

German Failure to Resist
Post World War II Reconstruction

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In light of the United States ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is useful to look to the past for examples of successful occupation and reconstruction campaigns. Germany in World War II provides a look at both sides of occupation and resistance and how they affected reconstruction. Germany planned, organized and equipped forces to resist the Allies, but in the end was entirely unsuccessful in its efforts. The Allies incorporated occupation planning early in the war and trained and organized forces to handle occupation and reconstruction. The Allies were also concerned about the German people engaging in resistance after occupation and therefore planned operations to shape the public opinion in the Allies favor. The outcome of the war is well known and Germany did not resist (organized or large scale resistance) but cooperated with the allies and rebuilt the country into the one of the world's leading economic powers. The question is why did the Germans fail to resist? Does the answer lie in the Allies planning and execution of their military government operations? Was German morale so devastated by defeat that they were no longer able to organize a resistance to allied demands? The answers to these questions are the lessons to be learned by the United States, and they are worthy to be examined for applicability in our current reconstruction and counterinsurgency efforts. This paper will first look at German preparations for resistance and how that effected the last days of the war and occupation. Secondly, it will look at Allied preparation for occupation and reconstruction in a hostile occupied Germany. Third, this paper will analyze how the failure of Nazi ideology combined with Germany's physical losses to create a population more concerned about where their next meal came from than resisting occupation forces.

Hitler never planned on surrender as an option. The only deliberate planning Hitler made toward actions under occupation was the creation of the Werewolf units. These were intended to operate in areas that had been overrun by Allied forces. Despite Allied fears, they were not

intended to be an insurgent force but only to conduct guerilla operations behind Allied lines. The fact that Hitler never considered surrender as an option can be traced to his and Germany's experience after WWI. Author Richard Bessel illustrates the following. "It was the consequence of the determination of the Nazi leadership to ensure that there would be no repeat of the armistice that had ended Germany's First World War. This time, they vowed, Germany would fight to the bitter end."¹ It was Hitler's insistence on fanatical defense that led to the creation of the Volkssturm and to the unforeseen consequence of creating a pacifistic society.

Hitler's unintentional preparation for occupation began as a result of the defeat at Stalingrad. The defeat at the hands of racial inferiors had the obvious effect of tarnishing the Nazi ideology of racial superiority, but it was Hitler's declaration of total war that changed the everyday lives of Germans who up to this point had not been affected by the war. Earl Ziemke notes:

The declaration of total war terminated the phase in which the prospect of an early victory had governed policy; however, total war connoted a much more cogent and purposeful policy shift than actually occurred...Hitler told the committee that what he really wanted them to do was to squeeze another 800,000 men out of the work force for military service, not to reorient the whole war effort.²

This was a public acknowledgement that the war would not be over quickly as had been hoped. It also meant that 3.5 million men and women were subject to a labor draft... and all non-war related businesses were to close.³ The defeat at Stalingrad and subsequent shifting of Germany's economy to total war turned Hitler's rhetoric to an unachievable philosophy.

Hitler and the Nazi party founded the Third Reich on the principle that the German people were racially superior and deserved room to live. Racial superiority was a founding principle and invoked often. That this idea could be false would undermine the entire Nazi sanctioned "German culture". Hitler demanded total war, total effort, and if the Germans could

simply not give up and fight to the end they would win.⁴ Even if this wasn't apparent to all, it became so the closer the Russians came to Germany. If the German people did everything that Hitler asked and they kept losing then how could the German people be sure about their own self image. This was the unintended erosion of morale that Hitler bought by selling lies about racial superiority. The creation of the Volkssturm in 1944 embodied this bankrupt idea.

