

Rommel, Hitler's Favourite General and our democratic culture of remembrance

By **News Desk** - Aug 18, 2020



Adolf Hitler

Lecture given by Professor Dr. Wolfram Wette,

Historical Seminar at the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg i. Br.,

in Heidenheim on 23 July, 2020, 5 p.m., at the Konzerthaus

on the occasion of the dedication of Rainer Jooss' counter-monument

to the existing Rommel monument, organized by the City of Heidenheim

Introduction: Opinions on Rommel are divided*

"Opinions on Rommel are divided. Whether his name as barracks patron (the armed forces of the Federal Republic of Germany) is kept or is dropped serious the Bundeswehr really is about correcting its traditions. Rommel This statement was made by the writer and journalist, Ralph Giordano (ago with a view to the military – not to civil society, in which there might perception.[2] Two decades later, the debate on tradition in the Bundeswehr There are still barracks and streets named after Rommel as well as monuments including the one in Heidenheim, which dates from 1961.[4]

Giordano, who was a Holocaust survivor himself, always tried to convey the public, which is often overlooked or suppressed. According to this idea, the of Germany was not the murder of European Jews but rather the "war of military attack on Europe, the world, and humanity – the war: that was of National Socialism." [5] It cost around 70 million human lives, including European Jews. The German politician Norbert Blüm recognized the connection war and the murder of the Jews. He stated simply: "Concentration camps as the front was held." [6]

According to Giordano, Rommel, the icon of the *Wehrmacht* (the armed Germany), cannot be taken out of this context.[7] For this reason, Rommel the *Wehrmacht*, should not be used as an example for tradition in the *B* German armed forces today. He cannot be a role model for soldiers today criminal regime.

In the following, I shall focus on three phases in the reception of Rommel first phase is during the war, the second during the post-war era, and the around 1990, when the legend of the "clean" *Wehrmacht* was dispelled.

Phase One: The Beginning of the "Rommel Myth" during the war in North

The Rommel myth came into being during the war in North Africa from 1941 was the *Wehrmacht* doing in North Africa? It was leading an imperialistic international law. In 1941 it was actually not on Hitler's war agenda to send which were soon called the "Afrika-Korps" – to North Africa, as the *Wehr* were planning the attack on the Soviet Union at that time. The German

secondary theatre of war[8] in North Africa to support the Axis partner in the war they were fighting against the British in the interest of colonial Germany. Germans had a strategy beyond Egypt towards the Suez Canal, to Palestine, the Near East, and even as far as Afghanistan and India.

Under the command of the daring general Rommel and his tanks, the German forces won stunning victories in 1942. But these victories were short-lived. German and Italian forces had to capitulate.

Rommel's victories provided the material, with which the Nazi Propaganda fashioned the commander of the *Afrika-Korps* into a great German war leader: a daring swashbuckler, an extraordinarily courageous soldier, who led his troops with cunning strategical skill; to sum up, an "ideal soldier". At the same time, Goebbels portrayed Rommel – truthfully enough – as an enthusiastic follower of Hitler's, who loved his "Führer". In this way Rommel, more than any other Wehrmacht leader, maintained the unity of the Wehrmacht and the Nazi regime for the German public. He fought the war in North Africa, and not at all against his will; indeed, with his assistance.

In this way, in 1942 Rommel advanced to become the best-known German name in Germany. There was another phenomenon, which might appear strange at the same time as in Germany, the propaganda experts of the enemy British exploited the Rommel myth, by praising the operational capabilities of the German army. Their obvious aim was to magnify the British overall victory over the German army in North Africa, when the time came. As a consequence of British and American propaganda, Rommel became the second best-known German *internationally* – directly shown in a Gallup poll at the time.[9]

Losses in the war in North Africa were extremely heavy.[10] My colleague Hans Schreiber, estimates: The Allies lost close to 220,000 (dead and prisoners) and the Axis powers 620,000, making a total of 840,000.[11] This does not include the losses in North African countries Tunisia, Libya and Egypt who were killed; apparently regarded as regrettable "collateral damage".[12] In view of the enormous losses it is not surprising that contemporaries compared the war in North Africa with Stalingrad, with its heavy losses.[13] They referred to it as a "second Stalingrad".[14]

