blamed defeats on a neglectful Hitler and the German High Command. Singular credit was given for battlefield successes despite being outnumbered on both the ground and in the air: “No other generals on either side gained the victory under such conditions.”³⁷ As Hanson Baldwin noted in his *New York Times* review, “Mr. Hart has very considerable military praise for Rommel – the ‘solider in the sun.’”³⁸ Moreover, the connections to Nazi ideology were gone; Liddell Hart had no reservations accepting that premise. Liddell Hart’s still generous military assessment of Rommel in the face of contradictory information from sources he valued indicated a mindset that still clung onto his preconceived notion of the “Desert Fox.”

It is difficult to assess the impact *The Other Side of the Hill* had because it was poorly received by many Western commentators, yet exhibited remarkable longevity: it has a 2002 edition published by New York’s Perennial. The initial negative reception may have been the consequence of the author, the *Wehrmacht*, and Rommel all having relatively poor reputations in 1948. Liddell Hart was sharply challenged in his depoliticization of the

³⁵ Liddell Hart, *German Generals Talk*, 45-54.

³⁶ Liddell Hart, *German Generals Talk*, 63-67.

³⁷ Liddell Hart, *German Generals Talk*, 45-54.

³⁸ Hanson W. Baldwin, “Hitler’s Generals Speak Their Minds,” *New York Times*, October 17, 1948, BR5. Depending on the version and publisher of this book, the following sentence is sometimes added at the end of the “‘Soldier in the Sun’ – Rommel” chapter: “The more deeply his record is examined the clearer it becomes that both his gifts and his performance, in a theatre of independent command, qualified him for a place in the role of the “Great Captains” of history. Liddell Hart did claim he had a greater appreciation for the “Desert Fox” after personally examining his writings. It is likely Baldwin read a more flattering edition.

German officer corps, and the book elicited incredulity. As a reviewer for the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* wrote in 1949:

In the spirit of an over-all apologia for losing – a pretty good war at that, had it not been for that “stumble-bum” Hitler! [The German generals] do not mention their own concentration camps and gas chambers, the grinding of tanks over their own wounded, their target practice with live children, their violation of everything decent ... All I find in this arrogant bravado is a regret for lost chances.”³⁹

A member of the US Army’s Historical Division who had conducted hundreds of interrogations of German officers derided the book as *An Exercise in the Use of Multiple Mouthpieces* because he found it “extremely irritating but even destructive of the book’s validity when virtually every German is made to utter unctuous phrases to the effect that the author’s books had taught them all they knew about warfare.”⁴⁰ Baldwin of the *New York Times* was willing to accept the book’s military judgment of Rommel, however he thought the book was “not successful in exculpating the German generals from their share of responsibility for World War II.”⁴¹ Notwithstanding the skepticism of these respected reviews took in early 1949, in just a few years – after the release of Young’s biography and Johnson’s motion picture – the book would find a much more fertile context and its author a professional renaissance. By 1951, its publisher Cassell offered an “Enlarged and Revised Edition.”⁴²

How Rommel Became Liddell Hart’s “Pupil” in Armored Warfare

³⁹ Boris Erich Nelson, Review of *The German Generals Talk* by B.H. Liddell Hart in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 262 (March 1949): 198-199.

⁴⁰ Frank C. Mahin, Review of *The German Generals Talk* by B.H. Liddell Hart in *Military Affairs* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1949): 57-58.

⁴¹ Baldwin, “Hitler’s General Speak Their Minds.”

⁴² B.H. Liddell Hart, *The Other Side of the Hill*, (London: Cassell, 1951).

Linking the English military theorist to Rommel's military tactics is problematic. Rommel was an infantry soldier until February 1940 and had previously been an opponent of tank warfare. Moreover, the German marshal did not read much abstract military theory; he was a practical and instinctive man who based his soldiering almost entirely on experience. Much of his aggressive approach, his flair, and the penchant for deception that characterized him as a commander in the Second World War is on display in every chapter of his 1937 manual on battalion level combat in the First World War, *Infanterie greift an*. Indeed, in that book there is the same impulsive commander disobeying his superiors and instinctively attacking perceived enemy weaknesses (which was how he won his *Pour le Mérite*) that was typical of Rommel during the Second World War.⁴³ The only British officer he read closely was his first African opponent Wavell, whom he regarded highly. Rommel became a believer in tank warfare during the Polish campaign while commanding Hitler's security battalion. Heinz Linge, one of Hitler's military orderlies, wrote in his memoir that the German dictator was especially fond of Rommel and:

He explained to Rommel that the theory of cooperation between panzers, assault troops and Stuka dive-bombers and showed him how quick victories would prevent the enemy from seizing the tactical and strategic initiative. I had the impression that Rommel soaked up every word the *Führer* uttered.⁴⁴

⁴³ Rommel's account of the series of engagements that led to his *Pour le Mérite* can be found in Erwin Rommel, *Attacks* (Provo, UT: Athena Press, 1979), 201-325. Two other poignant examples are from his account of a January 29, 1915 attack in the Argonne, in which he had disregarded an order to withdraw as support was not possible (and subsequent lamentations that the rest of the German Army failed to exploit his ephemeral tactical success), and when he confidently rushed French soldiers armed with just a bayonet (which ended in failure and getting shot, leaving him to conclude, "In a man to man fight, the winner is he who has one more round in his magazine."), 58-60 and 61-73.

⁴⁴ Heinz Linge, *With Hitler to the End: The Memoirs of Adolf Hitler's Valet*, trans. Geoffrey Brooks (London: Frontline Books, 2009), 120.

Rommel then applied these military innovations to replicate his experience infiltrating and assaulting enemy positions with elite infantry in the First World War.⁴⁵ Evidence that he read Liddell Hart's early writings is scant and questionable. The only explicit mention I know of that Rommel made of Liddell Hart in his letters, lectures, diaries, etc, was a single sentence in his memoir describing the aftermath of the British defeat at Tobruk: "After the battle I came upon an article by the British military critic, Liddell Hart, which ascribed the shortcomings of the British command during the African campaign to the British generals' close association with infantry warfare. I had the same impression. The British command had not drawn the correct conclusions from their defeat of 1941-42."⁴⁶ Rommel was referring to a Liddell Hart publication in 1942, when the English military theorist had been wise after the fact. Nevertheless, readers of *The Rommel Papers* were told precisely the opposite; namely that Rommel, along with Guderian, were Liddell Hart's pupils.

This distortion of the historical record was less the consequence of a conscious attempt to doctor it than the failing of memory. The anecdote historian Jay Luvaas offered about Liddell Hart's insistence on inserting phrases that "should have been obvious" and the English military theorist's penchant for seeing what he wanted to believe strongly suggest a motivation to clarify and amend. And so Liddell Hart initiated contact with Guderian in autumn 1948 by sending him a copy of *The Other Side of the Hill*. The two soon struck up a cordial relationship and Liddell Hart worked hard on getting a British publisher for Guderian's memoir, *Panzer Leader* (1952). Guderian apparently recognized the unspoken quid pro quo – he and his fellow generals (many of them in prison) had much to gain from

⁴⁵ An insightful examination into the evolution of Rommel's military beliefs is Peter Caddick-Adams, *Monty and Rommel: Parallel Lives* (New York: Overlook Press, 2012).

⁴⁶ Rommel, *Krieg ohne Hass* (Heidenheim/Brenz: Verlag Heidenheimer Zeitung, 1950), 126-127.

the sympathy of a British military commentator. So in *Panzer Leader*, he included an exact phrase from Liddell Hart to embellish his influence and sent him an inscribed portrait, signing it “from one of his disciples in tank affairs.”⁴⁷ Liddell Hart similarly suggested to Manstein that the brilliant “Sickle cut” thrust plan for the 1940 French campaign originated from his own earlier writings. However Manstein, although serving a prison sentence for war crimes, rejected these overtures and refused to have his military reputation diminished by diluting credit for a famous military maneuver.⁴⁸ This did not prevent Liddell Hart from making the claim himself in his own memoir.⁴⁹

Liddell Hart had better luck with Rommel’s family and Rommel confidant Fritz Bayerlein, a former *Afrikakorps* colleague who aided in the compilation of Rommel’s scattered writings that would become *The Rommel Papers*. When Desmond Young approached Liddell Hart in November 1949 about editing Rommel’s unfinished memoir, the English military theorist seized the opportunity. John Mearsheimer’s scholarly detective work documents the paper trail that led from Liddell Hart’s pen to transform this accurate representation of Rommel’s vague knowledge of “British military critics” into the following footnote in *The Rommel Papers*:

Note by General Bayerlein – Rommel was here referring to Captain Liddell Hart and General Fuller. In his opinion the British could have avoided most of their defeats if only they had paid more heed to the modern theories expounded by those two writers before the war. During the war, in many conferences and personal talks with Field-Marshal Rommel, we discussed Liddell Hart’s military works, which won our admiration. Of all military writers, it was Liddell Hart who made the deepest impression on the Field-Marshal – and greatly influenced his tactical and strategic thinking. He, like Guderian, could in many respects be termed Liddell Hart’s pupil.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Photo in Liddell Hart, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, between 194-195. It is also in the Liddell Hart Center for Military Archives.

⁴⁸ Bond, *Liddell Hart*, 232-234.

⁴⁹ Liddell Hart, *Memoirs*, vol. 2, 203-204.

⁵⁰ Rommel, *Rommel Papers*, 299; Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History*, 191-198.

Bayerlein wrote this because Liddell Hart asked him to. After procuring this manufactured evidence, Liddell Hart immediately asked Young to include it in subsequent editions of his Rommel biography.⁵¹ Young obliged and then some. He included the footnote, which uses the same crucial language regarding Liddell Hart's specific influence and Rommel being a "pupil." Young also amended the narrative text of his book. In the original British edition, he had correctly written that Rommel's preparation for his part in the 1940 campaign against France was based on the lessons he had learned in Poland. In the US edition Young added the sentence: "Both he and Guderian had already studied the writings of General Fuller and Captain Liddell Hart with more attention than they received from most British senior officers."⁵²

The surviving Rommels (and perhaps Bayerlein) acquiesced to this because they were rightly worried about the reputation of Erwin. His public standing in the United States and Great Britain in the late 1940s was that of a politicized Nazi and overrated "Hitler favorite." Even within Germany, Rommel's future was not a safe bet. The *Wehrmacht* was in disgrace for losing a disastrous war. And throughout his career, Rommel had made many more rivals than friends among the general staff, the high profile officers who would likely write the first histories of the war. Manfred Rommel stated that his father had written his memoirs because he was "anxious that an objective account of his actions should survive his possible death so that his intentions could not be misinterpreted."⁵³ Lucie explicitly mentioned the "biases [that] led some General Staff officers to severely criticize my husband after the war to Allied

⁵¹ Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History*, 194-195.

⁵² Young, *Rommel* (US edition), 48, 248. The original British edition on pages 66-67 and 274 do not include Liddell Hart's fiction.

⁵³ Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, xxiii.

interrogators” in her Foreword to *Krieg ohne Hass*.⁵⁴ There was a precedent here. During the First World War, Rommel submitted an official protest when he was initially passed over for the *Pour le Mérite* because another officer was credited for a crucial objective that Rommel had captured.⁵⁵ Desmond Young’s initial correspondence with Liddell Hart revealed the family’s concern that Rommel’s perspective would not be treated fairly *vis-à-vis* his rivals in the German general staff. Moreover, the Allies in 1949 were still imprisoning German generals. Liddell Hart’s correspondence with Lucie and Manfred indicates the Rommels were worried about the influence of Erwin’s rivals in the General Staff (with whom Liddell Hart had fostered an amicable relationship while writing *The Other Side of the Hill*). The English military theorist quickly removed these fears by showing his high regard for the “Desert Fox,” which assuaged Manfred, who then indicated his appreciation for how Liddell Hart objectively represented the German side of the war.⁵⁶

The fact the Rommels were still worried about Erwin’s reputation in 1949 is another indication that attributing the Rommel legend to wartime British excuses, the *Attentat*, and the Cold War is an oversimplification. It was not obvious that there would be a future renaissance for the “Desert Fox” and so Bayerlein and the Rommels told Liddell Hart what he wanted to hear, that Erwin Rommel had read his writings. In retrospect, they did not have to do this. The English military theorist was already smitten by the “Desert Fox” and the reception of *The Rommel Papers* (analyzed below) reveals that there were enough experts in Great Britain and the United States who thought highly of Rommel’s generalship. Liddell

⁵⁴ Lucie Rommel, “Vorwort,” *Krieg ohne Hass*.

⁵⁵ Remy, *Mythos Rommel*, 22-26.

⁵⁶ There are several relevant letters involving Desmond Young, Liddell Hart, Manfred Rommel, and Lucie Rommel in Liddell Hart Military Archives, 9/24/23 and 9/24/24 at King’s College, London. Particularly relevant are a December 28, 1949 letter from Manfred Rommel to Liddell Hart and a March 10, 1950 letter from Desmond Young to Manfred Rommel.

Hart profited more from the association with his purported “pupil” than the other way around.

Hagiography Substantiated: Analysis of *The Rommel Papers*

Before *The Rommel Papers* was released to its English-language audience, it was published in Germany under the title *Krieg ohne Hass* [War without Hate] by Verlag Heidenheimer Zeitung in 1950 (and after the release of Desmond Young’s *Rommel*). There are important differences. Liddell Hart had no input on *Krieg ohne Hass*. The narrative is almost entirely composed by Erwin Rommel and covers just his experiences in North Africa.⁵⁷ Bayerlein contributed one chapter reporting the events during the winter of 1941-1942 and Lucie wrote a Foreword in which she specified her desire to present her husband’s writings authentically for the historical record and as a testament to the spirit of chivalry that characterized the combat of fighting in Africa, which prompted the editors (Lucie and Bayerlein) to adopt its title.⁵⁸ Bayerlein supplies footnotes for clarification, though they are relatively infrequent and do not interrupt the flow of Rommel’s narrative; it is possible to go ten pages in *Krieg ohne Hass* without any input from the editors. By way of comparison, most pages in *The Rommel Papers* have a footnote or expounding commentary provided by Liddell Hart interspersed within the original narrative. In short, *Krieg ohne Hass* strove to be strictly Rommel’s explication of military events he experienced in Africa. His perspective, although limited by his ability to write in wartime Germany (and eventually under surveillance by the Gestapo), is meant to be a primary source for historical edification.

⁵⁷ The concluding chapter is a short twenty-page draft composed while convalescing after his injury during the Normandy campaign. In it he reflects on Germany’s precarious military situation; however he devotes much of the chapter to missed opportunities in the African campaign and how the fighting in Africa necessitated change in how to best fight modern wars.

⁵⁸ Lucie Rommel, “Vorwort,” *Krieg ohne Hass*.

