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Manstein – Master of Manoeuvre?

Mungo Melvin

Report by Andy Grainger

Mungo is writing a book on Manstein - arguably the most capable, and apart from Rommel, the best-known of Germany's WW2 commanders.

Manstein's own book, *Lost Victories* was widely read when it appeared in the 1950's but has been criticized subsequently on the grounds that it was written largely from memory. Mungo wanted to point out that Manstein maintained and kept very detailed personal records so that the book was grounded on much stronger foundations than some had maintained although as with any other memoir, their use could be selective.

Many of these records are still with the family and though Mungo had been able to make use of some of them he had by no means been given unfettered access!

The book will concentrate on the controversial aspects of his life ie his relations with Hitler, war crimes, the German resistance and not just his operations.

In his talk Mungo wanted to look at Manstein's design for operations. This is not a familiar idea to British ideas though it is for German or Soviet ones. Did he come up with a new idea? If he did, was it successful?

He was going to concentrate on operations in the Crimea. He did not intend to deal with the allegations of war crimes in his talk though these are an important allegation and clearly stand in the background of any discussion of German operations in Russia. He would be happy to discuss this aspect during questions.

Manstein was born in 1887, the same year as Montgomery and Mungo felt that the two men shared some characteristics. Both learned their trade in the First World War, both believed strongly in training, both won important victories in the Second World War and both played an important role in the design of their post-1945 armies.

Both were well-organised, intolerant of others and both annoyed their superiors. Manstein, on the other hand, was an aristocrat of patrician bearing who became a loser and a war criminal whereas Monty came from both a humble and non-military background and was seen as a winner and a national hero.

The Crimean Campaign 1941

This was a campaign where Manstein established his reputation as a commander. It is a small area where a great deal happens and the outcome was in doubt up until the last moment. He himself relished fighting a campaign '*free from the influence of the Supreme Command*'. By the end of it he was being spoken of as a successor to Halder and even Keitel.



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The Crimea is a peninsular approximately 200 x 200 km. The capital is Simferopol. There are a number of ethnic groups in the Crimea including Tartars. Ancient Tartar ditches up to 20 m deep had been dug and were still in place across each of the Perekop and Kerch isthmuses.

There were three approaches from the north, one via the Perekop and two others to the east via islands in the Sea of Azov.

Manstein concentrated on the Perekop, possibly because of his lack of familiarity with and resources for amphibious operations. The Soviets had fortified it strongly. Manstein only had three Corps and characterized the operations from September 1941 as *'long and obstinate fighting for dominance'*. In the absence of any naval resources to outflank the position he tried using one Corps to break in and using a mobile group to exploit – in a manner that had similarities to Montgomery's approach at Alamein.

Operationally the Soviets counterattacked against the Rumanians in the southern Ukraine north-east of Perekop diverting German attention in that direction but eventually Kleist's 1st Panzer Group attacked across the Dnepr in the direction of Melitopol and drove the Russians back. This took place over a vast area and had some characteristics of naval warfare in that each side could see the other's columns from a great distance away.

In the Crimea the Russians also sent troops from Odessa to Sebastopol. Since some of these eventually fought at Stalingrad Mungo felt that the Soviet Army may well have learned lessons for the conduct of the last battle from the first two which featured sieges of built up areas that could be supplied by water.

The Perekop was only 10 km wide. The terrain was flat and featureless and even at this early stage in the war everything had to be dug in against the Russian Air Force. Manstein demanded reinforcements of men, armour and airpower but although he got some of them he did not get them at the same time. The German Army that began Barbarossa was an experienced one but this was certainly its greatest test – were all the divisional commanders up to the strain? Certainly by October 1941 the divisions had lost nearly all the infantry strength since they had started the campaign.

The first break-in battle was not very sophisticated, there was certainly no scope for manoeuvre and airpower played a key role in any success that was gained.

By December 1941 the Germans had managed to close up to Sebastopol but all their attacks had been repulsed. The main Russian forces had withdrawn into Sebastopol or eastwards to Kerch but other troops had also moved into mountain areas where they started partisan warfare. The Germans were on a logistic shoestring and were on half-rations during the winter.

One feature of the German situation was that if the Russians cut the Perekop isthmus then 11th Army would be cut off and not just pushed back if but would quickly be destroyed.