Phase Two: Rommel and the legend of the "clean Wehrmacht"

After the end of the Second World War generals of the Wehrmacht delib the legend of the supposedly "clean" Wehrmacht. They claimed that the fought a purely military war in conformance with international law; and in war and National Socialist crimes. This image was created as early as group of high-ranking former Wehrmacht generals. Among them was G Westphal, one of the initiators of the Rommel memorial in Heidenheim it had been Rommel's closest confidant during the Africa campaign. The m generals composed whitewashed and played down the role of the Wehrr World War. It has been said – pointedly – that although the Wehrmacht won the subsequent battle for its public image.[16]

The prominent name of Rommel was now presented as the "face" of the war fought by the Wehrmacht. It is interesting to observe how the asse somehow been involved in the resistance of 20th July,1944, was gradual legend of the "clean" Wehrmacht. His former chief of staff, General Hans became a Nato general, was particularly influential in suggesting Romme resistance.[17] The idea that Rommel had been active in the resistance increasing acceptance, especially after the trial of Otto Ernst Remer in 1 the Chief Public Prosecutor in the trial, argued that the members of the traitors and perjurers, but that it was legitimate and a dictate of conscie action against the dictator and the illegitimate National Socialist state. A knew, this argument could have consequences for former Wehrmacht s

The victorious Allies did nothing to prevent using Rommel in the service legend. Instead, the Rommel cult flourished anew, with Britons and Ame biographies and popular motion picture films revering the general.[19] T same: the British-American victory over the legendary general, the "des the victory of the Allies in North Africa to shine all the brighter.[20]

It is no accident that this second phase of Rommel's heroization coincide Germany's rearmament and the integration of West German armed forc was the historical and political context for the dedication of the Rommel Heidenheim in 1961. The memorial drew a direct and entirely uncritical to the National Socialist era.

Phase Three: Farewell to the Wehrmacht legend and to Rommel

In the third phase, research in military history gradually destroyed the Wehrmacht legend. Historians from Germany's Military History Research Office published the papers at the end of the 1960s. At this point I would like to mention two names: Manfred Messerschmidt and Klaus-Jürgen Müller. Public enlightenment of the Wehrmacht culminated in the two Wehrmacht exhibitions, which attracted attention and more than one million visitors in the years 1995 to 2004. In speaking, the deeper historical research went into the history of the Wehrmacht. It became that not only did it wage wars in violation of international law; it committed many crimes, including the murder of European Jews.

Rommel, an important protagonist in the wars of Nazi Germany, must be reassessed, although he had nothing to do with the systematic murder of Jews during the campaign in North Africa. During this campaign, however, Jews were persecuted in other ways, for example, as forced labourers in defence construction. More on this subject can be found in commendable papers written by Wolfgang Proske.[22] Furthermore, it is well known that the political command in Berlin planned to extend the Holocaust to North Africa and the Near East. The SS Task Force for Egypt, under the command of Kurt von Ruff,[23] had already begun preparations for the murder of the approximately 100,000 Jews in North Africa. They never came to fruition, but only because of the need for the Axis powers Germany and Italy.[24] When Rommel later served in the Italian theatre of war, he gave commands contrary to international law, which were different from the criminal orders given by German generals in Eastern Europe. These actions exude the spirit of National Socialist annihilation policy.

The third phase was marked by critical, historical clarification. The veneration of the Wehrmacht became less and less acceptable, and the Africa veterans lost influence. In German civil society, including Heidenheim, critical voices became louder. Beginning in the 1990s, German civil society parted with the post-war politics of history, which had the unfortunate name of "coming to terms with the past". In its place, a democratic remembrance developed, in which there was and is no room for the glorification of the military. Some historians call this new orientation "post-heroic". For present and future, the democratic culture of remembrance creates a framework for orienting ourselves to new standards for evaluating Rommel.