The Rommel Papers named Liddell Hart as editor, “with the assistance of” Lucie, Bayerlein, and Manfred (the latter was not credited in *Krieg ohne Hass*). Rommel’s original narrative was not altered aside from the translation by Paul Findlay, who very familiar with his biographical details.⁵⁹ However, the editors augmented it with copious and sometimes comprehensive commentary (mostly by Liddell Hart) and additional chapters covering Rommel’s combat experiences during the whole war, beginning with the invasion of France in 1940. Of particular relevance are the chapters “Italy, 1943” and “The Last Days,” which were composed by Manfred (b. 1928). Both chapters cover periods in which Rommel did not have an active military command, and thus offer reminiscences about what he said in the confines of his home. Combined with the decision to intermingle Rommel’s letters to his wife Lucie (“Dearest Lu”) within the main narrative, the English language publication offers a window into his domestic life that was not present in *Krieg ohne Hass*. This is especially apparent in the last chapter, in which Manfred recounts his father’s final days and forced suicide by the Nazi regime. These accentuated Rommel’s human traits and thus give a more subjective quality to *The Rommel Papers*. As the review in *The Times* noted:

[W]hen his editors interpolate selected passages from letters to his wife, or accounts of his gastric complaints, or even his diatribes against the high command, a different historical note is struck, though with the best intentions. It stirs the sympathy of the reader, and the balance is disturbed in Rommel’s favor.⁶⁰

Liddell Hart felt this was an unjust criticism. He believed Rommel’s letters enhanced the historical veracity of the book and indignantly replied in a letter to the editor that the reviewer had a “very palpable anti-German prejudice.” He wrote that of his nearly 400 editorial notes, over 80 percent were purely factual and of the 66 that comment on Rommel,

⁵⁹ On Findlay’s knowledge, see “Rommel’s Career,” *The Guardian*, May 9, 1953, 4.

⁶⁰ “German Generals Recent Books,” *The Times*, April 22, 1953, 8.

47 were corrections or criticisms of his views.⁶¹ Given the peculiarities of Liddell Hart's intellectual idiosyncrasies, I have no doubt he intended objectivity. He did not consider the possibility those 47 corrections of military minutia in no way counter-balanced the first-hand account of Rommel's death orchestrated by the Nazi regime.

In *The Rommel Papers*, the spotlight shone brightest on the "Desert Fox," that is Rommel during his bold attacks and victories. Liddell Hart was unequivocal (and uncritical) in his adulatory introduction and commentary:

The main importance of the papers lies, however, in the abundant light they shed on Rommel's military leadership. Their evidence confirms the judgment of the British soldiers who actually fought against him ... The "Rommel legend" clearly had a much better foundation than most. Save for his many narrow escapes from death or capture in battle, he owed less to luck than most commanders who have attained fame. Now that his actual conceptions and the workings of his mind are laid open for examination it becomes evident that his successes were earned, not accidental. They bear the hallmark of military genius.⁶²

He continued by comparing Rommel to military legends such as Seydlitz, Napoleon, and Genghis Khan, thus enshrining Rommel in the pantheon of history's foremost warriors:

"There is no doubt on this score of Rommel's qualification as a 'Great Captain.'"⁶³ Liddell Hart wrote that he had developed a greater respect when delving into Rommel's own papers and seeing "that his audacity was so shrewdly calculated."⁶⁴ This was confirmation bias. In claiming that Rommel's description of the *Blitzkrieg* "could not be better epitomized" and the technique was borne from what he theorized as the "expanding torrent" in 1920,⁶⁵ it was illustrative of what many of Liddell Hart's own friends noted of him: he was not objective

⁶¹ Letter to the Editor, *The Times*, April 25, 1953, 7. See also Liddell Hart, Editorial Note, *The Rommel Papers*, xxix-xxx.

⁶² Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, xviii.

⁶³ Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, xix-xxi.

⁶⁴ Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, xv.

⁶⁵ Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, 124.

when assessing his own influence. Chester Wilmot, a respected war correspondent and friendly acquaintance, summed up the blatant self-adulation within this commentary well when he wrote to Liddell Hart: “[You should have] restrained your enthusiasm a little more in the introduction and in the footnotes.”⁶⁶

Although having an authoritative voice such as Liddell Hart as a proverbial cheerleader no doubt helped the stature of *The Rommel Papers*, it would be a mistake to overstate his influence. Reviewers were not blind to Liddell Hart’s lack of objectivity and some felt it detracted from the book’s merit. The British writer Nigel Nicolson, who fought in the Western Desert, stated the book was “remarkable,” but it “needed an editor less wedded to the idea of his hero’s invincibility” and that “Captain Liddell Hart’s object was to consolidate a reputation.”⁶⁷ Critics remarked the Liddell Hart’s lack of objectivity detracted from Rommel’s own “sensible” and fair minded” account. Some examples include “fantasy and fairy tale,” “a poor contribution to history,” and “a recurrent tendency in the footnotes to credit the editor with such achievements as having invented the principle of Blitzkrieg in the 1920s. The effect, noted one reviewer, was to have “[raise]the hackles of critics; and Rommel’s good name is in danger of being tarnished by the atmosphere of mutual admiration.”⁶⁸ *The Times* similarly distinguished Rommel’s own narrative, labeling it “a primary source of historical appreciation ... [that] could virtually stand alone,” from Liddell Hart’s commentaries, which “belong properly to quite another volume of appraisal. They illuminate the detail but distort the perspective.” These reviews suggest that the military

⁶⁶ Letter from Chester Wilmot to Liddell Hart, May 13, 1953. Liddell Hart Military Archives, 1/753 at King’s College, London.

⁶⁷ Nigel Nicolson, “Partisan for Rommel,” *The Spectator*, April 24, 1953, 506.

⁶⁸ Nicolson, “Partisan for Rommel”; Richard Hanser, “More Rommel Worship,” review of *The Rommel Papers*, edited by B.H. Liddell Hart, *New Leader* 36, no. 28 (July 13, 1953): 16; Major General G.L. Verney, “Patterns of War,” review of *The Rommel Papers*, edited by B.H. Liddell Hart, *Irish Times*, May 9, 1953, 6.

reputation of Rommel in 1953 had already been established, his writings were the highlight of the book, and that readers were able to mediate or resist Liddell Hart's encomiums.

Once again, the divide between reviews cut across beliefs regarding the suitability of separating the Nazi political from the German military when the "Desert Fox." An *Irish Times* editorial noted the propensity for making such a distinction at one of the Rommel themed exhibitions attended by Auchinleck and other 8th Army veterans:

One fact was impressed upon me: that there is a strategy of warfare which, for the devotees, has little to do with the blood and horror and death. The maps were being scrutinized like precious works. There was the impression that war was an enthralling game, like cricket.⁶⁹

Or as a review of *The Rommel Papers* in *The New Statesman and Nation* put it:

Some sort of a military genius and a political illiterate, [Rommel] pleads guilty to nothing. War is fun. More than that, it taxes the brain and tempers the nerves. It is intellectually and emotionally satisfying ... To commend a general for his professional skill is to raise doubts about one's own political morality; doubly so if he should be a German.⁷⁰

This was the same train of logic observed last chapter that prompted the loud, albeit fleeting, criticism of Nunnally Johnson for his spotlight on the "Desert Fox" such that it occluded the more nebulous historical figure of Erwin Rommel. And just as in the reception of the film, this issue was not as clear cut to most people as detractors contended. The *Irish Times* editorial remarked: "Viewing Rommel in this sense, I concluded that I had as much right to make a judgement as a professional footballer at a modern art exhibition."⁷¹ Even *The New Statesman and Nation* reviewer acknowledged there was ambiguity in Rommel's case. He

⁶⁹ "London Letter: 59 Fleet Street," *Irish Times*, April 22, 1953

⁷⁰ John Freeman, "The Smiler with a Knife," review of *The Rommel Papers* in *The New Statesman and Nation* 45, no. 1156 (May 2, 1953): 510-511.

⁷¹ "London Letter: 59 Fleet Street," *Irish Times*.

remarked that while the German High Command “shared corporate responsibility at the highest planning level for the criminal policies of the Third Reich ... Rommel did not.”⁷²

Rommel represented himself as a man of action, boldness, and in command at the front with his soldiers in the heat of battle. He fashioned himself as a practical general who mastered problems via improvisation, a man who seized opportunities with vigor, and had little use for outdated theories of “academic” commanders. He attacked “with guns blazing.” He wrote how “modern commanders” must free themselves of “this unnecessary academic nonsense” and immediately attack when the initiative presented itself. He flaunted the authority of his superiors in the High Command, “the majority of whom had never heard a shot fired in anger.” As he brazenly wrote his wife in early April 1941:

Dearest Lu,

We’ve been attacking since the 31st with dazzling success. There’ll be consternations amongst our masters in Tripoli and Rome, perhaps in Berlin too. I took the risk against all orders and instructions because the opportunity seemed favourable. No doubt it will all be pronounced good later and they’ll all say they’d have done exactly the same thing in my place. We’ve already reached our first objective, which we weren’t supposed to get until the end of May.⁷³

He had palpable disdain for quartermasters who “complain at every difficulty, instead of getting on with the job and using their powers of improvisation, which are indeed frequently nil,” and for desk-chair soldiers who lived by the principle “far from battle makes old soldiers.”⁷⁴ In his mind, because neither the Italian nor the German High Command took Africa as seriously as the British, the *Afrikakorps* was forced to fight the “Battle Without

⁷² Freeman, “The Smiler with a Knife.”

⁷³ Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, 111.

⁷⁴ This theme runs through the entire book. The quotes and relevant excerpts are taken from 86, 92, 96, 119, 122, 192-193, 203-204, 243, 288, 300, 327-334, 352, 365, 419, 513-521.

Hope – Alamein” where “there was never any chance of the army achieving success.”⁷⁵ As Rommel explained:

The same effort should have been demanded from [them] as from every tankman and infantryman, tired out as they were from weeks of fighting ... Their estimate of the transport situation was – at any rate, up to the late summer of 1942 – completely without foundation; it was the product of obsolete opinions and betrayed the tendency of the academic mind to evade all difficulties and prove them insurmountable ... These people lacked any kind of practical ingenuity and initiative ... I in no way underestimated the difficulties of organizing our supply ... I simply saw them in their true perspective.⁷⁶

These quotations are characteristic of a career stretching from his days as a junior officer in the First World War, in which he made impulsive decisions and simply expected the German military to sort out the logistical and administrative difficulties to exploit opportunities he saw so clearly. It was also a reprieve of the romanticized imagery of the audacious and action-oriented style of his command in the summer of 1942, when US and British commentators projected desirable military ideals onto the “Desert Fox.”

The allure of the “soldier’s soldier” archetype discussed in Chapter Two is thus particularly relevant for *The Rommel Papers*. Desmond Young and Nunnally Johnson had emphasized Rommel’s gentlemanly persona, yet did not capture the image of the hard driving soldier that had some British commentators in early 1942 questioning their own army’s establishment. This contrast was articulated best by an *Afrikakorps* veteran who commented on Nunnally Johnson’s film, stating: “We don’t think a lot of this ‘Desert Fox’ Hollywood production. James Mason does his best as Rommel, but it is sissy stuff to us who fought with him.”⁷⁷ Rommel’s continual praise for the fighting soldiers and derision of the

⁷⁵ Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, 327-334.

⁷⁶ Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, 235, 244, 287-289.

⁷⁷ “Desert Defeat,” *Daily Express*, September 18, 1952, 1.

administrative arm was emblematic of those who did not think much of “sissy stuff.” One example, from a letter Rommel wrote from France to his wife when that victorious campaign was winding down in late June 1940:

I'm having a lot of trouble with [one of my staff officers] just at the moment ... This young General Staff Major, scared that something might happen to him and the staff, stayed some 20 miles behind the front and, of course, lost contact with the fighting troops which I was commanding up near Cambrai. Instead of rushing everything up forward, he went to Corps H.Q., upset the people there and behaved as if the command of the division was no longer secure. And he still believes to this day that he performed a heroic deed. I'll have to make a thorough study of the documents so as to put the boy in his place.⁷⁸

When in 1974 Charles E. Higgins named Rommel “the real field marshal” who never wore “powderpuffs” (and defended the Los Angeles Police Department for its shootout with the Symbionese Liberation Army), he most likely had *The Rommel Papers* in mind.⁷⁹

Certainly, the book made for a compelling read. There was a near consensus among reviewers that Rommel's narrative was engaging and he had genuine talent as a writer. As historian Franklin L. Ford aptly put it, “one need not join Captain Liddell Hart in his breathless admiration for the protagonist to appreciate Rommel's clear and vivid reportorial style.”⁸⁰ Like Young's book and Johnson's film, retrospective commentators have overlooked the quality of *The Rommel Papers* as a reason for the book's positive reception. The military ideals and implied meanings on display in the book were all the easier to grasp since Rommel wrote with “clarity and emotional feeling,” as *The Atlanta Constitution* remarked. It was telling the paper titled the review, “Rommel's Papers Reveal Brilliant Ability to Write, Express Thoughts,” when his most conspicuous quality was a tank general.

⁷⁸ Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, 86.

⁷⁹ Charles E. Higgins, “Letter to The Times,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 29, 1974, OC_A10.

⁸⁰ Franklin L. Ford, review of *The Rommel Papers* and *Der Weg zum 20. Juli 1944: Ein Forschungsbericht*, in *The Journal of Modern History* 26, no. 2 (June 1954): 199-201.

The book has a narrative feel to it because Rommel's accessible and engaging writing made his memoir read as a novel in which he is the protagonist; his emotions, his sense of military ethos, his devotion to his troops, his love of country, his energy, and his courage are all on display for readers. It transformed what was an ostensibly niche military study into something more relatable and what one reviewer astutely called a "human document."⁸¹

Politically there is nothing new or ground-breaking in *The Rommel Papers*. Many historical ambiguities might have been cleared up had Rommel shared his thoughts on the political realm, but he was a military man and the context of writing in 1944 Germany had prompted caution. Much of his bitterness was directed at the German High Command, whose apathy and rigidity Rommel believed had caused the insufferable conditions endured by front-line German soldiers.⁸² The brief discussion of Nazi criminality in *The Rommel Papers* is imputed to obvious elements of the National Socialist regime, much of it via statements attributed to Rommel by his son Manfred from memory. He wrote of his father's realization of the mass murders in 1943, "which was to lead to his final break with the Nazi system" and "brought himself, from his knowledge of the Fuehrer's crimes, to act against him."⁸³ Even here, resistance is presented ambiguously. The book asserts Rommel "had never known" of the *Attentat*,⁸⁴ yet Manfred writes that his father was extremely critical of Hitler's policies, believed that a revolt in France enabling an unopposed US-British occupation held the best prospects for success, and alluded that he was prepared to end the war against Hitler's will.⁸⁵ So there is still a "break" – to use Manfred's word – with

⁸¹ Brigadier General (ret.) Eustace M. Peixotto, review of *The Rommel Papers* in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 289, (Sept. 1953), 225-226.

⁸² Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, 185, 220, 281-282, 391, 320, 426, 513. See also 111, 164, 186, 187.

⁸³ Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, 425, 429, 485-486, 496-497.

⁸⁴ Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, 486.

⁸⁵ Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, 485-486, 496-497.

Nazism, independent of the attempt against Hitler's life. It was highly interpretive, which meant readers could easily derive meanings from those historical events in a way that conformed to what they intuitively felt made sense to them. As such, this portrayal cemented rather than revised the positive resistance narratives already in circulation.

Rommel "Invites Respect": Reception of *The Rommel Papers*

The Rommel Papers was a notable commercial success. It quickly rose up the *New York Times* bestseller list, made some "Outstanding Books of the Year" lists, and has enjoyed remarkable longevity – it has gone through numerous editions, the most recent English language by New York's Da Capo press in 2003.⁸⁶ How mainstream this positive representation of the "Desert Fox" is hinted at by the fact that Kendals, northern England's largest department store, hosted exhibitions at the book's release dedicated to Field Marshal Rommel replete with copies of *The Rommel Papers* beside some original letters, sketches, photos, and other memorabilia. Kendals invited people to "Follow his victorious campaigns though his own eyes," which was an interesting invitation given the former enemy lost the campaign in the Western Desert.⁸⁷ If Rommel was a controversial figure to critics, his reputation was nevertheless marketable in British and US societies.

