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

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Lecture given by Professor Dr. Wolfram Wette,

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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 be a different perception.[2] Two decades later, the debate on tradition in the Bundeswehr continues. There are still barracks and streets named after Rommel as well as monuments to Rommel, including the one in Heidenheim, which dates from 1961.[4]

Giordano, who was a Holocaust survivor himself, always tried to convey a basic insight to his public, which is often overlooked or suppressed. According to this idea, the fundamental crime of Germany was not the murder of European Jews but rather the “war of weapons: 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 between the 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 forces of Nazi 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 Bundeswehr German armed forces today. He cannot be a role model for soldiers today, because he served in a criminal regime.

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

Phase One: The Beginning of the “Rommel Myth” during the war in North Africa 1941-1943

The Rommel myth came into being during the war in North Africa from 1941 to 1943. What was the Wehrmacht doing in North Africa? It was leading an imperialistic war, which violated international law. In 1941 it was actually not on Hitler’s war agenda to send German troops which were soon called the “Afrika-Korps” – to North Africa, as the Wehrmacht was 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 possessions. The 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 and Italian forces won stunning victories in 1942. But these victories were short-lived. In May 1942 the 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 hero, a fearless and daring swashbuckler, an extraordinarily courageous soldier, who led his cunning strategist; to sum up, an “ideal soldier”. At the same time, Goebbels – truthfully enough – as an enthusiastic follower of Hitler’s, who loved his “Führer”. In this way Rommel, more than any other Wehrmacht general, embodied the unity of the Wehrmacht and the Nazi regime for the German public.

In this way, in 1942 Rommel advanced to become the best-known German soldier in Germany. There was another phenomenon, which might appear strange at first glance. At the same time as in Germany, the propaganda experts of the enemy British were also working on the Rommel myth, by praising the operational capabilities of the German field marshal. Their obvious aim was to magnify the British overall victory over the Germans in North Africa, when the time came. As a consequence of British and American propaganda, Rommel became the second best-known German internationally – directly after Hitler, as shown in a Gallup poll at the time.[9]

Losses in the war in North Africa were extremely heavy.[10] My colleague Schreiber, estimates: The Allies lost close to 220,000 (dead and prisoners of war), and the Axis powers 620,000, making a total of 840,000.[11] This does not include the inhabitants of the North African countries Tunisia, Libya and Egypt who were killed; apparently, they were regarded as regrettable “collateral damage”. [12] In view of the enormous loss of human lives, it is not surprising that contemporaries compared the war in North Africa to 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 deliberately disseminated the legend of the supposedly “clean” Wehrmacht. They claimed that the Wehrmacht fought a purely military war in conformance with international law; and in war and National Socialist crimes. This image was created as early as November 1945 by a group of high-ranking former Wehrmacht generals. Among them was General Siegfried Westphal, one of the initiators of the Rommel memorial in Heidenheim in 1961. Westphal had been Rommel’s closest confidant during the Africa campaign. The memorandum which these generals composed whitewashed and played down the role of the Wehrmacht in the Second World War. It has been said – pointedly – that although the Wehrmacht lost the war in 1945 it 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 assertion that Rommel somehow been involved in the resistance of 20th July, 1944, was gradually woven into the legend of the “clean” Wehrmacht. His former chief of staff, General Hans Speidel, who later became a Nato general, was particularly influential in suggesting Rommel’s proximity to the resistance.[17] The idea that Rommel had been active in the resistance gained increasing acceptance, especially after the trial of Otto Ernst Remer in 1952. The Chief Public Prosecutor in the trial, argued that the members of the resistance were not traitors and perjurers, but that it was legitimate and a dictate of conscience to take forcible action against the dictator and the illegitimate National Socialist state. As Fritz Bauer well knew, this argument could have consequences for former Wehrmacht soldiers.

The victorious Allies did nothing to prevent using Rommel in the service of the Wehrmacht legend. Instead, the Rommel cult flourished anew, with Britons and Americans composing biographies and popular motion picture films revering the general.[19] The intent remained the same: the British-American victory over the legendary general, the “desert fox”, would cause 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 coincided with West Germany’s rearmament and the integration of West German armed forces into the Nato. This was the historical and political context for the dedication of the Rommel memorial in Heidenheim in 1961. The memorial drew a direct and entirely uncritical line of continuity 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 first critical research papers at the end of the 1960s. At this point I would like to mention two colleagues by name: Manfred Messerschmidt and Klaus-Jürgen Müller. Public enlightenment on the role of the Wehrmacht culminated in the two Wehrmacht exhibitions, which attracted a great deal of attention and more than one million visitors in the years 1995 to 2004. Speaking, the deeper historical research went into the history of the Wehrmacht, it became clear that not only did it wage wars in violation of international law, it was also involved in many crimes, including the murder of European Jews.

Rommel, an important protagonist in the wars of Nazi Germany, must be placed in this context, although he had nothing to do with the systematic murder of Jews during World War II. During this campaign, however, Jews were persecuted as forced labourers in defence construction. More on this subject can be found in commendable papers written by Wolfgang Proske.[22] Furthermore, it is 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 Walter Rauff,[23] had already begun preparations for the murder of the approximately 700,000 Jews in North Africa. They never came to fruition, but only because of the negative course of war 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, different from the criminal orders given by German generals in Eastern Europe.