Mine war and mine victims

Rainer Jooss' sculpture of a landmine victim, which is presented to the c occasion to say some words about the landmine war in North Africa and consequences. Both warring parties used tanks and landmines on a larg war in the North African desert.[26] Tank mines and anti-personnel min mobility of the enemy's tank units. Exact statistics on the mines used th They are estimated to have been in the millions, perhaps 20 million or n

For example, German Afrika-Korps pioneers, under the command of Ror "Teufelsgärten" (devil's gardens) in the area around the small Egyptian were "labyrinths of horseshoe-shaped landmine fields, which opened in British enemy"(Montgomery)[27]. They were intended to entangle the e from continuing his advance.

It cannot be determined how many people fell victim to the landmine wa victims are not a special category in the statistics of war losses. Who we mine war? They were primarily the soldiers of both parties of war. It is e countries of origin so that we can better understand the multi-national c war. The participants were Britons, South Africans, Indians, Australians, Arabs, Circassians, Jews, Frenchmen, men from France's African colonie Libyan soldiers under Italian command, and, of course, Germans. In ad civil population was affected by the mine war; that includes Tunisians, L Nobody asked them if they were willing to let the aggressors use their c The international dimension of the world war unleashed by Germany is i Africa.[28]

The parties of war generally planted their mines according to a plan, so them after a battle and use them in their next operations. Under pressu an enemy attack was imminent, the pioneers did not bother with any m simply threw them out of their trucks onto the desert. Later, covered wi longer be found. Even today mines can come to the surface, exposed by they glisten in the sunlight. They catch the interest of nomads – men, w frequently pay for their curiosity with their lives or with mutilation. "Acc data, around 3300 people have lost their lives through the explosion of since Egypt started to keep statistics in the 1980s; 7500 have been ma in Egypt! The country does not have the financial means to completely c mines. Since 1981 they have been able to clear 40% of the areas in que unsafe. "If we continue to work at this speed", said an Egyptian ministe 100 years to clear all mines and unexploded bombs."[30] The landmine also inhibit the economic development of Egypt and Libya, where natura

natural gas, and ores lie under the mined sand. The mines continue to be a burden for the population.

The sculpture "Landmine Victim" can stimulate any number of questions. For example: Why is it so difficult to obtain reliable information about the dead during the war in North Africa?[31] Are there reports about mines retrieved? What do we know about the civilian victims of the landmine war both during the Second World War and in the decades that followed? What has been given to the landmine war in the historical depictions of the past? What did German, Italian and British military historians write about the war in North Africa? Were agreements signed after the war covering the compensation of victims and the question of costs for a systematic clearing of the mines? What reparations of any kind?

The continuing threat by landmines to many people world-wide led to a global campaign in the 1990s. Its goal was to condemn and outlaw the production and use of anti-personnel mines in general. The campaign was successful. In December 1997 the Mine Ban Convention was signed in Ottawa, Canada. More than 100 countries have signed it by now, but some superpowers have not. The "International Campaign to Ban Landmines" (ICBL) was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997. Since 1997 it has become a legally binding international law.[33]

As part of his America-first policy, President Donald Trump, the friend and ally of the American weapons industry and the National Rifle Association (NRA), still in 2020. He made void the prohibition of anti-personnel mines enacted by Barack Obama, and allowed American armed forces to make use of this practice world-wide.[34] That is the present situation. It urges us to leave Rommel's viewpoint behind and to concern ourselves with the victims of war violence, landmines and

Our civil society and our democratic culture of remembrance do not need Rommel and his "foxes" as role models, but people with a humanitarian and peace-oriented

The Shadow of the Counter-Monument

In the military milieu – the Bundeswehr, reservists, veterans' associations and their traditionalists who lament the passing of the Wehrmacht as a model.[35] The focus is on keeping Rommel, the model soldier and icon, in the tradition as a craft

change in thinking cannot be halted. Most of the names of Wehrmacht g properties of the Bundeswehr in the 1960 – under the protection of the Wehrmacht – have been deleted.[36] The remaining two Rommel barrack indefinitely, since it has become clear that Rommel did not belong to the July,1944. The latest directive of the Bundeswehr concerning standards unequivocally in 2018: "*Military excellence is not sufficient.*"[37] Only at the name of justice and freedom can be considered worthy of tradition, resistance against National Socialism. This is not the case with Rommel.