Indeed, the review from *The Times* suggests that there was a perceptible mystique about "Desert Fox," at least among enthusiasts. The paper opined: "This latest and immensely readable contribution to the Rommel cult will unfortunately be accepted by many laymen as final evidence that its hero was fundamentally a finer and more important soldier

⁸⁶ "Best Seller List," *New York Times*, June 23, 1953, BR8; "A List of 275 Outstanding Books of the Year," *New York Times*, December 13, 1953, BR44. It has enjoyed a longer sustained relevance than Desmond Young's biography, which was last printed in 1987.

⁸⁷ Advertisement, *The Manchester Guardian*, May 4, 1953, 6. See also "The Good Soldier," *The Manchester Guardian* April 22, 1953, 6.

than his contemporaries.”⁸⁸ However, readers were capable of recognizing that Liddell Hart was not objective and reviewers did not passively accept what they read. *The Daily Mirror* deprecated the English military theorist for what it deemed a blatant lack of objectivity: “It is jaunty with admiration, frisky with hero-worship. James Mason with all the fake Hollywood nonsense in the film drew a reserved portrait of Rommel compared with the legend that Mr. Liddell Hart supports and embellishes.”⁸⁹ The *Saturday Review* noted that while “Field Marshal Erwin Rommel was a first rate military leader,” readers would not know his inability to grasp the overall contours of war and grand strategy because the editors were “drawn as they are from a circle of Rommel admirers. To them, Rommel is quite simply a hero.”⁹⁰ Most of the criticism was milder, nevertheless it was present, particularly from war veterans. General Sir Brian Horrocks, one of Montgomery’s deputies who fought in the 8th Army against Rommel in the Western Desert, believed that Rommel was “wise after the event” and that Liddell Hart was biased for allowing hindsight to pass for analysis.⁹¹ *The Christian Science Monitor* characterized many of the complaints as, “We beat Rommel. Don’t let us lose our sense of proportion by deifying him now it’s over.”⁹² So, although the book was a bestseller, there was a perceptible part of British society that sought to put the brakes on exaggerating the “Desert Fox.”

Of course, there were parts of British and US societies that were prepared to accept *The Rommel Papers* as authentic historiography. This was the assessment of former US General Cliff Andrus, who felt the book was an “exceptional contribution” and that “The

⁸⁸ “German Generals Recent Books,” *The Times*, April 22, 1953, 8.

⁸⁹ Cassandra, “St. George and His Dragon,” *The Daily Mirror*, April 24, 1952, 2.

⁹⁰ Gerard Speyer, “Master or Unwitting Tool?,” review of *The Rommel Papers* edited by B. H. Liddell Hart, *Saturday Review* 36, May 16, 1953, 18.

⁹¹ Lieutenant General Sir Brian Horrocks, “The Rommel Myth,” *The Sunday Times*, April 19, 1953, 6.

⁹² Melita Knowles, “Tributes to Rommel Stir Britons Who Fought Him,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 22, 1953, 7.

Rommel Legend ... was based on the character of the man: great moral and physical courage; ceaseless drive; an analytical and quick mind, and a colorful personality that developed *esprit de corps* and a will to fight that is found in few units.”⁹³ Historian Gordan A. Craig wrote, “this is a remarkable book” and noted the book’s importance for shedding light on “the master of the blitzkrieg.”⁹⁴ Other reviewers commented similarly: Liddell Hart did an “admirable job” of presenting an example of “mobile warfare at its best,” that the book showed “an authentic military genius,” and Rommel’s “legendary audacity.”⁹⁵ These descriptions were a reprise of the military imagery associated with the “Desert Fox” from the summer of 1942. It is difficult to quantify how much of this represented continuity and how much was the influence of the Young and Johnson productions. Robert Cromie of the *Chicago Tribune*, who extolled Young’s biography, lauded *The Rommel Papers* as a “tremendously fine volume” and one of the “military classics of all time.”⁹⁶ Nowhere in this review was there any semblance of critical analysis. It was an emotional review showing confirmation bias.

There are two specific aspects of Rommel’s reputation that keep reappearing in reviews, even from those that were critical: he had been an exceptionally skilled tank commander on the battlefield, and his character was judged highly. If detractors were quick to point out Rommel’s defects in grand strategy, they still acknowledged his gifts at the tactical level with statements such as “It cannot be denied that he was a master of mobile

⁹³ Major Gen. Cliff Andrus ret., “War Diary Reads Like Western,” *Washington Post*, May 24, 1953, B6.

⁹⁴ Gordan A. Craig, “Review: The Art and Practice of War,” *The American Scholar* 22, no. 4 (Autumn 1953): 484-486.

⁹⁵ Mark S. Watson, “Rommel’s Story Books and Book Makers: Of Tank Warfare,” *The Baltimore Sun*, July 5, 1953, LA13; Joseph G. Harrison, “From the Bookshelf,” *Christian Science Monitor*, May 19, 1953, 9; Paul Jones, “Rommel’s Papers Reveal Brilliant Ability to Write, Express Thoughts,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 17, 1953, 7F.

⁹⁶ Robert Cromie, Rommel’s Revealing War Diary: A Military Classic,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 17, 1953, J5.

warfare,” “possibly the greatest armored corps commander of the last war,” and that he was an “uncommonly acute analyst of mobile warfare.” If Rommel emerged from his papers as a figure of what Franklin L. Ford termed “circumscribed brilliance,” it was nevertheless still brilliance.⁹⁷ The tone and remarks offered on his chivalry and human qualities give the impression these were already in the mainstream. The *Christian Science Monitor* remarked the book was “additional evidence that Rommel – for all the rigidity of his military training – was a chivalrous opponent and a decent man.”⁹⁸ The *Washington Post* asserted he possessed strength of character in “great measure.”⁹⁹ Retired American general Eustace M. Peixotto believed the book was “above all ... the story of an officer and a gentleman, a devoted husband and father.”¹⁰⁰ *Commonweal* noted Rommel’s mental limitations but commented that, “his part in the plot against Hitler, however, was the act of a decent man, who had compassion for his country.”¹⁰¹ Even Rommel’s military critics were apt to accept the notion that he was a decent man. The aforementioned Horrocks, who took umbrage at Rommel’s exaggerated military reputation, nevertheless admitted, “No one could possibly read these papers without liking Rommel immensely,” a quote that was used to advertise the book.¹⁰²

Two reviews are worth highlighting as their commentary suggests that Rommel’s image as a professional soldier was becoming more mainstream as the 1950s progressed.

⁹⁷ Franklin L. Ford, review of *The Rommel Papers* and *Der Weg zum 20. Juli 1944: Ein Forschungsbericht*, in *The Journal of Modern History* 26, no. 2 (June 1954): 199-201. “Rommel as Tactician: Before and After Alamein,” *The Manchester Guardian*, April 20, 1953, 6-7; Horrocks, “The Rommel Myth”; Drew Middleton, “The War as Rommel Fought It: The Rommel Papers,” *New York Times*, May 17, 1953, BR6. Freeman, “The Smiler with a Knife.”

⁹⁸ Harrison, “From the Bookshelf,” *Christian Science Monitor*, May 19, 1953, 9.

⁹⁹ Andrus, “War Diary Reads Like Western,” *Washington Post*, May 24, 1953, B6.

¹⁰⁰ Brigadier General (ret.) Eustace M. Peixotto, review of *The Rommel Papers* in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 289 (Sep., 1953): 225-226.

¹⁰¹ William Pfaff, “Two Kinds of War,” *Commonweal* 58, no. 12 (June 26, 1953): 301-302.

¹⁰² Horrocks, “The Rommel Myth”; Advertisement, *New York Times*, May 17, 1953, BR18.

The first is from Drew Middleton of the *New York Times*, whose previous reporting examined above was consistent with someone suspicious of Nazi-era Germans and resurgent German nationalism. In his 1951 review of Young's *Rommel*, Middleton tempered Young's assessment of Rommel's military abilities by noting deficiencies in the realm of strategy. By 1953 Middleton seemed prepared to afford Rommel more credit noting, "History will probably class him with Patton and Montgomery among the great commanders." More noteworthy, Middleton's 1953 review of *The Rommel Papers* had fewer nagging questions that had prompted him to have reservations about Rommel's rectitude. In 1951, Middleton wrote that Young's "touch was not so sure" when he ventured into "Rommel's political and moral character" because it was "difficult to believe" that the Nazis would have picked Rommel if they had had political doubts. In 1953, Middleton printed a different interpretation:

At the end, as we know, he saw Hitler for the insane megalomaniac he was. The Fuehrer, he told his family late in 1943, acted as though he was not normal. This was the beginning of his break that led to his involvement in the bomb plot of 1944 and the final choice of suicide rather than a trial and disgrace.¹⁰³

Gone are the critiques regarding Rommel's late turn against Hitler and the doubts of his political independence *vis-à-vis* the Nazis Middleton had had two years earlier. This was a confident and more generous declaration for Rommel's involvement in the *Attentat* (something Middleton did not even dispute). Either Middleton genuinely altered his impression of the German marshal or sensed public sentiment was shifting and adopted his reporting to be commensurate with that.

¹⁰³ Drew Middleton, "Sand, Blood and General Rommel," *New York Times*, January 21, 1951, 168; Drew Middleton, "The War as Rommel Fought It."

The case of Joseph G. Harrison of *The Christian Science Monitor* is less ambiguous. Reviewing *The Rommel Papers* in 1953, Harrison concluded Rommel “was an authentic military genius” and wrote that the book’s “biggest disappointment” was “to find so little additional documentation on Rommel’s progressive opposition to Hitler” and that this “chivalrous opponent and a decent man” broke from Hitler “not so much on moral or spiritual grounds as upon those of military practicality.”¹⁰⁴

This could only be a “disappointment” if Harrison expected or wanted Rommel to be a moral resister. By 1960, Harrison believed Rommel’s resistance had been based on moral grounds. Reviewing Paul Carrell’s *Foxes of the Desert*, Harrison commented on what he believed was a British desire to convert foes into heroes:

For this remarkable military personage, undoubtedly one of the ablest field commanders ever to arise during the long history of [Germany], enjoyed a popularity among his British adversaries which more than once caused real – but wholly unnecessary – concern in London. Furthermore, while there was ample military justification for this British attitude, Rommel also showed a certain humanitarianism which was notably lacking in most other German military figures and which, in the end, caused him to throw in with the anti-Hitler plotters of 1944.¹⁰⁵

This assessment was likely genuine. Like many Rommel admirers we have looked at, Harrison rejected the Germans-as-Nazis correlation. He concluded that *Foxes of the Desert* “has the additional worth of showing that the average German soldier, however unworthy the cause for which he was fighting, was at heart little different from his Allied opponent.” At some point between 1953 and 1960, Harrison came to believe what he wanted *The Rommel Papers* to demonstrate: this otherwise decent German general had joined the resistance against Hitler because of his heart and not his military mind.

¹⁰⁴ Joseph G. Harrison, “From the Bookshelf,” *Christian Science Monitor*, May 19, 1953, 9.

¹⁰⁵ Joseph G. Harrison, “Africa and Those Who Fought for It, Loved It, Put It Down in Words,” *Christian Science Monitor*, January 5, 1961, 11.

These reviews suggest that Rommel's officer and gentleman persona had become entrenched by this time. Still, however accepted they may have become, a sector of the US and British publics still contested Rommel as an anti-Nazi figure. Some reviewers reminded audiences that politics cannot be ignored when it comes to a high ranking member of the *Wehrmacht*. *The Manchester Guardian* accepted that Rommel might be portrayed as a "gallant gentleman" who realized the futility of war in 1944, but wrote: "The tragedy is that Rommel, and others like him, did not recognise that in 1939 or earlier."¹⁰⁶ Historian Franklin Ford believed that Rommel's political judgments were "essentially immature" and rejected the notion that the German general was a confirmed anti-Nazi.¹⁰⁷ *The Daily Mirror* flatly condemned the book for shrouding the war crimes perpetrated by the Third Reich:

All the strutting and the panoply of Germans with guns in their hands once more. All the ferocious national pride and joy of warlike, obedient people with civility on their lips and vengeance in their hearts ... It is a pity that Englishmen as well as German writers should swell the flow ... German generals are boosted by German writers to forget the horrors that were committed in their name ... The flaming slaughter at Oradour and the killings of Lidice? Why mention them? And it is sad that St. George has got his Teuton dragon back so soon.¹⁰⁸

Regardless of how intuitive or mainstream the positive reputation of Rommel was during the 1950s, some Americans and Britons still attached a greater importance to the criminality of the Nazi regime and Rommel's service to it.

The reception of *The Rommel Papers* was on the whole quite good. It is important to recognize that reviews did not uncritically accept Liddell Hart's thinly veiled eulogistic

¹⁰⁶ "Rommel as Tactician," *The Manchester Guardian*, April 20, 1953, 7.

¹⁰⁷ Franklin L. Ford, review of *The Rommel Papers* and *Der Weg zum 20. Juli 1944: Ein Forschungsbericht*, in *The Journal of Modern History* 26, no. 2 (June 1954): 199-201.

¹⁰⁸ Cassandra, "St. George and His Dragon," *The Daily Mirror*, April 24, 1953, 4.

commentary. He was seen as biased. He was accused of embellishing Rommel's narrative. He was charged with bedeviling history. Yet many of those critics accepted the book's overall themes of Rommel as a captivating military figure (even if overrated) and human with estimable qualities (even if not quite an anti-Nazi). Historian George Frederick Howe best encapsulated the book's overall reception:

As a rising military commander, husband and father, and German patriot, Rommel appears to great advantage. After discounting the tendency of documents written and edited as these have been to place Rommel in the best possible light, a reader must yet conclude that Rommel's military distinction was earned and that his personal qualities invite respect.¹⁰⁹

Howe recognized the problematic nature of the source material and lack of objectivity of the editors. People did not just accept these positive portrayals of Rommel because that was what they read, or it was politically convenient to do so. The notion that a German general could be a decent person and distinguished from the Nazi regime was an intellectually credible notion.

¹⁰⁹ George Frederick Howe, review of *The Rommel Papers* by B.H. Liddell Hart, in *The American Historical Review* 59, no. 3 (Apr. 1954): 631-632.

Chapter 12

Rommel in the Public Sphere: Commentaries and Commemorations

This chapter takes a broader view of portrayals and perceptions of Rommel in various shared media such as speeches, memorials, soldier's reunions, and other public representations. The key theme that emerges is the diversity of interpretations people had of him. Typically, individuals interpreted the ambiguous biographical and nebulous historical facts in a manner that suited their worldview. There was no coherent representation or view of the political significance of the "Desert Fox," and this was a topic that was debated throughout the 1950s-1970s, even if public commemorations intimated that he was worthy of remembrance. Militarily, however, views approached more of a consensus that the "Desert Fox" embodied an honorable warrior ethos. Mostly, the examples in this chapter reveal people deriving proverbial lessons of history from the image of Rommel that made sense to them. These ranged from an example of German resistance against – or collaboration with – Hitler's regime to the more mundane inspiration of devising football strategies from the battles the "Desert Fox" fought. These are further indications of how crucial it is to consider the active role of audiences and their worldviews in trying to untangle the many threads of what comprises public opinion of Erwin Rommel.