The third phase was marked by critical, historical clarification. The veneration of Rommel became less and less acceptable, and the Africa veterans lost influence. Civil society, including Heidenheim, critical voices became louder. Beginning 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 culture of remembrance developed, in which there was and is no room for the glorification of war and military. Some historians call this new orientation “post-heroic”. For present-day generations, the democratic culture of remembrance creates a framework for orientation and sets the standards for evaluating Rommel.

Mine war and mine victims
Rainer Jooss’ sculpture of a landmine victim, which is presented to the city today, gives occasion to say some words about the landmine war in North Africa and consequences. Both warring parties used tanks and landmines on a large war in the North African desert.[26] Tank mines and anti-personnel mines served to limit the mobility of the enemy’s tank units. Exact statistics on the mines used then are not available. They are estimated to have been in the millions, perhaps 20 million or more.

For example, German Afrika-Korps pioneers, under the command of Rommel, planted so-called “Teufelsgärten” (devil’s gardens) in the area around the small Egyptian town El Alamein. There were “labyrinths of horseshoe-shaped landmine fields, which opened in British enemy” (Montgomery).[27]. They were intended to entangle the enemy and hinder him from continuing his advance.

It cannot be determined how many people fell victim to the landmine war. Victims are not a special category in the statistics of war losses. Who were the victims of the mine war? They were primarily the soldiers of both parties of war. It is eye-opening to list the countries of origin so that we can better understand the multi-national character of this desert war. The participants were Britons, South Africans, Indians, Australians, Arabs, Circassians, Jews, Frenchmen, men from France’s African colonies, Libyan soldiers under Italian command, and, of course, Germans. In addition, the native Arab civil population was affected by the mine war; that includes Tunisians, Libyans, and Egyptians. Nobody asked them if they were willing to let the aggressors use their countries as battlegrounds.

The international dimension of the world war unleashed by Germany is reflected in North Africa.[28] The parties of war generally planted their mines according to a plan, so they could remove them after a battle and use them in their next operations. Under pressure, however, as when an enemy attack was imminent, the pioneers did not bother with any mine-laying plans, but simply threw them out of their trucks onto the desert. Later, covered with sand, they could no longer be found. Even today mines can come to the surface, exposed by wind or rain, where they glisten in the sunlight. They catch the interest of nomads – men, women, and children – who frequently pay for their curiosity with their lives or with mutilation. "According to Egyptian data, around 3300 people have lost their lives through the explosion of abandoned landmines since Egypt started to keep statistics in the 1980s; 7500 have been maimed."[29] The landmines also inhibit the economic development of Egypt and Libya, where natural resources such as oil are in the desert sand. Rommel, Hitler’s Favourite General and our democratic culture of rem...
natural gas, and ores lie under the mined sand. The mines continue to t
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 participating countries? What did German, Italian and British military historians write about the North Africa? Were agreements signed after the war covering the compensate victims and the question of costs for a systematic clearing of the mines? Reparations of any kind?

The continuing threat by landmines to many people world-wide led to a 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 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention was signed in Ottawa, Canada. More than 160 states 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 1999 the treaty is legally binding international law.[33]

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

Our civil society and our democratic culture of remembrance do not need “desert foxes” as role models, but people with a humanitarian and peaceful orientation.

The Shadow of the Counter-Monument

In the military milieu – the Bundeswehr, reservists, veterans’ associations, traditionalists who lament the passing of the Wehrmacht as a model.[35] In keeping Rommel, the model soldier and icon, in the tradition as a craf
change in thinking cannot be halted. Most of the names of Wehrmacht properties of the Bundeswehr in the 1960 – under the protection of the Wehrmacht – have been deleted.[36] The remaining two Rommel barracks 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 as 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 Bundestag, 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 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 words of Ralf Georg Reuth – that of "battlefields and barrack yards, which he had in 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 de 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 which could serve an orientation for the future. They are history, museum and nothing else. The archetype of German militarism, is not of our time, but contrary to it nothing, neither within the military milieu nor without. Our civil society's culture of remembrance is committed to other values: democracy, a just state freedom and peace.

From now on, the shadow of a fragile-looking sculpture of a landmine victim will fall on the monumental and martial memorial to the commander, here, in Rommel’s very place of birth. In my view, the sculpture is not an addition to the heroic monument of 1961, but rather a counter-monument. The cripple directs our attention to the victims, as upon the prominent warrior and his martial spirit. To conclude with a more general statement:

On the one hand, we see the symbol for the war logic of the past; on the other hand we see the symbol for the hundreds of thousands of victims of the war in North Africa, who urge us to create a lasting peace. I believe that this is a good basis for the continuing development of the culture of remembrance in Heidenheim. I congratulate the community on taking this step into the future.

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


baden-württembergische Innenminister Hans Karl Filbinger (CDU).


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


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


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


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


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

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