Rommel belonged to a different world. In 1996 the Munich historian Lud characterized this world as follows: "*National Socialism was a product of in war and there, in war, it finally found its downfall.*"[38] Our historical was expressed succinctly in an important resolution of the German Bund 15th May,1997. Our representatives acknowledged: "*The Second World aggression and annihilation, a crime for which National Socialist German responsible.*"[39] When we speak offhandedly of Hitler's favourite gene keep in mind that Hitler was not just any statesman and commander-in-player in these happenings. He was the "*criminal of the millennium*", as Heribert Prantl in the newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*,[40] in order to c voices who would relativize and play down the crimes of the Third Reich the spirit of Ralph Giordano, the writer whom I quoted at the beginning designating the war of weapons as the main crime of National Socialism

The world of Rommel, the professional soldier, was – drawing on the wo Ralf Georg Reuth – that of "*battlefields and barrack yards, which he had the 1920s he participated in the organization of the illegal "Schwarze (b paramilitary formations hostile to the Weimar Republic. Rommel was not resistance. He had some knowledge of it – what exactly cannot be deter not denounce anybody, at least, which speaks in his favour.*"[42] But he resistance.

To make one thing clear: Rommel will retain the status of a prominent p the evaluation of his actions has changed fundamentally in the last deca continue to change. What we are renegotiating here today is only one s discourse which has not yet been completed.

The world of "barrack yards and battlefields" has nothing in common wit constitution, nor especially with its central maxim of peace. This means: war history, National Socialist history, just as are Ludendorff, Hindenbur

Keitel and others. They have nothing to say to us today, at least nothing an orientation for the future. They are history, museum and nothing else. **archetype of German militarism, is not of our time, but contrary to nothing, neither within the military milieu nor without. Our civil s remembrance is committed to other values: democracy, a just sta freedom and peace.**

From now on, the shadow of a fragile-looking sculpture of a landmine vi monumental and martial memorial to the commander, here, in Rommel's my view, the sculpture is not an addition to the heroic monument of 1961, but a **counter-monument**. The cripple directs our attention to the victims, ar upon the prominent warrior and his martial spirit. To conclude with a mc **On the one hand, we see the symbol for the war logic of the past; we see the symbol for the hundreds of thousands of victims of th Africa, who urge us to create a lasting peace.** I believe that this is a continuing development of the culture of remembrance in Heidenheim.] on taking this step into the future.

*I thank my friends and colleagues Detlef Bald, Helmut Donat, Jakob Kr for their comments and suggestions.

[1] Ralph Giordano: Die Traditionslüge. Vom Kriegerkult in der Bundeswe f.

[2] Die unterschiedlichen Rommel-Bilder wurden zuletzt analysiert von I Mythos wankt. Neue Kontroverse um den „Wüstenfuchs“ Erwin Rommel

[3] Siehe dazu das Gutachten des Wissenschaftlichen Dienstes des Deu zur Traditionswürdigkeit Erwin Rommels für die Bundeswehr (2019). Im unter: www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/645808/244e391b6318b5a.

[4] Das Rommel-Ehrenmal wurde im Jahre 1961 vom „Verband Deutsch Organisation ehemaliger Wehrmachtssoldaten, errichtet. Als Schirmherr t

baden-württembergische Innenminister Hans Karl Filbinger (CDU).

[5] Ralph Giordano: Die zweite Schuld oder von der Last Deutscher zu se
1987, Kap. „Wehrmacht und Krieg – die heiligen Kühe. Über das Hauptv
Hitlerdeutschlands“, bes. S. 170 f.

[6] So wird Norbert Blüm zitiert in: Der Spiegel Nr. 28 vom 10. 7.1978.
<https://www.stiftung-20-juli1944.de/reden/widerstandskampfer-und-kri>
weishaupl-20071978

[7] Giordano, Traditionslüge (wie Anm. 1), S. 338

[8] Peter Lieb: Krieg in Nordafrika 1940-1943. Leipzig 2018, weist darau
der Sicht der Alliierten zu diesem Zeitpunkt um den Hauptkriegsschaupl

[9] Ralf Georg Reuth: Erwin Rommel. Des Führers General. München, Zi

[10] Gerhard Schreiber: Der Zweite Weltkrieg. München 2002, S. 75 f.