Commemorating "The Desert Fox"

Public remembrances of Rommel were instances in which participants played an active role in shaping and imputing their own meanings into them. Scholars of memory have debated how much power – and success – the state has had using these memorializing

functions to make memories and shape public consciousness.¹ There is no question that the postwar FRG sought to commemorate and benefit from Rommel's iconic image to emphasize usable memories from the Nazi past. Still, when examining the various ways Rommel was publicly honored, two themes emerge that suggest more agency lay with participants than the West German political establishment: memorializing Rommel was largely a bottom-up phenomenon and the imprecise imagery in these commemorations invited audiences to derive their own meanings from them.

Bonn was largely a reactive, if not passive, player in commemorating Rommel. Indeed, it was not until *after* the hagiographic narrative was already entrenched in the early 1950s (in which Bonn played a negligible role) that these commemorations took place. Memorializing Rommel thus had a grassroots character and lacked the specificity that might be expected had a state-oriented agenda existed. While there was an unmistakable tone that the German marshal was a laudable figure, there was enough ambiguity for participants to impute their own meanings. This pattern echoes the conclusions of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who asserted that the input of participants (as opposed to creators) figures prominently when considering the meaning or significance of commemorations.² As such, commemorating Rommel reflected and reinforced existing narratives rather than molded new ones.

¹ Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge University Press, 1983); Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989); Bodnar, *Remaking America*. Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Kansteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory*. See also Charles E. Lindblom, "The Science of 'Muddling Through,'" *Public Administration Review* 19, no.2 (Spring 1959): 79-88 who raises interesting arguments that state agencies are by their nature incapable of the rational and comprehensive decision-making process necessary for such an endeavor.

² Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

The first point to consider is that Rommel was hardly unique among his *Wehrmacht* peers in that the FRG commemorated him. This continues the running theme throughout this study whereby perceptions of the German marshal were broadly representative of the German army from the Second World War. Whereas officers who opposed Hitler such as Beck and Stauffenberg have been posthumously honored, the clean *Wehrmacht* myth was pervasive enough that the *Bundeswehr* barracks in Füssen had been named after Eduard Dietl, a convinced National Socialist of whom Hitler had thought highly, until the Ministry of Defense changed the name in 1995 to the Allgäu barracks. What set Rommel apart were the frequency and myriad ways in which the German marshal was commemorated in the FRG, not that he was distinctive from other *Wehrmacht* figures in receiving such plaudits.

Resistance to the Nazi regime, although not specifically a connection to July 20, 1944, was one commemorative theme. The *Rommelstrasse* roadway in Goslar (one of cities he was stationed in) connects the *Bonhoefferstraße* (named after July 20 resisters Klaus Bonhoeffer and Dietrich Bonhoeffer) and the *Geschwister-Scholl-Straße* (named after Hans and Sophie Scholl, student leaders of the White Rose resistance group, who were executed in 1943). It may be a coincidence that the *Rommelstrasse* literally links up two roadways commemorating different resistance groups who were victims of Hitler's National Socialist regime. Yet such a bond neatly symbolizes Rommel's reputation as a Hitler opponent: his ambiguous association with the *Attentat* and his gentlemanly persona made for an intuitive, if specious, connection with committed anti-Nazis like the Scholls who were not part of that conspiracy. In any event, with the plentiful roadways in this part of Goslar named after opponents of National Socialism, it is clear Rommel was to be counted as one within this group. Another Rommel resistance memorial was dedicated in 1961, when the West German

Federal Ministry of Defense selected him as one of five “heroes of German Resistance” who had had their names dedicated to military bases (the *Generalfeldmarschall Rommel-Kaserne* [Field Marshal Rommel barracks] is in Augustdorf near Bielefeld).³ All five were regime opponents who were executed in the aftermath of July 20. Of the other four, two were military figures directly connected with the assassination attempt (Claus von Stauffenberg and Henning von Tresckow) and two were steadfast civilian opponents of Hitler from 1933 (SPD politician Julius Leber and Jesuit Father Alfred Delp).⁴ These specific commemorations unambiguously identified Rommel as an anti-Nazi.

Still, most of the ceremonial uses of his name were nonspecific dedications to his memory in the military (as opposed to the political) realm that intimated he was an abstract figure to be admired. There are memorials, typically found in communities in which he lived or served, devoted to him as a soldier rather than a resistor. The monument in Weingarten reads: “Field Marshal Erwin Rommel 1891 – 1944. Lieutenant of Weingarten Infantry Regiment 124. Supreme Commander in North Africa 1941 – 1943. Lived here in 1913 and 1914, honor this brave man and soldier.”⁵ Goslar had a similar dedication to Rommel (and Heinz Guderian) as a soldier.⁶ A small museum in Herrlingen, the town Rommel last lived in, houses his military mementos in what is an homage to the “Desert Fox.” It displays his medals, official documents, battle maps, many photos of his military campaigns and of him (mostly in uniform), and lastly his Field Marshal’s baton, once an object of great prestige. Many of the more noteworthy relics were recently donated by son Manfred to the *Haus der*

³ Two other army barracks in Dornstadt and Osterode have since been named after Rommel.

⁴ “German Resistance Heroes Honoured,” *The Times*, July 20, 1961, 10.

⁵ “Generalfeldmarschall Erwin Rommel 1891 1944. Leutnant im Infanterie-Regiment 124 in Weingarten. Oberbefehlshaber in Nord – Afrika 1941-1943. Wohnte hier im Jahre 1913 und 1914 ehre diesem Tapferen Manne und Soldaten.”

⁶ The old plaques (since taken down, discussed below) can be seen on this website: http://www.raymond-faure.com/Goslar/Goslar_Worthstrasse_1617.html, (accessed August 27, 2019)

Geschichte [House of History] of Baden-Wurttemberg in Stuttgart. Sometimes his name is used with no obvious larger significance. The *Rommelstrasse* in Stuttgart is just a short nondescript roadway (which after the twenty-two year tenure of son Manfred Rommel as the city's mayor makes the roadway's meaning more ambiguous).⁷

The image of the “Desert Fox” as an honorable soldier and an anti-Nazi whose connections with the *Attentat* were nebulous and elastic enough made him an ideal icon for a 1950s German society that was at best ambivalent about July 20, 1944: he could be represented as both a dutiful officer and an anti-Hitler figure without being an oathbreaker or a traitor. For instance, the monument inaugurated in 1961 at his hometown of Heidenheim was marked with the words: “upright, chivalrous, and brave, until his death, as a victim of the tyranny.”⁸ This ambiguity comes through in speeches made at these commemorations that left the association between him and the July 20 attack against Hitler indistinct. Indeed, these were often given by former *Wehrmacht* veterans who were hostile to the *Attentat*. At a 1964 memorial service dedicated to the twentieth anniversary of the German marshal's death, former *Afrikakorps* colleague Siegfried Westphal parsed out July 20 from his speech to the congregation that referenced Rommel's demand to Hitler that the German dictator accept the consequences of the successful Allied landing at Normandy and that “This led to his death in a cruel manner.”⁹ With this language, Westphal could still present Rommel as a Hitler opponent who was shamefully killed by the Nazi regime, yet remove him from a *Putsch* that was arguably treasonous. A similar ambiguity occurred three years previously when a plaque

⁷ According to the Mythos Rommel exhibit, the street was originally named for Erwin.

⁸ “Was” is intentional as the monument was taken down in 2013. See Justin Render, “The Desert Fox: A formidable Adversary – Even to His Own Side,” at *War History Online*, December 13, 2018: <https://www.warhistoryonline.com/instant-articles/erwin-rommel-the-desert-fox.html>, (accessed August 21, 2019).

⁹ “Afrika Korps Pays Tribute to Rommel,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 12, 1964, 16.

was dedicated to Rommel in Goslar. Inspector General of the *Bundeswehr* Friedrich Foertsch referred to Rommel as a “splendid” soldier, a “great man,” and “an exemplar of duty and a model for young soldiers.” Hermann Hoth, Rommel’s superior during the 1940 French campaign, also spoke at the dedication ceremony and stated that Rommel testified to the honor of German soldiers. What neither former *Wehrmacht* general mentioned was obvious. “He most certainly did not,” the *Goslarsche Zeitung* remarked the next day, “mention Rommel’s role in the Resistance movement and his suicide, which was in fact murder by the power-holders.”¹⁰ Also not mentioned at the ceremony was that both dedicating generals had been indicted for war crimes. Hoth, sentenced at the IMT for 15 years, and Foertsch, sentenced to 25 years imprisonment by the Soviet Union, were granted early releases in 1954 and 1955, respectively. These dedications show how commemorations allowed participants to draw diverse meanings from them. The former *Wehrmacht* generals did not wish Rommel to be associated with the *Attentat* and used these public occasions to broadcast their belief that the honor of German soldiers was not tied to the July 20. The *Goslarsche Zeitung* underscored to its readers the importance of the *Attentat*, something not emphasized during the Goslar proceedings. As these commemorations tended to focus on the lowest common denominator among the multitude of participants – the image of an honorable soldier who was a victim of National Socialism – they were more likely to cement pre-existing attitudes or uphold the general “climate” of things than construct new public images.

¹⁰ Taken from Remy, *Mythos Rommel*, 8.

Rommel's public standing in West Germany during the 1950s and 1960s was potent enough to encompass the men who had served under him, in particular the *Afrikakorps*. At a 1955 dedication of a German memorial to the men of the *Afrikakorps*, Dr. Schneider, a deputy Speaker of the Bundestag, called attention to the formation's high standing outside Germany:

From foreign mouths the news reached us how chivalrously the men around Rommel fought in this age of unchivalrous weapons. Their example, which in the most severe battle never offended against the nobility of humanity, is today praised in the Parliaments of their opponents when nobility in war is mentioned.¹¹

Schneider's boast was not empty; Churchill praised Rommel's conduct of war in Africa during a 1953 debate in the House of Commons, for which the *Afrikakorps* publicly thanked him, and Desmond Young paid tribute specifically to the men of the *Afrikakorps* as honorable soldiers in his bestselling biography.¹² The respect for Rommel's old unit was not limited to their wartime service. Its veterans' association, the *Afrikakorps-Verband*, was seen as a moderate and respectable force among the worrisome ultra-nationalism that other veterans' groups might bring to the FRG's political landscape. Allied officers were reported being "favorably impressed" with the dignity of its first meeting, and a speaker from the SPD joined the old soldiers in their call to release German prisoners to make it easier for the former soldiers to contribute to the security of the free world and become "good Europeans," an unusual arrangement as the leftist SPD was ostensibly against rearmament.¹³

¹¹ "'Nobility' of the Afrika Korps," *The Manchester Guardian*, November 21, 1955, 1.

¹² "Afrika Korps Message to Sir W. Churchill," *The Times*, May 2, 1953, 5; Young, *Rommel*, 140.

¹³ "Homeland and Hollywood Hail a German Marshal," *Life*, October 8, 1951, 76-81; "European Scene," *Chicago Tribune*, October 21, 1951, E15; "Afrika Korps Reunion," *The Times*, September 17, 1951, 4; Searle, *Wehrmacht Generals*, 165-166.

The *Afrikakorps* members were aware that they were perceived as “Rommel’s men” and for the most part conducted themselves judiciously in the postwar world. The *Afrikakorps-Verband* was not involved in political controversies that marked the German veteran scene that had loose cannons such as former generals Hermann Ramcke and Hans Frießner who were public embarrassments with their insensitive statements that praised the *Waffen-SS*, accused Poland of starting the Second World War, or referenced the July 20 conspirators as traitors.¹⁴ Indeed, the *Afrikakorps-Verband* partook in symbolic commemorations with British troops stationed in Germany. Soccer, a sport especially popular in Great Britain and Germany that had previously served as a forum for Anglo-German fraternization during the spontaneous 1914 Christmas Truce of the First World War, was a natural conduit for the former adversaries of the Western Desert to renew acquaintances under festive auspices. During a 1953 celebratory match between “Rommel’s Afrika Korps” (the *Afrikakorps* has been typically portrayed as *his*, not Nazi Germany’s) and the “Desert Rats” (the byname of the British 7th Armored Division that had fought in North Africa) Dr Robert Lehr, the West German Minister of Interior, applauded the match and reportedly stated, “Those who fought in North Africa were the bearers and champions of a high German martial tradition ... Rommel stood as the paragon of the true and, in the best sense, heroic and chivalrous German profession of arms,” and that the loss of the war was the not the fault of German soldiers but of the political leadership.¹⁵ Lehr’s comment epitomized a narrative that not only excluded German soldiery from National Socialism (instead linking them with a more useful past tradition), but also from military defeat as well – all that was bad had been caused by the Nazis. British participants and observers were impressed by the

¹⁴ Searle, *Wehrmacht Generals*, 139-175.

¹⁵ “‘Desert Rats’ Meet Afrika Korps,” *The Times*, July 14, 1953, 6-7.

conduct at these symbolic soccer matches, which were periodic events in the 1950s. At one such gathering, the *Daily Express* deemed the spectacle “exemplary” and reported:

Ten thousand of Rommel’s men came into Hanover by Sunday excursion and coach to watch at this their annual rally. It was the quietest, soberest German old soldiers’ reunion on record.

No jackboots, no violent speeches, no rollicking *Wehrmacht* songs, and the only flags out were those marking the corners of the Hindenburg Stadium.

Everyone behaved in exemplary fashion. The hundreds of British troops in the stands cheered when they should have, clapped each goal-scorer, and everybody helped the referee.¹⁶

“Rommel’s men” were evidently cognizant that playing the role of gracious hosts and aiding the referee was a small price to be remembered for only their service with the famous *Afrikakorps* in the Western Desert, not the time they spent as Hitler’s soldiers on the Eastern Front.

The commemorations examined so far have stemmed from West German initiatives, a development that is hardly surprising given the interest Germans had in maintaining the “founding myths” of the FRG. Yet as non-Germans such as Desmond Young, Nunnally Johnson, and B.H. Liddell Hart also played such a crucial role in disseminating Rommel hagiographies, there were public acknowledgements with an international flavor outside of West Germany’s borders. At a 1962 NATO function in Rome, British diplomat Sir Eugen Millington Drake presented the “Rommel Shooting Prize” to commemorate the German marshal as the reward for a shooting competition among *Bundeswehr* units. Drake, noting that other NATO armies had similar prizes named for exemplary leaders, said “the obvious choice both as a man and as a leader was Rommel. It commemorates him as a man without blemish, with his sterling qualities and nothing against him.”¹⁷ In an act that symbolized the

¹⁶ William Hamsher, “Desert Rats Draw with Rommel,” *Daily Express*, September 14, 1953, 2.