With Germany's forces in retreat and Allied armies at the border Hitler approved the creation of the Volkssturm, a militia for men age 16-60.⁵ They were created with the rhetoric of defending their homeland but in reality they were created to feed the Hitler's out of control ideology. Besel states about the last weeks of the war: "The priority of the Nazi regime and its armed forces was not to protect German women and children, but to fight to the very end."⁶ The goal of Hitler was not to surrender but to fight with such extreme vigor that the Russians and Allies would be forced to seek surrender terms favorable to the Germans and secondly to set an example for future generations to venerate. The racist ideology that the Germans were superior and therefore unbeatable in battle created a blind assessment of the military situation in 1944. Instead of looking to peace or pursuing irregular warfare with the aim of state or political survival; Hitler pursued a policy that threw every available troop at the enemy. Their rearguard action on the Eastern front was heroic but left the nation with a bankrupt male population. For example in "January, when Soviet forces launched their greatest offensive...German casualties reached their peak: In that month alone more than 450,000 German soldiers lost their lives".⁷ In contrast the "Germans lost over 200,000 men during the Stalingrad disaster".⁸ The effect of increasing fatalities as the Allies drew closer meant the regime intended to commit national suicide rather than accept the reality of defeat.

The Volkssturm with its ranks of old men and young boys would not be trained or properly equipped. The German state did not have the capacity to do so. They were not expected to have good equipment or training but only to fight well.⁹ Along with the defeats, came more speeches about stopping the enemy. Notably Hitler's last speech to Germany's soldiers "It must be our general irreversible will, not to give posterity a bad example like those who came before us did. In large parts of the east and in many area of the west we already are experiencing what is in store for our people...offer resistance and to strike at our enemies until they tire and finally crack in the end!"¹⁰ Hitler had offered this concept since after Stalingrad and the German military and people fought tenaciously. The lie it was based on –racial superiority– could not accept compromise and this was the ultimate erosion of the German will to support Nazism. The evidence is in the outcome.

Despite having fought against overwhelming odds, the Wehrmacht continued to defend German territory at an alarming cost to Allied soldiers.¹¹ While the Wehrmacht fought and died heroically this may be more of an example of comradeship and fighting well when surrounded than fighting for a cause.¹² The Nazis were beaten and had been for some time but they would not accept defeat and those supporting them must have known it also. The example of Soviet resistance in the fortress cities of Leningrad, and Stalingrad fueled German desire to turn the tables and create their own fortress cities and crush the Allies at the doorstep of Germany. The inability of the Wehrmacht and Volkssturm to stop the Soviets crushed the Nazi belief in German superiority. The end of the war, the surrender and assaults of the fortress cities saw huge numbers of suicides in civilians and military personnel.

The suicides were in inconceivable numbers. Here are three examples. "By the time the city of Niehoff capitulated ...3,000 civilians had committed suicide."¹³ "City of Grünberg,

where in the first 14 days after the Russians arrived over 500 people had committed suicide, including doctors, court officials, factory owners, and prosperous citizens.”¹⁴ “By the time Cottbus was captured...one hundred and eighty seven Germans including the fortress commandant had committed suicide”.¹⁵ Author Christian Goeschel says the following about the phenomena of suicide in Germany.

Many Germans experienced a complete breakdown of norms and values, an anomie, which cannot simply be reduced to the breakdown of the political structure of the Third Reich. The Third Reich created a society far more tightly bound by rules and regulations, far more closely organized, far more intrusively molding of peoples everyday lives and aspirations than anything previously experienced. Nazi ideology and propaganda shaped German society and culture in a way that gave many people the order and stability they craved in 1933. When it began to fall apart, when it eventually collapsed, the anomie which spread amongst those most loyal to the regime and most permeated by its values was correspondingly extreme. For many people who committed suicide, politics, war, and everyday life did not come as separate events, but coalesced in a single, lethal cocktail.¹⁶

Groeschel’s thesis is that the Germans didn’t give up. Rather they experienced the destruction of Nazi ideology as an end to their world. Those Germans who associated themselves closest to Nazism were more susceptible to suicide. The reason the Germans did not resist can be tied to this phenomena. The ideology of Nazism had broken their image of being German. They had lost their identity.

There is no serious resistance to Allies after occupation and then surrender. The supposed ring leader of the Werewolf organization Otto Skorzeny turned himself and over 300 of his men in to the Americans on 10 May 1945.¹⁷ There would be no uprising from the Werewolves. The German response to both the American and Soviet style of governance was to comply. The Soviets and Americans conducted their occupations much differently, so what compelled the Germans and does this mean that the conduct of occupation doesn’t matter? It was the planning and execution that did effect the German reaction to occupation.