[11] Gerhard Schreiber: Das Ende des nordafrikanischen Feldzugs und d
1943-1945. In: Die Ostfront 1943/44. Der Krieg im Osten und an den N
Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg, Bd. 8. Hrsg. vom Militärgesch
Forschungsamt). München 2007, S. 1100-1163, Zitat: S. 1109.

[12] Zu den Opfern aus Ländern der Dritten Welt siehe den innovativen
zählen nicht“. Die Dritte Welt im Zweiten Weltkrieg. Hrsg. von Recherch
Bonn 2014, Nachdruck Bonn 2019 (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildun
10408).

[13] Bezug auf Rüdiger Overmans: Das andere Gesicht des Krieges. Let
Armee. In: Stalingrad. Ereignis, Wirkung, Symbol. Hrsg. von Jürgen För
1992, S. 439-446.

[14] Siehe den Eintrag „Tunesienfeldzug“ in: <https://de.wikipedia.org/wi>

[15] Zur Vita von Westphal siehe Wolfgang Proske: Siegfried Westphal:
moralischen Verpflichtung, stets ‚Coeur` zu beweisen ...“. In: ders. (Hrsg
Trittbrettfahrer, Bd. 8: NS-Belastete aus dem Norden des heutigen Bade
Gerstetten 2018, S. 397 – 415; vgl. auch Hendrik Rupp: Vehikel für die

Rommel-Denkmal. Beim Heidenheimer Heimat- und Altertumsverein sprach Proske über Siegfried Westphal, den „großen Unbekannten“ hinter dem Heidenheimer Zeitung, 3.5.2019.

[16] Das Bild stammt von dem US-amerikanischen Historiker Omer Bart

[17] Hans Speidel: Invasion 1944. Ein Beitrag zu Rommels und des Reichs. Tübingen 1948. Hier wurde Rommel gezielt zum Widerstandskämpfer stilisiert und heroisiert. Siehe auch Elmar Krautkrämer: Generalleutnant Dr. phil. Harald Ueberschär (Hrsg.), Hitlers militärische Elite, Bd. 2: Vom Kriegsbeginn bis zum Kriegsende. Darmstadt 1998, S. 251.

[18] Irmtrud Wojak: Fritz Bauer 1903-1968. Eine Biographie. München 1998.

[19] Im Einzelnen beschrieben von Reuth, Erwin Rommel (wie Anm. 9).

[20] So auch das Urteil des britischen Generals Sir David Fraser: General Erwin Rommel. In: Gerd R. Ueberschär: Hitlers militärische Elite. Bd. 2: Vom Kriegsende bis zum Weltkriegsende. Darmstadt 1998, S. 184-193, hier: S. 192.

[21] Hannes Heer/Klaus Naumann (Hrsg.): Hannes Heer/Klaus Naumann: Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941-1944. Hamburg 1999.

[22] Siehe Wolfgang Proske: Zwei Rollen für Erwin Rommel beim Aufmarsch in Libyen und Ägypten, 1941-1943. In: ders. (Hrsg.), Täter Helfer Trittbrettl. Belastete aus dem östlichen Württemberg, Gerstetten 2016.

[23] Siehe Martin Cüppers: Walter Rauff – in deutschen Diensten. Vom BND-Spion. Darmstadt 2013.

[24] Siehe im Einzelnen Proske, Zwei Rollen, S. 153-176, bes. 175; sowie Mallmann/Martin Cüppers: Halbmond und Hakenkreuz: Das Dritte Reich. Darmstadt 2. Aufl. 2007.

[25] Siehe besonders den berüchtigten „Gesindelbefehl“ vom 23.9.1943. Der Oberbefehlshaber Italien-Nord (Heeresgruppe B) herausgab: „Irgendwelche Hemmungen des deutschen Soldaten gegenüber Badoglio-hörigen Banden ehemaligen Waffenkameraden sind völlig unangebracht. Wer von diesen Soldaten kämpft, hat jedes Anrecht auf Schonung verloren und ist mit c

die dem Gesindel gebührt, das plötzlich seine Waffen gegen seinen Freund
Proske, Zwei Rollen, S. 175. Zum Zusammenhang Gerhard Schreiber: Die
Kriegsverbrechen in Italien. Täter, Opfer, Strafverfolgung, München 1999
Friedrich Andrae: Auch gegen Frauen und Kinder. Der Krieg der deutschen
die Zivilbevölkerung in Italien 1943/1945, München/Zürich 1995, S. 49.