¹⁷ “British Tribute to Rommel,” *The Manchester Guardian*, April 30, 1962, 8.

military partnership between West Germany and the United States, in 1969 the US Bath Iron Works shipyard commissioned a destroyer for the German navy called *Rommel*. The German crew was presented with an oil portrait of the Field Marshal, and Lucie was flown in to christen the ship in a ceremony that included speeches by the governor of Maine and German Defense Minister Gerhard Schröder.¹⁸ Esteem for Rommel extended beyond the political purview of the NATO. In 1954, Egyptian President Mohammed Naguib invited Lucie Rommel to a Cairo premiere of the German documentary film *Das War Unser Rommel* [That Was Our Rommel], where she was reportedly received as a “social lioness.”¹⁹ Her reception undoubtedly reflected anti-imperialist sentiment as Winston Churchill was booed and Rommel “loudly cheered” when they were shown on screen.²⁰ Whether or not historical evidence can substantiate that Rommel was “a man without blemish ... and nothing against him” or a symbol of anti-British imperialism is beside the point as that is what many people perceived him to be. These commemorations were significant for the symbolism from which participants drew according to how they made sense of a historical figure.

The political significance of these commemorations is clear; governments used Rommel’s reputation for their own agenda and the legend of the “Desert Fox” grew. But

¹⁸ “Rommel’s Widow to Christen Ship,” *The Washington Post*, January 28, 1969, A6; Photograph, *The Washington Post*, February 2, 1969, 3; “Rommel, Missile Ship is Launched in Maine,” *New York Times*, February 2, 1969, S23.

¹⁹ “Egyptians Go Wild Over Marshal Rommel Widow,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 18, 1954, B2.

²⁰ “Churchill Booed, Rommel Cheered at Cairo Movie,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 20, 1954, 1. How much grass roots genuine respect there is for Erwin Rommel among Egyptians is something I cannot speculate. I would venture to say there has been enough to make it a topic worth pursuing. Since the days of Kaiser Wilhelm II the Arab countries of the Middle East have enjoyed cordial relations with Germany. Hitler was popular there, and many Nazi scientists and technocrats were welcomed after the war well into the 1960s. There is a Rommel museum and “Rommel’s beach” at one of Rommel’s old headquarters in Mersa Matrouh, where the story goes that the German marshal liked to swim. Although this museum was recently founded and thus beyond the scope of our study, the fact that the museum was an Egyptian initiative and was established with the consent of the Rommel family who provided a number of the German marshal’s personal belongings is another example of Rommel as an international icon. A study into the Egyptian reception of Erwin Rommel is bound to come up with interesting conclusions.

seeing the memorialization of Rommel through the lens of nation-states attributes too much agency to them and obscures the role of participants and the spontaneous individual acts that were neither political nor were connected to the state. Sometimes a visit to Rommel's gravesite in Herrlingen was just part of a tourist's itinerary.²¹ More significantly, the state was often reacting to initiatives from below and discourses that already had been established. In 1961, when a monument honoring Rommel was unveiled in Heidenheim (the town of his birth), the project was funded by former *Afrikakorps* members, not the West German state.²² Or consider the wreath laying ceremonies on the anniversary of Rommel's death that evolved into international gatherings in which German, British, and US officers were among the thousands attending by the 1960s. They had their humble origins when *Afrikakorps* veterans joined Lucie in honoring the German marshal and grew through the 1950s.²³

Perhaps the best example of these tributes from the grass-roots level was the international character that shaped *Afrikakorps* reunions where Commonwealth veterans of the Eighth Army joined their former enemies in drinking, reminiscing, and commemorating fallen comrades. These festive meetings between former desert adversaries (sometimes up to 20,000 veterans) with Rommel as spiritual MC epitomized the image of the African campaign as a "war without hate." At a 1960 reunion at Munster, 10,000 veterans from both sides applauded a letter from a former British sergeant who praised the *Afrikakorps* and

²¹ An interesting account of a US journalist's visit (who had limited German language skills) can be seen in Philip D. Gibbons, "In Search of the Desert Fox," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 26, 2002, L1 and http://www.cuestaroad.net/philgibbons/in_search_of_the_desert_fox.htm, (accessed May 5, 2012). A short YouTube video of the gravesite has nearly 100,000 views and an excellent ratio of 204 likes to 6 dislikes. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PP-4hOWOFE>, (accessed May 5, 2012).

²² "Germans Pay Hero Tribute to Rommel," *Los Angeles Times*, November 13, 1961, 9.

²³ See "European Scene," *Chicago Tribune*, October 21, 1951, E15; "Homeland and Hollywood Hail a German Marshal," *Life*, October 8, 1951, 76-81; "Rommel Honored at Grave," *New York Times*, October 18, 1954, 2; "Ex-Enemies and Germans Hail Rommel," *Chicago Tribune*, October 19, 1959, A11; "Rommel is Honored by West Germans," *New York Times*, October 19, 1959, 2; "Allies Honour Rommel" *Irish Times*, October 15, 1969, 9.

wished to visit Rommel's grave. He said that although he had lost relatives in a German air raid, "I wanted to have one of your boys as my true friend." To do so, the sergeant explained, was to fulfill a promise he made to a dying German soldier during the desert campaign that he would befriend a German ex-soldier after the war. The reciprocity of goodwill was evident when Westphal remarked that the letter "proved the chivalrous attitude of the former enemy." More goodwill was palpable when a former *Afrikakorps* veteran acknowledged Montgomery as "a great commander" when asked about British historian Correlli Barnett's book, which severely criticized the British Field Marshal.²⁴ The soldierly comradeship on display at these *Afrikakorps* reunions was a powerful and recurring enough symbol of military ethos for John Bierman and Colin Smith to use the occasion of a 2001 reunion as the forward for their acclaimed *Alamein: War Without Hate*.²⁵

The Rommel commemorations reflected images of the "Desert Fox" that had been already in circulation from the best-selling hagiographies fashioned by Young, Johnson, and Liddell Hart. Although the honors bestowed upon Rommel were vague, they were unequivocally positive. He was represented as many things: a paragon of military ethos, an upstanding man with a sterling character, iconic tank commander, anti-Nazi, and someone who epitomized the best in an ugly war. All of these were exaggerations of who the historical Rommel had been, yet that is the point – myths and heroes are symbolic of what we want to believe. The multiplicity of meanings which individuals drew from these commemorations stemmed more from how they wished to remember the Second World War.

²⁴ "Britons at Afrika Korps Reunion," *The Times*, September 11, 1960, 8. For other international *Afrikakorps* gatherings, see "Afrika Korps Holds Reunion," *New York Times*, September 15, 1958, 2; "Afrika Korps Rally at Dusseldorf," *The Times*, October 1, 1956, 6; "British and French Bandsmen Play for Rommel's Veterans," *Chicago Tribune*, September 15, 1958, A7.

²⁵ Bierman and Smith, *Alamein: War Without Hate*, 1-8.

Still, as Pierre Nora observed, official commemorations are an essential part of constructing a historical narrative that can be transmitted from generation to generation.²⁶ Even if these public and sanctioned tributes reinforced rather than shaped public attitudes, as the street grid of Goslar demonstrates, the symbolic linking between Rommel and more concrete and indisputable anti-Hitler resisters was a logical conclusion of the mass consumed hagiographies of the early 1950s.

Later Examples of Rommel in Popular Culture

The aim in this section is to examine some of the popular public representations that illustrate the continuing influence of the image of the gentlemanly and honorable “Desert Fox.” In fact, one of the more interesting examples was the portrayal in Twentieth Century-Fox’s *The Desert Rats* (1953), which seemed to try to redress the criticism of glorification in Johnson’s *The Desert Fox* film from two years earlier. In electing to feature the 1941 Commonwealth successful defense of Tobruk against Rommel’s forces, *The Desert Rats* takes the Allied perspective, which puts Rommel as the antagonist. Moreover, the film depicts the German general (incorrectly given the rank of field marshal) far less sympathetically: although James Mason reprised the role, the on-screen Rommel is arrogant and uses a hackneyed guttural accent (other German soldiers are also represented stereotypically, one officer slaps a British prisoner during a conversation with Rommel).²⁷ A number of people in the motion picture business interpreted these changes as a “frank apology for a blunder of two seasons ago called ‘The Desert Fox.’”²⁸ If that was the intent –

²⁶ Pierre Nora, *Realm of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, ed. Lawrence D Kritzman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996-1998).

²⁷ *The Desert Rats*. Directed by Robert Wise (Los Angeles: Twentieth Century-Fox, 1953).

²⁸ H.H.T., “‘*The Desert Rats*,’ with Richard Burton and Robert Newton, Presented at the Mayfair,” *New York Times*, May 9, 1953, 13; Philip K. Scheuer, “‘Desert Rats’ Details Aussie Stand at Tobruk,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 1953; John McCarten, *New Yorker*, May 16, 1953, 131; “New Films,” *Newsweek*, May 25, 1953, 101.

the studio did not deny it – then Twentieth Century-Fox miscalculated the moviegoing public. While some critics and audiences appreciated the film’s tribute given to Allied forces, many felt *The Desert Rats* did not meet the standard of its predecessor. As the *New York Times* remarked, the film struggled to be more than a “plain, cavalier apology”:

For the supreme irony of this film is that while it admirably eschews the psychological intricacies of its predecessor, [screenwriter] Mr. Murphy’s open-faced tale is no match for Nunnally Johnson’s inventive perceptiveness.

Sadly, none of the brave warriors here seems half as intriguing as one of Mr. Johnson’s ambivalent Germans...²⁹

The film’s performance at the box office was a noticeable drop-off, perhaps grossing less than 50 percent than *The Desert Fox*.³⁰ The smug and pompous representation of Rommel may have assuaged the sensibilities of critics, but it was by their own admission not as interesting and attracted noticeably less interest from moviegoers.

The gentlemanly image of the “Desert Fox” returned to Hollywood’s silver screen in the Darryl Zanuck epic *The Longest Day* (1962), a multi-national collaborative representation of the D-Day landings that featured a star-studded cast. As the film sought to relay the D-Day story from many points of view, Rommel is just one of dozens of prominent characters. Still, his role in the film is noteworthy. It is he who gives the film the title with his observation that the importance of the Allied landing would make it “the longest day” for both sides. The portrayal is a reprise of the consummate professional with a human side; in one scene he tends a rose garden and it is his trip home to gift Lucie with shoes as an anniversary present that prevents him from being at his military headquarters on June 6 (the

²⁹ H.H.T., “*The Desert Rats*.”

³⁰ Box office figures before 1980 can only be estimated as the manner in which they are reported and calculated has changed. According to *Variety*, the US and Canada estimated rentals (i.e. the revenue received by the distributor) for *The Desert Rats* was \$1.1 million whereas *The Desert Fox* was \$2.4 million. *Variety*, “Top Grossers of 1953,” January 13, 1954, 10 and *Variety*, “Top Grossers of 1951,” January 2, 1952, 70.

domestic triviality of the shoes not being the right size is also in the film). Most German soldiers are similarly represented as honest professionals fighting for Heimat rather than Hitler. If anything, the depictions of the prescient General Erich Marcks and enigmatic *Luftwaffe* ace Josef “Pips” Priller are perhaps more memorable. General Jodl of the German High Command is the one proverbial bad apple as he obstinately refuses to awaken Hitler to release the German *panzers*, a military error the film (over)dramatizes when German General Blumentritt mocks “the glorious Führer” for oversleeping and causing Germany “to lose the war.” The apolitical portrayal of the German army is such that “Seig Heil” is never actually said in the film.³¹ It was the same representation that Bosley Crowther found so objectionable in his biting 1951 criticism of *The Desert Fox: The Story of Rommel*, namely that Germans “except for the uniform [were] indistinguishable from all the familiar and conventional representations of the heroic officers on ‘our’ side.”

Rommel’s reputation as a maverick who won victories against the odds attracted enthusiasts to draw inspiration from the “Desert Fox” into their everyday lives. Sportswriter Volney Meece recalled seeing Oklahoma University football coach Bud Wilkinson, who led the Sooners to three national championships from 1947 to 1963, reading *The Rommel Papers* on a trip back from a conference. Asked about his choice in reading material, Wilkinson spoke on the art of faking an attack and turning the enemy’s flank: “It’s exactly like the strategy of an end run in football ... The strategy in war and football are the same.”³²

Wilkinson, a navy veteran of the Second World War, thought so highly of *The Rommel*

³¹ *The Longest Day*. Directed by Ken Annakin, Andrew Marton, and Bernhard Wicki (Los Angeles: Twentieth Century-Fox, 1962).

³² Volney Meece, “Bud Operated Under Control, ‘Within Himself,’” *The Oklahoman*, February 11, 1994. Retrieved from <https://newsok.com/article/2456665/bud-operated-under-control-within-himself>. (accessed November 23, 2018).

Papers that he called it “the best coaching text that I have ever seen” and specifically praised Rommel’s perseverance and positive achievements under adverse conditions.³³ Another football coach who lauded Rommel’s memoir was Paul Dietzel, who led Louisiana State University to the National Championship in 1958. As the university’s sports information director recalled:

Dietzel, an Army assistant, immediately obtained, read and retained [*The Rommel Papers*]. It had nothing to do with coaching football. In Dietzel’s mind, it had everything to do with coaching football ... Dietzel frequently quoted this line from Rommel – “I will take morale over material, three to one.”³⁴

Interestingly, that line does not appear in *The Rommel Papers*. Dietzel was later quoted as attributing it to Napoleon,³⁵ who probably did say something to that effect.³⁶ It is another episode where someone made the mistake of attaching a military ideal or axiom to the “Desert Fox.” Ron Meyer is another college football coach who was an avid reader of military history and reportedly treasured a book on Rommel.³⁷ As US football culture extols masculinity, has violent aesthetics, and military metaphors have become standard in the game’s lexicon, the appeal of Rommel as the “Magnificent Bastard,” which harkened back to Allied commentary after the fall of Tobruk in June 1942 was a seamless adaptation.

One example that demonstrates the credibility of the “Rommel myth” in 1961 was an aptly titled article “Rommel: Fox or Fake?” in the *Marine Corps Gazette*, a professional

³³ Sid Ziff, “Bud and the Fox,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 14, 1965, H4.

³⁴ Bobby Matherne, “A Book Review of *The Perfect Season: LSU’s Magic Year - 1958* by Bud Johnson,” <http://www.doyletics.com/arj/perfects.htm>, (accessed August 4, 2010).

³⁵ Frank Litsky, “Paul Dietzel, Coach who Led L.S.U. to Its First National Title, Dies at 89,” *New York Times*, September 25, 2013, B12.

³⁶ See Arthur Upham Pope, “The Importance of Morale,” *The Journal of Education Sociology* 15, no. 4 (Dec. 1941): 195. I have heard that quote attributed elsewhere to Rommel. While he wrote about the importance of morale in both of his books, I have found no evidence that he articulated that quote. Even if he did, he was hardly the first commander to make such a suggestion about the importance of morale and during the Second World War, the quote had been already attributed to Napoleon.