The Soviets did not plan a long term formal occupation, for them it was a continuation of the war.¹⁸ The Americans planned for occupation. Probably for the first and only time in US military history has a military government and civil action program been incorporated into campaign planning and execution.¹⁹ Civil affairs units attached to combat units and established military control over occupied areas as soon as they were occupied. De-Nazification programs were introduced, jails established for criminals and camps for displaced personnel established. The Russian occupation could be described as chaotic, marked by mass rape, and oppressive to the Germans before they established control. The United States occupation was chaotic as due to the 2,225 displaced refugees from the East.²⁰ It was also marked by restoring order and democracy. What both countries had in common was mass numbers of troops on German soil. The US and the Russians each had over 1.5million troops in Germany territory and both engaged in complete de-Nazification campaigns. Ziemke reports that “Minor sabotage would be child’s play but has not happened because the people are not interested in war but in looking out for themselves.”²¹ They did not resist because they had lost their identity, and only survival remained. The Russians and Americans both filled the void left by the Nazis. Their approach was different and governed by either democracy or communism but they created order in the chaos and in doing so helped the Germans to redefine what it meant to be German.

Hitler refused to acknowledge military reality and the sacrifices of the German people. He did not see Germany’s eventual defeat even after Stalingrad and Kursk. Hitler could have allowed the military to operate in a manner that would have led to conditions favorable to a peace settlement. Instead he insisted that the Wehrmacht doggedly defend every inch of land. Hitler would not allow retreat (generally). His insistence on racial superiority being the answer to the militaries problems managed to bankrupt the male population of Germany, and the bulk of

their military hardware. The privations suffered by the German people as a result of total war and the unending need for raw materials left the country bankrupt in every aspect (except money which the Germans had quite enough of).²² The result of total war fought by the “master race” was that once defeated it meant all the propaganda was just a lie. The Nazi party preached racial superiority as justification for the war for “lebensraum”. Nazi society was militarized. Boys joined the Hitler Youth, then military service. For a whole generation of Germans all they had known was this militaristic society. When the master race was defeated militarily it meant more than just simple defeat of the fielded army. It meant defeat of the German race as they had been taught to see it. Now the Nazi approved self image or culture was gone. In its place was survival. Survival for the individual, not for the state. The state had ceased to be important. For the foreseeable future Germans would have to contend with hunger, cold, disease, refugees and rebuilding.

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- ¹ Bessel, Richard. *Germany 1945, From War to Peace*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2009, 9.
- ² Ziemke, Earl F. and Magna E. Bauer. *Army Historical Series: Moscow to Stalingrad: Decision in the East*. Washington D.C. Center of Military History United States Army, 1986 – CMH Pub 30-12, 505.
- ³ Ibid, 505.
- ⁴ Yelton, David K. *Hitler's Volkstrum: The Nazi Militia and the Fall of Germany, 1944-1945*. Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2002, 152 paraphrased.
- ⁵ Bessel, Richard. *Germany 1945, From War to Peace*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2009, 16.
- ⁶ Ibid, 36.
- ⁷ Ibid, 11.
- ⁸ Ziemke, Earl F. and Magna E. Bauer. *Army Historical Series: Moscow to Stalingrad: Decision in the East*. Washington D.C. Center of Military History United States Army, 1986 – CMH Pub 30-12, 501.
- ⁹ Bessel, Richard. *Germany 1945, From War to Peace*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2009, 18.
- ¹⁰ Ibid, 17.
- ¹¹ Ibid, 21.
- ¹² Ibid, 42.
- ¹³ Ibid, 40.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, 387.
- ¹⁵ Ibid, 395.
- ¹⁶ Goeshchel, Christian. *Suicide in Nazi Germany*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 170.
- ¹⁷ Central Intelligence Agency. Interrogation of Otto Skorzeny, Report number 8-975. 7th Army 1945. Document is now declassified, 1.
- ¹⁸ Naimark, Norman M. *The Russians in Germany: A History of The Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945-1949*. London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995, 465.
- ¹⁹ Ziemke, Earl F. *Army Historical Series: The U.S. Army in the Occupation of Germany 1944-1946*. Washington D.C. Center of Military History United States Army, 1975 - CMH Pub 30-6, 7.
- ²⁰ Ibid, 408.
- ²¹ Ibid, 139.
- ²² Ibid, 276.

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