[26] Zur Definition von Landminen und Streumunition sowie zu weiteren
Informationen siehe den Eintrag: <https://sicherheitspolitik.bpb.de/m5/a/cluster-munitions>.

[27] Paul Anton Krüger: Rommels explosives Erbe. Vor 75 Jahren begann
Alamein – und für viele Bewohner im Nordwesten Ägyptens ist der Zweite
immer nicht vorbei: Mehr als 17,5 Millionen Minen liegen hier weiter im
Süddeutsche Zeitung, 20.10.2017. Siehe: <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/rommels-explosives-erbe-1.3717426>.

Siehe auch den Beitrag von Elisabeth Lehmann: Ägypten. Das Land der
In: Deutschlandfunk 13.6.2015: www.deutschlandfunk.de/aegypten-da

[28] Siehe den Band „Unsere Opfer zählen nicht“ (wie Anm. 12).

[29] Krüger, Rommels explosives Erbe (wie Anm. 27).

[30] Ebda., gemeint ist die Entwicklungsministerin Sahar Nasr.

[31] Zu Ägypten gibt es Forschungen und eine reichhaltige internationale
Landmines from External Powers in World War II at El-Alamein in Egypt:
link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-64255854-2_3, nicht dagegen

[32] Zum Komplex Minenräumung siehe den gut informierten Eintrag: [d](#)
/Minen r%C3%A4umung.

[33] Übereinkommen über das Verbot des Einsatzes, der Lagerung, der
Weitergabe von Antipersonenminen und über deren Vernichtung (1997)
[https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%9Cbereinkommen_
%C3%BCber_das_Verbot_des_Einsatzes,_der_Lagerung,_der_Herstellung_und_der_Weitergabe_von_Antipersonenminen_und_
%C3%BCber_deren_Vernichtung](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%9Cbereinkommen_%C3%BCber_das_Verbot_des_Einsatzes,_der_Lagerung,_der_Herstellung_und_der_Weitergabe_von_Antipersonenminen_und_%C3%BCber_deren_Vernichtung) g. Siehe auch den Eintrag „Landmine“ :
/Landmine

[34] Die USA traten dem Ottawa-Ankommen nicht bei. Gleichwohl wies amerikanische Militär an, keine Personenminen einzusetzen. Zu Trumps siehe: DIE ZEIT, 1.2.2020: www.fr.de/politik/donald-trump-hebt-landmir

[35] Zu diesen Traditionalisten siehe Detlef Bald/Johannes Klotz/Wolfram Wehrmacht. Nachkriegsdebatten und Traditionspflege. Berlin 2001.

[36] Siehe dazu das Gutachten des Wissenschaftlichen Dienstes des De (wie Anm. 3), Abschnitt 2: Die bisherige Umbenennungspraxis bei Name Wehrmachtbezug.

[37] So die Bundesministerin der Verteidigung, Ursula von der Leyen, in vom 28.3.2018 zum neuen Traditionserlass. Zitiert nach: Deutscher Bur Wissenschaftliche Dienste (wie Anm. 3).

[38] Ludolf Herbst: Das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933-1945. I Gewalt. Rassismus und Krieg, Frankfurt am Main 1996, S. 9.

[39] Entschließung des Deutschen Bundestages, 13. Wahlperiode, 175. S. 15818-15835.

[40] Heribert Prantl: Von Eis bedeckt. Vor 75 Jahren wurden Dietrich Bo Mitstreiter von den Nazis ermordet. Der Mut des Gedenkens: Erinnerung In: Süddeutsche Zeitung, Nr. 80, 4./5.4.2020, S. 5.

[41] Reuth, Erwin Rommel (wie Anm. 9), S. 17.

[42] Vgl. die neueste Studie zum Thema von Linda von Keyserlingk-Reh kleine Clique"? Die NS-Ermittlungen über das Netzwerk vom 20. Juli 194 Ergebnis: Die Verschwörer seien sich sicher gewesen, dass Rommel sie würde.

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