³⁷ John Underwood, “New Boys on the Block,” *Sports Illustrated* 45, no. 10 (September 6, 1976): 79.

journal dedicated to the study of war as a science. The author demonstrates an impressive knowledge of the reception history of Rommel, such as the influence of the April 1941 *Das Reich* article (as well as Rommel's reaction) and the prevalence of false biographical information in reputable sources after the war.³⁸ The author observed that according to the US Army's criteria of leadership, "Rommel passes the test with flying colors ... he took average German soldiers, built up a superb fighting force." But according to the article, "true greatness came only when he decided that his loyalty to the German people was greater than his loyalty to Adolf Hitler." It is interesting the author attributed Rommel's resistance to Hitler via a greater loyalty, a military virtue. This was a very informed commentator. Although one who drew a sharp distinction between Germans and Nazis, a view that strongly correlates to positive perceptions of Rommel (indeed the author emphasized Rommel "*never* belonged to the Nazi Party.") The article illustrates that there were honest attempts to uncover the Rommel myth. However, the biographical information available and the casual way even educated people accepted the notion of the clean *Wehrmacht* meant conclusions were often similar to this article: "Field Marshal Erwin Rommel should be remembered as a truly great commander."³⁹

The "Desert Fox" myth was also an excellent fit for the genre of wargaming, which had its humble origins as a US entertainment medium in the 1950s and rapidly grew in popularity during the 1960s and reaching its peak by the mid-1970s.⁴⁰ These were board

³⁸ Although it is odd that within this impressive display of historical facts, the author incorrectly identified the Nazi Propaganda Minister as "Paul" Goebbels, especially as the author quoted his diary.

³⁹ Gordon L. Hill, "Rommel: Fox or Fake?," *Marine Corps Gazette* 45, no. 6 (June 1961): 26-31.

⁴⁰ Jon Peterson, *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Adventures from Chess to Role-Playing Games* (San Diego: Unreason Press, 2012), especially 1-14.

games that typically simulate historical military scenarios and have a set of rules that governs how events unfold as players vie to defeat their opponent(s). Although wargames are intended to entertain, the most accomplished designers (many of them historical buffs with published books) have recognized that historical accuracy and authenticity are crucial for the success and longevity of a game. As one veteran in the industry succinctly stated, “The game must be realistic.”⁴¹ The significance is that these wargames ought to be seen as informed reflections of contemporary historical understanding rather than just mediums of entertainment. Although this examination into wargames extends beyond the timeframe of this study, I believe there is value in including it as it deepens our understanding of the military imagery of the “Desert Fox” and reveals a palpable line of continuity and consistency going back to the summer of 1942. The political significance of Rommel has, of course, become more contested since the 1970s, but this is an examination into an ostensible apolitical domain: wargames almost exclusively deal with just the logistics, strategy, and science of warfare (indeed it is common practice for publishers to hire moderators to monitor their Internet message boards and forums to ensure participants do not broach nonmilitary themes⁴²).

The 1964 Avalon Hill production *Afrika Korps* is one of the classic and most played wargames ever. It was a top seller in the industry, had multiple editions, inspired articles

⁴¹ James F. Dunnigan, *The Complete Wargames Handbook: How to Play, Design, and Find Them* (New York: William Morrow, 1992).

⁴² For instance, Paradox Interactive, a Swedish company that specializes in selling historical simulations (and has numerous titles on the Second World War) encourages customers to post fan-fiction stories about hypothetical German (or any other country’) military campaigns - provided “No Gulags, Concentration Camps, Holocaust or Swastikas ... [We] ask you not to discuss these topics as they are not related to this game ... Anyone discussing any of the above items on this board is liable to be banned.” See “No Gulags, Gas, Concentration Camps, Holocaust or Swastikas! If in doubt ask a Mod,” *Paradox Interactive*, <http://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/showthread.php?529860-No-Gulags-Gas-Concentration-Camps-Holocaust-or-Swastikas!-If-in-doubt-ask-a-Mod&s=74e5cd9f0bae3de74f3eec05d9af0343>, posted April 6, 2011, last edited March 17, 2013, (accessed June 28, 2014).

twenty years after its release, and its strategic gameplay made it a popular tournament favorite. In opting to name the game after Rommel's famous army formation and to exclude the opening Italian-Commonwealth battles, the game followed a German orientation common in the genre. But more than this, *Afrika Korps* was Rommel-centric. As the back of the box explained, "Now, the legend of 'The Desert Fox' is recreated ... *Afrika Korps* simulates the mobile conflict between Rommel's Panzerarmee Afrika and the British Eighth Army defending Egypt and the Suez Canal."⁴³ The *Panzerarmee Afrika* was Rommel's, not Hitler's or even Germany's. In its catalogues, Avalon Hill invited gamers to, in fact, be Rommel: "YOU can re-create Field Marshall Rommel's daring exploits at Bengasi, Tobruk, El Alamein and points in between ... Here YOU can fully appreciate the genius of the great Desert Fox."⁴⁴ This was not just hyperbole, but an actual feature of the gameplay. In what is a relatively common phenomenon in wargames devoted to the Western Desert campaign, *Afrika Korps* has an actual "Rommel" unit that Axis players can use to allow their combat units to break the rules and exceed their normal allotted movement. The game treats him uniquely in this manner (i.e. there is no corresponding "Montgomery" unit).⁴⁵ The very name of the game, the special Rommel unit, and the marketing that invited players to recreate Rommel's genius was a natural expression of the image of the "Desert Fox" as the consummate armored commander.

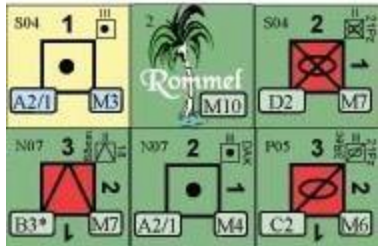
Avalon Hill's Rommel-centric approach to *Afrika Korps* was (and still is) a prevalent theme in wargames devoted to the North African campaign in which the German marshal

⁴³ Charles S. Roberts, *Afrika Korps* (Baltimore: Avalon Hill, 1964, 1965, 1980).

⁴⁴ 1975 Avalon Hill catalogue. Retrieved from <http://www.boardgamegeek.com/image/158058/afrika-korps?size=original>, (accessed January 3, 2011).

⁴⁵ This is excepting one of the later optional expansion scenarios simulating Operation "Compass," in which the Commonwealth player had an "O'Conner" unit that functioned similarly to the "Rommel" unit to simulate the significant advantage in mobility the British had *vis-à-vis* the Italians before the arrival of German forces.

usually appears on the box cover, title, or has a special unit.⁴⁶ Given these criteria, the focus on Erwin Rommel in wargaming dwarfs all of his Second World War contemporaries and rivals history's most famous figures such as Napoleon and Alexander the Great.⁴⁷ Even in



the 1978 game *Caporetto, 1917*, devoted to the Austro-German victory in the First World War battle of the same name, there is actually a Rommel unit even though he was just a junior officer at that time!⁴⁸ Like *Afrika Korps*, many of

these games strove to simulate Rommel's reputation for tactical brilliance by introducing innovative features or allowing the Axis player to do things the Allied player simply cannot do. One game representative of both trends was *Rommel in the Desert*, released by Columbia Games in 1984. *Rommel in the Desert* used wooden blocks that stood upright, which allowed players to hide their unit's details instead of the traditional counters that were placed face up on the board. Columbia Games marketed this feature as having finally captured the essence of Rommel's generalship in a board game: "At last, a HIGHLY PLAYABLE game-system featuring the element of SURPRISE, for a game on the Master of Deception and the most wide-open campaign in modern history!" The back of the gamebox (as vital to a game's storeroom appeal as a magazine cover to a periodical) similarly enticed potential customers:

The desert war has been gamed many times before, but this game is really different ... The real problems of generals have nothing to do with shuffling combat factors to get that perfect 3-1 attack while your foe waits passively to

⁴⁶ Some examples from the 1970s include John Edwards, "The African Campaign" (Jedko Games 1972, 1978). The 1972 edition also had a tank on the cover. The 1978 edition did away with the tank and had a larger picture of Rommel. David C. Isby, "Rommel: The War for North Africa" (Rand Game Associates, 1974); Roger Damon, "Rommel's Panzers" (Austin: Metagaming, 1978); Richard H. Berg, "The Campaign for North Africa: The Desert War 1940-43" (New York, Simulations Publications, Inc., 1979).

⁴⁷ BoardGameGeek, probably the most comprehensive boardgame online database and the most trafficked by the gaming community, is a good starting point to attempt to assess this.

⁴⁸ Albert A. Nofi, "Caporetto 1917" (Simulations Publication, Inc., 1978).

be overwhelmed. Rommel gained his many victories over the numerically superior Eighth Army by employing speed, daring, and surprise. In this game, as in the desert campaign, the events of the battlefield are often subordinated to the battle of wits and nerves between the opposing commanders.⁴⁹

To encourage Axis players to keep their wits while executing these audacious maneuvers, the game had a built in “Rommel Bonus” that broke the normal rules and gave eligible Axis units a movement bonus, a potentially decisive advantage to sustain an otherwise impossible line of attack.⁵⁰ These innovations were on the whole successful. The wargamer community has favorably reviewed *Rommel in the Desert* and the game has since gone through a second edition in 2004, which has an iconic portrait of Rommel with his goggles and scarf on the cover.⁵¹

While the “Desert Fox” makes for an obvious appeal to sell more units, it is not easy for designers to accommodate the expectations gamers have of the iconic commander, to say nothing of creating rules that allow players to consistently recreate his improbable victories while adhering to verisimilitude. Games that put Rommel on the cover must do more than capture the accuracy of an abstract battlefield simulation with realistic resource management. Gamer Marco Arnaudo in a review of *Field Commander: Rommel*, a game with otherwise solid ratings and gameplay mechanics, captures the essence of what gamers expect in a game featuring Rommel:

I know [*Field Commander Rommel*] has drawn a lot of criticism, I believe mainly because the expectations that the theme creates and what the game is about are very different. They don't really match. People that are interested in Rommel, and I'm one of them, I will play virtually anything that has

⁴⁹ Taken from <http://boardgamegeek.com/image/92857/rommel-in-the-desert?size=large>, (accessed December 21, 2010).

⁵⁰ Craig Besinque, “Rommel in the Desert” Originally published as (Game Preserve 1982). Published by (Columbia Games 1984, 2004). Original ad from Strategy & Tactics #94. Current ad at http://www.columbiagames.com/cgi-bin/query/cfg/zoom.cfg?product_id=3421, (accessed January 4, 2011).

⁵¹ Boardgamegeek has a compilation rating of 7.54 (out of 10), which is a very respectable score as the highest rated games are generally in the 8s and average games in the 6s. <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/84/rommel-desert>, (accessed July 20, 2015).

Rommel on the box, will probably look in a game with some opportunities to reproduce those strategies and techniques that made the military genius of Rommel so interesting, so fascinating. If you are playing a game about the Fox you want to outfox your enemy ... If you are looking for a game that has a strong historical feel that gives you the opportunity to try the strategies that Rommel was famous for, if you are looking for a game about Rommel, then maybe you will have to look for it somewhere else.⁵²

Arnaudo recommends *Rommel in the Desert* “because it really shines if you want to try to do crazy Rommelian things ... if players get aggressive, in that game you can do incredible things with the supply lines, perform extraordinary bluffs and prepare all sort of traps ... they WORK.”⁵³ Arnaudo’s expectations evince that the “Desert Fox” has a special quality whose unorthodox genius should be rewarded if executed by a competent player.

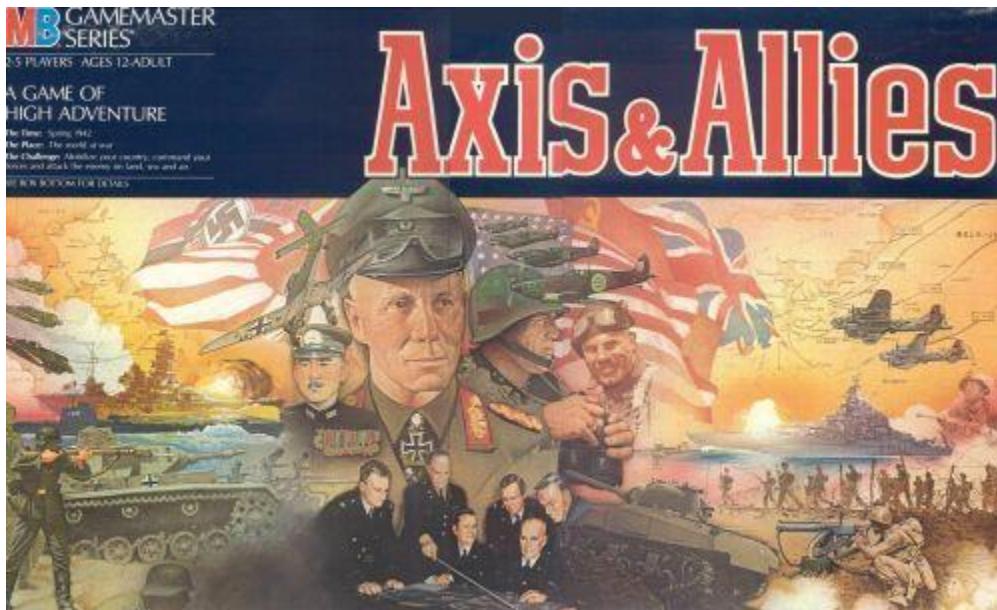
Wargames have conformed to the military idealization of the “Desert Fox” and highlight a continuity that stems back to the Summer of 1942. As a whole, the focus on Rommel and more generally the German side (many wargames feature prominent German military motifs and use German military nomenclature) cater to a genre that customarily finds more interest in playing the underdog, relying on their brains rather than overwhelming force, and accepting the challenge of reversing the historical result.⁵⁴ It is a combination that fits perfectly with the myth of the “Desert Fox.” The boxcover of the 1984 board game *Axis and Allies*, a relatively simple simulation of the entire global conflict and probably the best-selling World War II game ever with 2 million units sold, epitomizes the standing Rommel

⁵² Marco Arnaudo review of “Field Commander: Rommel” at <http://boardgamegeek.com/video/4186/field-commander-rommel/2d6-orgs-video-review>, (accessed February 17, 2011). For a similar review see Chris Montgomery, “Field Commander: Rommel a Short Dip Into the Shallow End of the Pool” at <http://www.boardgamegeek.com/thread/384611/a-not-so-positive-review>

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Smelser and Davies, *The Myth of the Eastern Front*; Dunnigan, *The Complete Wargames Handbook*, especially 43-45.

has among his Second World War peers. A montage of many of the war's iconic weapons and leaders, Rommel's portrait is the largest and in the foreground of the box cover.⁵⁵



The Undercurrent of Rommel Perceptions

The 15th anniversary of Rommel's death in 1959 demonstrated the still sharp contrast between public memories of Nazi-era Germans. In a ceremony at Rommel's gravesite, Lucie was the honored guest and was accompanied by Speidel, then Commander in Chief of NATO forces in Central Europe. Speidel used the occasion to repeat his generous (and exaggerated) assessment in *Invasion 1944* by stating that Rommel "grew beyond the military leader to become a personality of historical greatness" to a crowd of several thousand and an international assembly of soldiers, which included the commander of the US 7th Army, General F.W. Farrell.⁵⁶ The *New York Times* published a letter to the editor protesting the presence of a US Army general:

As an American citizen I want to protest the presence of the representative of our country at a ceremony honoring a Nazi general. Have

⁵⁵ Larry Harris, Jr., "Axis & Allies," (Milton Bradley, 1984).

⁵⁶ "Ex-Enemies and Germans Hail Rommel," *Chicago Tribune*, October 19, 1959, A11; "Rommel is Honored by West Germans," *New York Times*, October 19, 1959, 2.

we forgotten so soon the things the Nazis stood for, the atrocities the German armies committed, the millions of innocent people killed?