At this time Manstein's confidence both in himself and the Army fell. He described the Crimea in the Winter of 1941 as his worst time as *'reasonable competence'* on the part of the



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Russians would have enabled them to capture the capital of the Crimea, Simferopol, which was a communications hub including the railway back to Perekop. He managed to hold them along the Kerch front but only just.

Spring 1942 – capture of the Kerch peninsula

Manstein decided that before attacking Sebastopol again it was essential to clear his left flank – the Russians in the Kerch peninsula. He built up an attack force of three Corps but it was outnumbered about 2:1 by the three Russian armies facing him. He was reinforced with a Panzer Division and Richthofen's VIII Air Corps and conducted a deception in the north whilst launching the main attack in the south of the sector.

The battle was a success but had the unlooked for effect of bolstering the Germans' confidence. Although the Russian troops fought very hard their senior leaders were less effective and senior officers such as Halder formed the view that with one more push the Russians would fold.

June 1942 – the Fall of Sebastopol

There were actually three battles or attacks on Sebastopol. Only two feature in Manstein's memoirs as the first, in November 1941 has been airbrushed out!

The Soviets had constructed very solid defences during the first half of 1942 with their very professional engineers. These included very powerful coastal guns in armoured turrets that could fire inland.

Once again, no naval assets were available to the Germans although Richthofen's VIII Air Corps remained on hand with 600 aircraft although it was unable to dominate the whole area all the time. In particular, the Soviets were able to conduct naval amphibious operations despite German air superiority. Famously the huge Dora and Thor mortars were brought up but their impact was largely of a propaganda nature – Manstein did not think it worth using two Regiments to fire 40 shells.

The capture of Sebastopol took one month of very hard fighting. In the first three days each of the attacking divisions lost about 2,000 men. Manstein managed to obtain some additional infantry from Army Group South but no armour apart from about a battalion's worth of assault guns.

Hitler became fascinated by the battle in which he identified similarities with Verdun. About 250,000 men were engaged and the small amounts of ground gained or lost reminded him of 1916.

Eventually Manstein captured the northern side of the Severnaya inlet. Rather than fighting around the head of the inlet he brigaded his engineers and conducted an assault crossing at night over the 1,000 metre wide obstacle. This was successful and Sebastopol fell shortly afterwards.

It had been a German victory but something of a Pyrrhic one. It had taken longer than planned and Manstein reported his losses at around 25,000. The Russians had been commanded by



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Petrov, the very effective commander of Odessa who had been evacuated to Sebastopol with the remains of the garrison.

Apart from military losses, the population of Sebastopol had fallen from 100,000 to 8,000.

The German (and Italian) maritime operations had been utterly dominated by those of the Soviet Navy which had conducted significant amphibious operations in the Crimea including at least one at Army level.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the campaign it had been a massive operation characterized by very heavy fighting.

Questions

Q1) It has been suggested that what we now describe as war crimes were a necessary part of the German policy of manoeuvre warfare

A1) This is a very large question but there is no doubt that significant crimes took place in the Crimea and Manstein could hardly not have known about the policies being carried out. An *Einsatzgruppe* eliminated about 90,000 Jews in the Crimea. Partisan warfare started very early in the campaign and vicious acts were committed on both sides – for example German counterattacks found that the Russians had killed patients and staff in hospitals.

Many Tartars chose to collaborate with the Germans and were then employed in rear area duties although some also fought in the front line. They were particularly hostile both to Russians and Communists.

There was sound co-operation between Manstein's troops, the SS and Tartars in anti-partisan operations.

Q2) Could the Germans have sealed off the Crimea?

A2) Hitler had rejected this idea for a number of reasons

- He characterized the Crimea as a Soviet aircraft carrier from which air raids could be flown against the oil fields at Ploesti
- It provided bases for the Soviet Navy which could conduct amphibious operations throughout the Black Sea
- It offered a base for a Soviet counterattack across the Perekop.

The Soviet Air Force had fought very hard from the beginning of the campaign.

Q3) How did Manstein get along with the Rumanians and other allies?

A3) Manstein was better at dealing with allies than some other German commanders. He had a lot of respect for the ordinary soldier but did get irritated when promises to attack by their commanders failed to materialize.



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Q4) No amphibious landings were carried out in support of the Perekop operation. In view of the assault crossing of the Severnaya Inlet could more have been done?

A4) Not really. The Severnaya Inlet is 'only' about 1000m across whereas the Sivas Sea is around 10km.