Rommel was a general of the German Army, an army committed to the overthrow of the civilization as we know it. Although West Germany has, by circumstance, become an ‘ally’ of the United States, I don’t feel our country has to participate in honoring a Nazi general.⁵⁷

The letter writer did not perceive the FRG as a legitimate and rehabilitated partner of the United States. As his memories of Nazi-era Germans focused on the millions of victims, he rejected the premise of separating Rommel from the “army committed to the overthrow of civilization as we know it.” This is another example illustrating the correlation between perceptions of Rommel and beliefs regarding the relationship between Germans and the Third Reich.

This clash of historical perceptions typified the pattern examined in this study. Americans, Britons, and Germans came together to publicly endorse a sympathetic portrayal of Rommel as an honorable soldier. It was not precisely articulated why the German marshal was a “personality of historical greatness,” yet the occasion of his death at the hands of the Nazi regime allowed willing participants to connect the anti-Hitler dots so to speak. The letter writer was representative of overshadowed individual private memories that persisted and contested this public narrative. However prevalent accolades of Rommel were in books, motion pictures, periodicals, commemorations, games, and other mediums of what may be construed as public opinion, these divergent memories persisted.

There were also those in Great Britain who voiced objections to the veneration of Rommel. On the occasion of Sir Eugen Millington-Drake’s presentation of the “Rommel Shooting Prize” in 1962, the *Daily Mirror* editorialized:

⁵⁷ Murray L. Lobel, “Honoring Rommel Protested,” Letter to the Editor, *New York Times*, November 3, 1959, 30.

The picture is not so simple as that. Rommel was a favourite of Hitler and one of the main exponents of armored warfare ... This was the shining sword that made possible the death of 10,000,000 Jews. When things went wrong, Rommel was implicated in the plot to kill Hitler. The ally, or the accomplice, changed sides. I doubt whether he ever visited a concentration camp but no man as intelligent as he was, who knew the Nazi leaders intimately for many years, could have been unaware of the massive evil that was going on. Sir Eugen Millington-Drake must be short of valiant heroes.⁵⁸

While some basic factual details were wrong (10,000,000 Jews was too high an estimate and the article claims Rommel rebuilt the Panzer divisions, which he did not), the contested memory surrounding Rommel was (and still is) not about historical facts. The *Daily Mirror* accepted the contention that Rommel had acted against Hitler. The critique was that whatever sterling qualities the “Desert Fox” may have had, Rommel was still a cog in the National Socialist machine for a significant time. It was an objection, like most of the others in previous chapters, anchored in perspectives of who must bear responsibility for the misdeeds committed by the Third Reich.

Even within Germany, there were uneasy feelings concerning Rommel as a hero of the Nazi era. There have been incisive studies on the socio-political milieu in postwar West German society that discouraged honest introspection with the Nazi past (sometimes referred to as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*). There were liberal voices who preferred such a course, but it was not until the sweeping political changes of the late 1960s with the student protest movement and the ascent of the SPD Chancellorship of Willy Brandt that a new age cohort challenged the selective memories of the 1950s in mainstream German public discourse.⁵⁹ Before then, outspoken critics of Rommel and the founding myths were minority voices. When in 1952 the German writer and future Nobel-prizewinner Heinrich

⁵⁸ “Cassandra Says,” *Daily Mirror*, May 1, 1962, 8.

⁵⁹ Marcuse, *Legacies of Dachau*; Herf, *Divided Memory*; Frei, *Adenauer's Germany and the Nazi Past*.

Böll dubbed Rommel the “Sonny Boy,” and questioned how it could be assumed that being a Field Marshal of Hitler had nothing to do with politics and “as late as 1944 he needed proof that Hitler was a criminal,” it followed the same line of criticism that the film received in British and US societies. There were Germans looking to forward anti-establishment narratives, but as historian Hanna Schissler recalled of her childhood in the 1950s, it was an era when it was fashionable to make oven jokes and the introspection that Böll sought was simply not discussed.⁶⁰

The “Desert Fox” was precisely the type of selective memory that made recollecting about the Nazi-era palatable to many Germans, especially those who wanted to believe the *Wehrmacht* did not stain its honor fighting for the Third Reich. Indeed, his professional rivals opted for self-censorship rather than ruin the mythology of Germany’s most renowned soldier and an acceptable hero from the Second World War. Rommel had made professional enemies among the German officer corps (in sharp contrast with front-line *Landsers* who esteemed him) and they did not publicly voice their iconoclastic perspectives until opening up to David Irving and Wolf Heckmann in the early 1970s. Previously, these men felt their unspoken truths would mar the reputation of German soldiers. As General Heinrich Kirchheim, who had witnessed first-hand Rommel’s ill-conceived initial offensive against Tobruk in 1941, put it in a 1959 letter to General Johannes Streich, who was unceremoniously dismissed from his command by Rommel:

[Propaganda] made him the symbol of all that is best in soldiering. His qualities as a leader were glorified, as were his qualities of character – in particular his chivalry, goodness, and modesty! The idea was that an official

⁶⁰ Bernd Balzer (ed.), *Heinrich Böll Werke: Essayistische Schriften und Reden I: 1952-1963* (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1979), 45-46; Hanna Schissler, “Introduction: Writing About 1950s West Germany,” in *The Miracle Years: A Cultural History of West Germany, 1949-1968*, ed. Hanna Schissler (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 3-13.

criticism of this by now mythical character would damage the image of the German soldier.⁶¹

Streich was well aware of what Kirchheim spoke of. At a 1965 lecture to his former military comrades, he remarked:

I had thought for a while whether I should publish a refutation of the book “War Without Hate.” However I quickly abandoned that idea. Also I am finally no longer drawn to making available true and accurate information for the War History Archives. Rommel was one of the military leaders, who – rightly or not – was played up as a folk hero to the German people. Why would somebody take such a belief away from the people, in a time when only enemies of Germany’s soldiers speak out? Even today’s lecture is – for the same reason – intended only for this circle of comrades. So I ask [that these harsh words of criticism] are spread no further.⁶²

For Streich, who loathed Rommel, to opt for silence he must have felt an enormous amount of pressure. Reflecting years after the event, Streich, a considerate yet cautious commander, is reported to have said that Rommel blamed him for the failure of the 1941 offensive at Tobruk because, “Your trouble was that you were too concerned for your men.” To which Streich retorted, “I can imagine no greater words of praise for a division commander.”⁶³ Whether or not Streich can be accused of selectively remembering Rommel’s semantics,⁶⁴ he can hardly be blamed as his military reputation was ruined when

⁶¹ Taken from Heckmann, *Rommel’s War in Africa*, 86.

⁶² Lecture by General Streich in August 1965 in *LCER*, reel 3.

⁶³ Interview with Johannes Streich in *LCER*, reel 3.

⁶⁴ Caution is advised in taking this reported conversation literally because Streich had motive to portray his dismissal as unjust and David Irving is involved. I think the overall contours of the incident are plausible, though it is questionable Rommel literally said that. While Rommel was often tactless and ruthless to officers he did not respect, his public writings and personal correspondence reveals a genuine interest to keep casualties low and concern for the men under his command. This alleged comment was out of character, but considering the importance Rommel placed on quickly seizing Tobruk and his lack of discretion, it is possible he uttered something to that effect. It should be noted that Rommel and Streich most likely hated each other before this incident. Streich was part of the 5th Panzer division in France that lagged behind Rommel’s 7th Panzer and he was bitter that Rommel convinced their mutual superior Hoth that the 7th should be allowed to commandeer the 5th’s bridging equipment. The commander of the 5th protested but to no avail as Hoth elected to support Rommel’s more aggressive posture and eventually sacked the commander of the 5th, General Max von Hartlieb. See Frieser, *Blitzkrieg Legend*, 232 and especially accompanying footnote 80 on pages 410-411. Streich’s war record indicates a cautious commander by nature so conflict between him and his aggressive superior Rommel

Rommel sacked him. That this juncture at Tobruk was Rommel at his personal and professional worst is beyond doubt. He was obsessed with Tobruk,⁶⁵ his tactics ill-conceived,⁶⁶ and he filed enough unjust official complaints about the performance of his officers that *Oberbefehlshaber des Heeres* (Commander of the Army) Walther von Brauchitsch was shocked. Brauchitsch wrote Rommel, feeling “obligated by duty for the sake of the *Afrika Korps* and your own personal interest” to inform him that “calm discussion” would produce better results than threatening or sacking “officers who have until then previously excelled in battle.”⁶⁷ This representation of Rommel never made it into Desmond Young’s *Rommel* (which devoted but a single paragraph to the successful Australian defense of Tobruk), Nunnally Johnson’s *The Desert Fox* (which depicted Rommel as cordial and polite to his peers), or Liddell Hart’s *The Rommel Papers* (in which the editor, who ought to have known better, did not correct Rommel’s oversimplified account). That Streich had more than enough corroborating evidence to set the story straight and chose to do so only in private illustrates the palpable incentives Rommel’s professional rivals felt to bite their tongues for the betterment of the German army’s image.

There was no such pressure to conform with the hagiographic image in the United States or Great Britain, so there was public debate on the worthiness of esteeming Rommel, which typically comprised of people with hardened opinions who did not change their mind.

was hardly surprising. See Samuel W. Mitcham Jr., *Rommel’s Desert Commanders: The Men Who Served the Desert Fox, North Africa, 1941-1942* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2007).

⁶⁵ After the initial failure of his first attack, undeterred he showed a map to his friend General Milch of the *Luftwaffe* and said: “See that, Milch, that is Tobruk! I’ll take it! There it is and the Pass, I’ll take that too! That is the Suez Canal, I’ll also take that! And there is Cairo, I’ll take that too!” See “Aus dem unveröffentlichten Memoiren des Feldm. Milch” taken from *LCER*, reel 5.

⁶⁶ Adalbert von Taysen, *Tobruk 1941: Der Kampf in Nordafrika* (Freiburg: Verlag Rombach, 1976); Robert Lyman, *The Longest Siege: Tobruk, the Battle that Saved North Africa* (London: Macmillan, 2009); Schreiber, Stegmann, and Vogel, *The Mediterranean, South-east Europe, and North Africa 1939-1941*, 679-683 offers a good synopsis.

⁶⁷ Walther von Brauchitsch letter to Erwin Rommel, July 9, 1941 NA RG 242 T84 roll 276.

Take an argument at a 1953 session in the House of Commons about Hans Speidel's inclusion as an official NATO representative at a British armament exhibition. Churchill, again Prime Minister, was asked if he was aware if Rommel's former Chief of Staff was invited. To which he replied:

I do not know any reason why the former Chief of Staff of General Rommel should be under any exceptional disability. On the contrary, in the height of the war, I paid my tribute to General Rommel's outstanding military gifts and I am bound to say now, in time of peace, that I also regard his resistance to the Hitler tyranny, which cost him his life, as an additional distinction to his memory.

Churchill was challenged whether a tribute to such a person was an affront to men who fought against Rommel's army that had been assisted by General Speidel, "who was doubtless a member of the German officer class which made itself the willing partner of the Nazi regime." The Prime Minister rejoined:

There were quite a lot of people in Germany who had been anxious to support their country but who had not associated themselves with the crimes of the Nazi regime. A great factor in the peace of the world was the separation of those who had been active and vigorous servants and supporters of Hitler and his crimes and tyrannies and those who had tried to keep the honour of the German name clear from those charges.

To this perspective of distinguishing between "good" and "bad" German Army officers, Labour MP Emanuel Shinwell shook his head and retorted that "there are many things that [Churchill] says which I dislike—and with very good reason."⁶⁸ The *Daily Mirror* was more specific in dubbing the speech a "whitewash":

Rommel for all his bravery and his gallantry was part and parcel of the wickedest regimes which ever brought misery to the human race. For twenty years he knew a good deal of the brutality that put Hitler in power and

⁶⁸ The transcript can be found at http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1953/apr/29/british-armaments-inspection-general#S5CV0514P0_19530429_HOC_237, (accessed May 7, 2012). See also "House of Commons," *The Times*, April 30, 1953, 9; "London's Bid to Rommel Aide Protested," *Washington Post*, April 30, 1953, 6; William Barkley, "Churchill in Storm," *Daily Express*, April 30, 1953, 1.

sustained him there until the gates of the concentration camps were burst open by the horrified and sickened troops of the Allies in 1945.⁶⁹

At loggerheads was the level of responsibility gallant soldiers must share for that misery the Nazi regime inflicted. The ambiguity of Rommel's career – he was at times reported as being Hitler's favorite general and a man of principle who opposed the German dictator – and the lack of historical awareness regarding Nazi-era Germans' relationship with the Third Reich meant debates about Rommel required participants to use stereotypes, hearsay, or their own sense of right and wrong either to reconcile conflicting information, explain the inexplicable, or fill in evidentiary gaps.

The point here is that those who balked at the uncritical positive representations of Rommel never went away or were eventually convinced he was worthy of remembrance. Even if this group was overshadowed during the 1950s and 1960s and did not have much influence on the conventional narrative of the "Desert Fox," it is still important to recognize because there is not a single collective memory. People could derive independent judgments and their persistence formed the foundation of the more critical Rommel narratives that began to acquire a mainstream presence in the 1970s.⁷⁰ Rommel's reputation has always had a duality to it, the honorable professional and the Nazi abettor, whereupon beliefs regarding the level of responsibility that the German military must share for the criminality of the Nazi

⁶⁹ "Poetry and Whitewash," *Daily Mirror*, May 6, 1953, 4.

⁷⁰ In 1978, the popular German periodical *Der Spiegel* remarked that David Irving's 1978 biography *Trial of the Fox* had dramatically "destroyed" the legend of Rommel's life. While *Trial of the Fox* was an important publication, the chipping away at the hagiographic "Desert Fox" narrative no doubt began even earlier. *Der Spiegel* itself noted the importance of Wolf Heckmann's 1976 biography that "thoroughly scrutinizes the Rommel myth and explains why Rommel was greatly overestimated." Earlier in 1971, there was a documentary titled *Mythos Rommel* broadcast on West German TV that posited Rommel's reputation was largely the creation of Nazi propaganda. It prompted former Rommel colleagues Friedrich Ruge and Friedrich von Mellenthin to respond with strong objections. "Rommel: Ende einer Legende," *Der Spiegel* (August 21, 1978): 62-75; "Rommel: 'Dieser Räuberhauptmann!,'" *Der Spiegel* (November 29, 1976), 82-90; Friedrich Ruge's November 28, 1971 signed letter in *LCER* reel 4; Mellenthin, *German Generals of World War II*, 83.

regime tended to determine which way public opinion went. The 1960s represented a decade in which assumptions of German ignorance and nonaccountability began to be seriously challenged in public forums: the Eichmann Trial, the publication of William L. Shirer's *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, Fritz Fischer's *Griff Nach der Weltmacht*, and Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews*, the student movement in 1968, and, probably most significant, the emergence of a new age cohort that was keen on investigating how wide the net of compliance and conformity ranged over German society during the Nazi era. People increasingly questioned the "Desert Fox" hagiographic mold of a resistance hero in light of a new level of historical awareness. But that is another story with a new set of historical actors, a different socio-political context, and a process of generation change that deserves its own study.

Epilogue

“Once Rommel had taken off his desert-boots, the rest was anti-climax.”
– E.T. Williams, from a review of Desmond Young’s *Rommel* (1950)¹

The myth of the “Desert Fox” was at its heart a military idealization that arose from the (perceived) extraordinary turn of fortunes for the Axis forces in the Western Desert from January to June 1942. It represented an authentic expression of virtues esteemed in military traditions shared across many cultures through time; a colleague who studies the Classical World of Greece and Rome told me he felt that Rommel was analogous to Hector from Homer’s *Illiad* and I believe that comparison is apropos. Retrospective observers who have pointed to political circumstances such as the *Attentat* or the Cold War alliance with the FRG have missed the essence of the “Desert Fox,” those aspects that had fascinated people to begin with and served as the inspiration for so many biographies.

There were many days working on this project that I thought about the parallels in the United States regarding the reception history of Confederate Civil War generals such as Robert E Lee and “Stonewall” Jackson. In the main, like Rommel, they too were deemed honorable combatants by the Union victors and had numerous memorials erected and public venues named in their honor.² Like attitudes toward Nazi Germany,² many in the North drew distinctions between zealous slaveowners and non-slaveholding Southern Whites. Union General Ulysses S. Grant, who received Lee’s Surrender at Appomattox, judged him to “be a man of much dignity” and wrote in his memoir:

I felt like anything rather than rejoicing at the downfall of a foe who had fought so long and valiantly, and had suffered so much for a cause, though that cause was, I believe, one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and

¹ E.T. Williams, “The Rommel Legend,” *The Observer*, January 22, 1950, 4.

² Blight, *Race and Reunion*.

one for which there was the least excuse. I do not question, however, the sincerity of the great mass of those who were opposed to us.³

It is so eerily familiar that had Grant's exact words been attributed to a US or British general about Rommel, I doubt even an expert would recognize something was amiss. To continue the analogy further, at the conclusion of the Civil War, sentiments akin to Grant's were challenged by those who focused on the Emancipationist cause and rejected such distinctions regarding the Confederacy. Like those who argued German society must bear responsibility for the Third Reich, their views were quickly overwhelmed by those who advocated for peace and reconciliation with the (white) US South. It is interesting how in both cases the ideological fervor and harsh attitudes quickly subsided after the war's conclusion. I suspect this is because they were fueled by passions rather than fundamental changes in worldviews, although no doubt the American victors in both cases found reconciliation easier because in neither war did enemy forces target the US (North) home front, while the victors knew that they had wrought devastation on the homes of those enemies.

The debates and controversies over Rommel have occurred because not everyone considered it appropriate to reflect on the Second World War from just a military perspective. Critics of Rommel have consistently used the same logic since the *New York Times* in 1942 implored readers not to let the colorful military personality of the "Desert Fox" obscure the Nazi "beast" that he fought for.⁴ They did not so much dispute the facts as they did the interpretation, meaning, and significance of those facts. At the core, people have argued over the degree of responsibility military leaders such as Rommel ought to shoulder for the crimes perpetrated by the Nazi regime. Perceptions and representations of Rommel

³ Ulysses Simpson Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant* (London: Sampson Low, Marston: 1895), 629-630.

⁴ See Chapter Three; "Rommel and the Beast," *New York Times*, June 26, 1942, 20.

have changed since the 1970s because the British, US, and German general publics are much more knowledgeable of the Second World War and sensitive to the Holocaust and other crimes committed by the Nazi Regime. US President Ronald Reagan's notorious 1985 ceremonial visit to the German military cemetery at Bitburg that aroused a storm of criticism, particularly from US veterans, shows how the old assumptions regarding the apolitical German army no longer held the explanatory power they had in the 1950s. Indeed, even a skilled orator such as Reagan, the "Great Communicator," failed to sway the US public and could not overcome the historical circumstances arrayed against him as he was defeated by his critics in the court of public opinion.⁵

Representations of Rommel have become much more vigorously contested in public narratives since the 1970s, particularly in Germany (less so in the US and Great Britain). To take one example, the 2012 German made for TV film *Rommel* was denounced by Manfred and his daughter Catherine as presenting "lies" for depicting Erwin Rommel as "an upstart, a favourite of Hitler and a Nazi war criminal." Like Nunnally Johnson sixty years before him, director Niki Stein defended the screenplay and asserted his depiction was historically accurate and based on "all the recent significant research findings on Rommel." And just as in the case of Johnson, it was not "all" research findings; historian Cornelia Hecht, who curated the 2008-2009 "Mythos Rommel" exhibit at the Haus der Geschichte Baden-Württembergs, blasted the film for inaccuracies. Stein himself has admitted that he views Rommel as a "weak man" and believes the film relays a powerful historical lesson: "I hope young Germans watch. We're talking about our grandparents. It explains a lot about the way

⁵ Richard J. Jensen, *Reagan at Bergen-Belsen and Bitburg* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007).

people act in a dictatorship.”⁶ Such a statement shows how the way Stein made sense of the Nazi era – and perhaps his sense of responsibility – manifested itself in his controversial representation of Rommel. Stein’s line of reasoning is indicative of a recent trend in Germany that has seen heroic images of the “Desert Fox” in eclipse. Indeed, since the new millennium, some (though not all) memorials dedicated to Rommel in Germany have been taken down (another parallel to Confederate generals in the United States).⁷

The US, British, and German publics are more apt to contest the Rommel myth (indeed the Rommel *Wikipedia* page has an entire section devoted to that topic), because since the 1970s debates about the “Desert Fox” have occurred in a context that has undermined the James Mason heroic portrayal and have made the connections between Rommel and Nazi criminality more discernible, if still indistinct. Ever since David Irving’s *Trail of the Fox* was published in 1977, we know Rommel attended Nazi indoctrination courses like every German officer and after one in December 1938, he wrote to his wife: “Yesterday the Führer spoke: today’s soldier must be political, because he must always be ready to take action for the new politics. The German military is the sword of the new

⁶ “Rommel Film Criticised for Depicting General as ‘Nazi War Criminal,’” *The Guardian*, September 21, 2011, retrieved here: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/sep/21/rommel-film-nazi-war>; Madeline Chambers, “The Devil’s General? German Film Seeks to Debunk Rommel Myth,” *Entertainment News*, November 1, 2012, retrieved here <https://www.reuters.com/article/entertainment-us-germany-rommel-idUSBRE8A00RM20121101>; Ed Meza, “Rommel TV biopic Stirs Controversy,” *Variety*, November 12, 2011, retrieved here <https://variety.com/2011/tv/news/rommel-tv-biopic-stirs-controversy-1118046014/> (all accessed August 29, 2019).

⁷ Two examples are a 2001 verdict by the city council of Goslar to take down a plaque honoring him (and Guderian) and a 2013 decision to remove a monument commemorating Rommel in his hometown Heidenheim by the city council acting on the advice of historians and in the wake of protestors who defaced the monument. One significant difference between Rommel and the Confederate generals is that the removal of memorials dedicated to the latter in the US has been more sweeping, whereas there are still some public venues honoring Rommel. This is perhaps because biographies such as Lee’s are less ambiguous than Rommel’s. Lee owned slaves and Rommel’s refusal to implement criminal orders when so many of his peers passed them on does seem significant. Comparing the dismantling of memorials to Nazi era German and Confederate figures would make for an excellent study as I suspect the reasoning has much overlap.

German worldview.”⁸ New historiography has stimulated reconsiderations of old assumptions. To take one example, Raffael Scheck’s 2006 *Hitler’s African Victims: The German Army’s Massacres of Black French Soldiers in 1940* has prompted discussions about Rommel’s exploits with the 7th Panzer division during the French campaign that are no longer just about military strategy.⁹ Even if most participants in Rommel debates have not read the latest research, these new interpretations consistently get brought up by people who have because books like Scheck’s shed light on the crux of the matter: what did Rommel know about Nazi criminality and how accountable was he? (Fitting for the reception history of Rommel, conclusions are still ambiguous. Scheck states that while massacres occurred in areas in which the 7th Panzer operated and thus elements from that division were likely responsible, there is no evidence incriminating Rommel himself.) This is not just a function of the age of Google searches; back in 1977, readers of the *New York Times* review of *Trail of the Fox* were told the German General Staff had compliantly accepted Hitler’s concepts of political warfare and lost their honor in doing so.¹⁰

This shift took place in the 1970s more because of gradual changes in British, German, and US societies that had taken place, in particular the emergence of a new age cohort, than because of any specific event or publication. Collective memories are not static. As the context of the present changes, so do shared perspectives of the past. The international student protests of the 1960s, the Civil Rights movement in the United States, the growing activism of the New Left, and the increasing scholarly attention on the

⁸ Erwin Rommel letter to Lucie Rommel, December 2, 1938, NA RG 242 T84/275.

⁹ Raffael Scheck, *Hitler’s African Victims: The German Army Massacres of Black French Soldiers in 1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For the academic debates on this matter aside from Scheck, 23-28 see Claus Telp, “Rommel and 1940,” in *Rommel Reconsidered*, 30-59; Butler, *Field Marshal*, 173-174. Lieb, “Erwin Rommel: Widerstandskämpfer oder Nationalsozialist?” 313-328 is a more generalized recent investigation into Rommel’s contact with criminal orders and his handling of them is.

¹⁰ David Pryce-Jones, “With Apologies to Adolf Hitler,” *New York Times*, November 20, 1977, BR6.

connection between National Socialism and the *Wehrmacht* were some of the key changes that altered how people made sense of the Second World War. When wondering why Irving's argument in *Trail of the Fox* that Rommel was not a Resistance hero has persisted despite the author's ruined reputation, it is not because that notion was original. As we have seen, it had been articulated ever since the release of Young's *Rommel* in 1950 by respected figures such as Hugh Trevor Roper. Irving's thesis resonated because audiences, whose composition and horizons of understanding have changed since the 1950s, were receptive to challenging old orthodoxies about the "Desert Fox." Reviewers, historians, and audiences were not blind to Irving's numerous problematic claims and his dubious reputation. In 1977, he was dubbed a "self-righteous crank" and a "spokesman for the current wave of Hitler revisionism," who had written "mischievous nonsense" and "beloved conspiracies." And yet within these commentaries were acknowledgements that "a credible portrait of Rommel does emerge despite the flaws in the work" and, "there can be no doubt that the champions of military conspiracy have highlighted Rommel's role too much."¹¹ Creators and critics of the Rommel myth have consistently been able to parse out what they have deemed problematic or incorrect information that conflicts with their sense of history.

The shifts in public views that have occurred in the reception of Rommel would become more apparent if people would stop making assumptions based on what they think

¹¹ A sampling of the (very) diverse reviews of *Trail of the Fox* is: Robert Kirsch, "The Book Report: Irving's Demythification of the Desert Fox," *Los Angeles Times*, January 11, 1978, F4; Leonard Bushkoff, "How the Desert Fox Became Obsolete," *Boston Globe*, February 5, 1978, A14; Pryce-Jones, "With Apologies to Adolf Hitler"; Harold C. Deutsch, review of *Trail of the Fox: The Search for the True Field Marshal Rommel* by David Irving in *American Historical Review* 83, no. 3 (June 1978): 758; Ronald Lewin, "The Gentleman of the Afrika Korps," *Times Literary Supplement*, November 11, 1977; Karl A. Schleunes, review of *Trail of the Fox: The Search for the True Field Marshal Rommel* by David Irving in *German Studies Review* 1, no. 1 (Feb. 1978): 96; "The Soldier's Soldier," *The Guardian*, November 10, 1977, 9; A.J.P. Taylor, "Rommel's Betrayal," *The Observer*, November 20, 1977, 28; Bruce Wilkenson, "Desert Fox Seen Through an Admiring Briton's Eyes," *Chicago Tribune*, December 19, 1977, 23; Friedrich Ruge, "Trail of the Fox: A Comment," *Military Affairs* 43, no. 3 (Oct., 1979): 158.

represents a nation's "needs" and instead paid more attention to what authors, critics, and commentators have actually written or said. Wolf Heckmann, a German born in 1929 and thus entered adulthood after the war's end in 1945, is one a fitting example. His 1976 biography, *Rommel's Krieg in Afrika*, preceded David Irving's and presented such a forceful challenge to the myth of Rommel that the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Rommel "brutalized his troops," was a "beast," and was dubbed by Heckmann as "Hitler's 'darling.'"¹² This is what Heckmann wrote in 1979 in the preface to the English language edition:

The worst disasters in history have been motivated by emotion. The most revolting torrents of blood have been shed by "idealist" followers of an idol, regardless of common sense. A sixteen-year-old German at the war's end (who in the years to come was to recognize just what, as a young fool, he had fought for with lethal weapons) perhaps sees this particularly clearly.

Now, as an aging man, I should like once more to be ready to fight for one thing: to uphold the system which we have been able to take over at least in the Western part of our defeated country – the system which hinges on understanding and is based on doubt about rulers. Doubt is the child of understanding. It is a basic component of democracy ... The world being what it is, one must – despite all doubt – be ready to defend the right to doubt. That's how it seems to me.¹³

Over the course of time, the ways in which people make sense of history and their perspectives on matters are bound to change. If individuals are comfortable with their worldviews and adhere to them, collective narratives about the past will nevertheless still change once the next generation comes of age.¹⁴

This is not meant to signal the death knell for the "Desert Fox." That positive imagery remains in the public sphere and its persistence indicates a genuine quality and

¹² "Nazi 'Desert Fox' also a Beast, Biography Says," *Los Angeles Times*, December 1, 1976, A1; "Nazi 'Desert Fox' Called Brutal General," *Los Angeles Times*, December 2, 1976, B21.

¹³ Heckmann, *Rommel's War in Africa*, ix-x.

¹⁴ Mannheim, "The Sociological Problem of Generations"; Pilcher, "Mannheim's Sociology of Generations: An Undervalued Legacy," Marcuse, "Generational Cohorts"; Spitzer, "The Historical Problem of Generations."

substance behind the myth. The “Desert Fox” is at heart a military idealization, and as long as warrior values are held in esteem, Rommel’s picture will still be hung in military vehicles, as in the anecdote of the US tank crew during the 1991 Gulf War discussed in the introduction.¹⁵ What I think has resonated with people most was his adherence to the soldier’s code and keeping the fighting in the Western Desert clean. It is a significant departure given how compliant the *Wehrmacht* was in implementing criminal orders. Unlike the *Attentat*, it is clear Rommel took an active role. He refused to entertain Allied requests to segregate black POWs from white POWs because “they fought together and wore the same uniforms.”¹⁶ Moreover, as historian Peter Lieb has noted, the war in North Africa was not predestined to be clean.¹⁷ Indeed, Colonel-General Hans-Jürgen von Arnim, who replaced Rommel as commander in March 1943, issued an army order denouncing the talk about the “fairness” of the English because he felt England was Germany’s main enemy, thus commanders were obligated to make their men hate the English.¹⁸ Regardless of what side of the debate people may fall regarding Erwin Rommel, something most everyone can agree on is that war should be honorable and entail no unnecessary destruction. It is precisely because the Second World War was characterized by hate, that the allure of the chimera of the “Desert Fox” is so prevailing.

¹⁵ “The Battle of 73 Easting,” *Greatest Tank Battles* (Breakthrough New Media: Toronto, 2010).

¹⁶ Diary entry for June 21, 1942, *LCER* reel 9. The diaries in the *LCER* collection are attributed to Erwin Rommel, although most of them were kept for him. The entry cited here was written by one of his staff officers.

¹⁷ Lieb, “Erwin Rommel: Widerstandskämpfer oder Nationalsozialist?” 320.

¹⁸ Kitchen, *Rommel’s Desert War*, 443-444.

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