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German Generals' Perception of the Second World War

Tobias Seidl

Summary by Andy Grainger

How did key German military figures view the war as it went on? How did they shape their ideas and how did they feel about the Nazis? Historians have looked at private soldiers or at key individuals such as Guderian, Rommel and Manstein. Mr Seidl wanted to look at other generals as a group to see how far, if at all, they saw events with a common mindset.

Between 1933 and 1945, a total of 3190 men belonged to the German *Generalität*. Mr Seidl focussed on 17 of these men, all former members of the German Army Group Africa – amongst them the German Africa Corps Commanders Ludwig Crüwell, Gustav von Vaerst, Wilhelm Ritter von Thoma and Hans Cramer as well as the commander-in-chief of the army group Africa Colonel General Hans-Jürgen von Arnim. These men were born between 1888 and 1899, with the majority having joined the armed forces prior to the First World War. All 17 fought in this war, deployed primarily on the front line and in staff positions. All but one remained in the armed forces during the interwar years and continued their military careers. Most of the Generals participated in the Polish and French campaigns of WWII, and all but one was deployed to the Eastern Front before being transferred to Africa.

In the past, historians used sources such as letters, diaries and comments of friends. These are useful but can be sporadic and are 'censored.' For example, the General is unlikely to write to his family about brothels he may have visited or war crimes perpetrated by his units.

Mr Seidl chose to look at the period May 1943-May 1944. The Germans were retreating by then but had not been decisively defeated.

In 2004, Sönke Neitzel¹ discovered in the National Archives London, a vast number of transcripts of bugged conversations among German and Italian POWs generated in special POW camps in England from 1939 until 1945. Responsibility for the bugging activities stood with the Combined Service Interrogation Centre (CSDIC UK) and MI9. In December 1939 the centre moved to Trent Park, a large mansion located in Cockfosters, north of London, which is today part of Middlesex University.

For the first few years of the war, only a few German and Italian Soldiers – primarily Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine men - came into Allied custody but during the war the CSDIC increased considerably. Trent Park was converted into a long-term camp for German staff-officers. The first high-ranking officers to arrive at Trent Park were General Ludwig Crüwell and General Wilhelm Ritter von Thoma, both of whom had been captured in North Africa in 1942. Following the capitulation of Army-Group Africa in May 1943, a larger group of staff-officers was sent to the camp. A further wave of prisoners followed the Normandy campaign and the push through France in 1944. From September 1939 to October 1945, a total of 10,191 German prisoners of all ranks passed through the CSDICs

¹ Sönke Neitzel *Tapping Hitler's Generals: Transcripts of Secret Conversations, 1942-1945* Frontline Books 2007 £30.



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centres resulting in 16,960 protocols. The staff-officers protocols run to about 10,000 pages, with approximately 20% of the total inventory of the protocols documenting conversations of German POWs.

Conversations were guided using stool pigeons and fake newspapers, which were listed to by German exiles. The instructions given to the intelligence officer are not known and only military and political issues were considered. Personal and social conversations were not recorded.

A good deal of strategic intelligence was gained. For example, the first hints of the research at Peenemünde came from the Trent camp. All the POWs were generals so they had no difficulties talking to each other as there was nobody superior to them in rank and they were all professional soldiers.

Were the inmates of Trent Park aware that their conversations were being taped? Corroborative evidence is not entirely clear but it does indicate that some POWs were careful to withhold information at the formal interrogation only to reveal more to colleagues later. In letters and diaries they tended to voice concern about relatives rather than discussing the war. These sources have given historians a new perspective on officers reflecting on the course of the war, their enemies and of German policy.

Neitzel and other historians are trying to identify common views; they are not particularly looking for facts but to find more about the reality produced by the group; not how many were pro or anti-Hitler, more how did they see him and how far was their reasoning affected by National Socialism (NS)?

Numerous studies have so far tried to reconstruct the mental mindset of the Wehrmacht soldiers and the German population. One of the central questions was, and remains, to what extent the officers' reasoning was influenced by national socialist ideology. Some historians like Omer Bartov regularly stress the relevance of National Socialist indoctrination in the German military.

The evidence suggests that Nazi ideas had a key influence even long after 1945. Some evidence suggests that Nazism just built on ideas that were current in pre-war society.

Until relatively recently historians tended to follow the Officers' own view of their role and that of the Army as non-political vis à vis Hitler but there is not much empirical evidence to back this up.

The methodological approach Mr Seidl is using aims to describe the mindsets and interpretation of the German Generals in his sample in its full variety. It is feasible to identify heterogeneous as well as homogenous patterns. Since this study deliberately accepts different mindsets and interpretations of the Generals, it goes beyond the currently dominant approach of generalization. Thus new perspectives on the Wehrmacht and the officer corps will be uncovered.



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The discourses analysed in the study can be clustered in six broader topics:

1. the discourses on the other in the war participating states and general concepts of ‘the enemy’;
2. the German Wehrmacht and its staff;
3. the war itself, including the manner of warfare and strategic mistakes;
4. the self-conception as a German officer;
5. National Socialism as an ideology and its exponents in politics and society; and
6. the future prospects/predictions of the Generals.

Mr Seidl did not have time to elaborate on all of these aspects but limited himself to aspects of the first of these clusters; the discourses on the other states participating in the war and their general concepts of the enemy. He began with the Generals’ attitudes toward the British in World War II and then described his findings on the Soviet Union and the general concepts of ‘the enemy’.

The English were seen as educated and confident. They had world influence and some generals even hoped for an alliance, but the English were also seen as arrogant. The Germans had a fairly favourable view of the political system but were critical of the alliance with the Soviet Union. They expected UK society to have strong anti-Soviet sentiments. Some Germans thought that Britain would extend her empire, others that Britain would lose territory.

Some of the generals believed that the US was simply using the UK to achieve their own objectives. Others thought that there would be a German-UK alliance against the US. Some even saw Britain as being responsible for the war as they had declared war on Germany. Another view was that British disarmament showed that Britain did not want war.

The generals saw British army officers as being ‘correct’ but with limited capabilities and a reliance on material superiority.

In contrast to NS propaganda, the German generals differentiated between Russia and Communism; they saw the Russian soldier, people and equipment as very impressive. They did not use the word ‘*untermensch*’ and indeed criticised its use.

What did they think of the Committee of Free German Officers?

They assumed that all of them were induced or forced to join rather than being volunteers. The possibility of a voluntary participation on the basis of political or ethical conceptions was, perhaps surprisingly, not brought up as a possibility. There was praise for Russian achievements and the stability brought about by Stalin. On the other hand, they disapproved of Stalin whom they saw as brutal though there was no talk of war crimes.

They saw parallels between Hitler and Stalin and some even thought there would be an agreement between them.

People in the camp did not think that Russia was going to attack in 1941, but as the war went on the threat from Russia was seen as great.



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There was no critical analysis of Communism. Bolshevism was just seen as violent and restrictive and a crude burden on population. All civilised nations should stand against it. Their anti-Bolshevik thinking was not linked to racial attitudes.

There was no positive thinking on the Jews who were seen as unimportant socially and economically. The generals disapproved of the methods of persecution; believing in discrimination and emigration but not mass murder.

Overall the generals had a broadly homogenous set of opinions regarding military views and attitudes; but their stance towards NS and their assessment of the war differed considerably. It may also be of interest that the support of an individual for NS was seemingly not affected by region, religion, social position or similar biographical factors.

The link between human perceptions and real actions is difficult to analyse and judge. Furthermore it should probably be the task of psychologists and not historians. The options of the generals in the camp were limited by the conditions of captivity. But there is one aspect where it is possible to study this link between thinking and acting, which is the question of collaboration. More than two thirds of the group opposed the regime openly in the camp and reflected on and discussed strategies of overthrowing the national socialistic regime, including cooperation with the Allies - especially the English. But only one put this idea into action. The Luftwaffe Major General Bassenge volunteered in September 1944 for a special mission to urge the commander of the Channel Islands, Lieutenant General Rudolf Graf von Schmettow to surrender. The mission failed due to bad weather conditions and the German refusal to let the disguised Bassenge land.

Regardless of this episode the so called Thomas Theorem, which is very popular in social psychology, can give us an idea how important it is for historians to study the mental mindset, perceptions and ideas of individuals and groups. As Thomas states "*If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.*"

Tobias Seidl (born in 1981) did his undergraduate studies in Journalism and Modern History at Karlsruhe University. He is a graduate of the KU Leuven Master program in Peace and Conflict Studies and did also graduate studies in Modern History at Karlsruhe and York University Toronto. His main fields of interest are National Socialism and Genocide Studies. Tobias Seidl currently is lecturer at the Centre for Cultural Studies at Karlsruhe University and research assistant at Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz.