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**Hasso von Manteuffel (1897-1978):
Germany's Greatest Tank General?**

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General der Panzertruppe Hasso von Manteuffel was one of the German Army's true masters of armoured warfare in the Second World War. Like many who rose to prominence commanding tank divisions, his formative military experience was gained in the war of 1914-18; accepted into the *Reichswehr* in 1919, his talents as a commander were noticed in the mid-1930s by Heinz Guderian who helped promote his career; like many in the officer class, he was an enthusiastic supporter of the Third Reich; after 1939, he rose quickly through the ranks, ending the war as a three-star general. He did not disappear into obscurity after 1945: he made a significant contribution to the debate over future West German armed forces; he also became a member of the German parliament in 1953; but his post-war career ended in a court conviction for an execution order given in January 1944.

Hasso von Manteuffel was born on 14 January 1897 in Potsdam, an important garrison town. He entered the Prussian cadet school at Naumburg/Saale in 1908; he joined the cadet school at Berlin-Lichterfelde in 1911, passing his final exams in January 1916. His family connections helped facilitate a quick route to the fighting in France. Strings were pulled and he was transferred to the Hussar Regiment von Zietan (Brandenburg) No. 3 in February 1916. Promoted to Lieutenant on 28 April 1916, it was not long before he was in the thick of the fighting. During a reconnaissance mission, he was wounded in the leg by shrapnel on 12 October 1916. He discharged himself from hospital in January 1917 to return to the front. The following month he was transferred to a divisional staff where he quickly displayed a sound understanding of tactics. In May 1917, he was awarded the Iron Cross, First Class.

Like many officers of his generation, and particularly those from the nobility, Germany's defeat came as a huge shock. It was thus not surprising when he joined the *Freikorps von Oven* in Berlin in early 1919. Once the revolutionary disturbances had subsided, military routine settled in and Manteuffel was faced with the tedium of life in the barracks. As

he had transferred to a cavalry regiment in 1919, riding became his hobby and even won national trophies for equestrian events. With an army restricted in size by the Versailles Treaty, and only 4,000 officers permitted, promotion ground to a halt. He was only promoted to *Oberleutnant* (Second Lieutenant) in 1932. However, the rise of the National Socialists spelt military expansion and he was promoted to Captain in April 1933, then Major in October 1936. In January 1936 he became an instructor at the Tank School, Wünsdorf. It did not take long before his abilities were noticed and he was assigned to the Armoured Forces Inspectorate, part of the Army High Command (1 March 1937–1 February 1938). Due to this experience, he was appointed as head of directing staff, II Panzer Training School, Berlin-Krampnitz. Given the importance of training replacements, he was to spend the Polish and French campaigns there. In recognition of his work, he was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel on 1 March 1940.

Although Manteuffel did not participate in either the Polish or French campaigns, this did not mean that he was deprived of their tactical lessons since former pupils wrote to him, or visited him, to report on their experiences. Then, at the end of April 1941, he received command of a battalion in the 7th Panzer-Division, the division Rommel had led in France. Thus Manteuffel was commander, 2nd Battalion, *Schützen-Regiment 7*, 7th Panzer-Division, assigned to the XXXIX *Panzerkorps*, when Operation Barbarossa began. He experienced his first battle in twenty-two years and saw the first losses in his battalion. In early July, he was able to capture a bridge across the Berezina River by using surprise and employing a combination of weapons. On 22 August, he was given the command of *Schützen-Regiment 6*, after its commander had been killed. On 2 October, he led the crossing of the Dnieper River. On 28 November, Manteuffel was able to seize a vital bridge at Jachroma. But the following day, the divisional commander informed him that no reinforcements were available to defend the bridgehead, so his unit was forced to retreat.

From late November 1941 until March 1942, he commanded his men in brutal defensive battles. He was then sent to France for rest and recuperation. His division was subsequently withdrawn two months later and sent to France for refitting. If Operation Barbarossa had now failed, Manteuffel's star was rising. On 1 October he had been promoted to Colonel; on 31 December 1941, he had been awarded the Knight's Cross. During this period, Manteuffel was given the command of a brigade in the 7th Panzer-Division. But later he found himself on his way to Africa. On 11 November 1942, he was sent to join Rommel in the desert and take over the command of a division.

When he finally landed in North Africa on 8 December 1942, he was given a collection of disparate units and ordered to turn them into a division: a small contingent from the 10th

Panzer-Division, a brigade of paratroopers, a paratrooper engineer battalion, and a brigade of Italian *Bersaglieri*. In March and April, the 'Manteuffel Division' was thrown into battle; by all accounts, although not a mechanized formation, it performed well, with Manteuffel demonstrating his military abilities again, this time as a divisional commander. At the end of April, he was ordered to return to Germany for medical treatment. On 1 May 1943, he was promoted to Major-General. Once his convalescence was complete, he was able to request from Hitler the command of 7th Panzer-Division, which he took up on 16 August.

As soon as he arrived at the front, he had to engage immediately in the furious defensive battles taking place in the area around Kharkov. According to Manteuffel, the division was divided into battle groups and was able to exploit its speed and agility to hold the line against the Red Army. But cut off from its own lines, the division was forced to fight its way through to the western bank of the Dnieper River. On 18 November 1943, Manteuffel was able to recapture Zhitomir with six tanks and a weakened panzergrenadier battalion after a reconnaissance unit had discovered a drunk Russian anti-tank crew. For this action, he was awarded the Oak Leaves to the Knight's Cross. When the situation at the front had stabilised, he was instructed to relinquish 7th Panzer as he had been appointed commander of the Panzergrenadier-Division *Großdeutschland*. He was given the instruction by Hitler to turn it into the strongest division in the army.

On 26 January 1944, Manteuffel took over command of the *Großdeutschland-Division*. Armed with a letter from Hitler, he sought to build up its strength in equipment. He was able to procure four tank battalions – a Tiger battalion and three Panther battalions. While he was reinforcing his new division, he was promoted to Lieutenant-General on 1 February 1944. During his command of *Großdeutschland*, one battle in particular stands out, the defensive action at Targul Frumos in Rumania, 2-8 May 1944. By that point, the 'GD' had become the most powerful division in the army. This was based on Manteuffel's abilities as a tactician, but also the intention of the Nazi leadership to use the unit as an ideological bridgehead into the army. By the second week in April, the 'GD'-Division had already destroyed 89 Russian tanks and ten anti-tank guns. At Targul Frumos, during the first three days of the battle, *Großdeutschland* destroyed 350 Russian tanks and damaged 200 at a cost only ten German tanks destroyed. Soviet losses included some Josef Stalin IS-2 heavy tanks. Manteuffel had calculated the IS-2 was too new for the crews to be able to manoeuvre them properly, so recognised an opportunity for them to be outmanoeuvred by his more experienced tank crews. Experience also told him that the T-34/85 was too slow and could be outmanoeuvred by the Panzer IV. His plan was to execute the perfect 'hammer and anvil' battle: in other words, the

artillery and antitank guns would act as the anvil on to which the advancing Red Army mechanized forces would be driven by the 'GD' mobile forces.

Manteuffel's successes in Russia were down to his philosophy of command from the front, personal reconnaissance, his ability to combine the different elements of a division, and his understanding of Russian tactics. His reputation as a commander led Hitler to conclude that he was a general who could win battles. Once the Western Allies had successfully landed in Normandy, and had begun their breakout, the German front looked in danger of collapsing completely. On 1 September 1944, Manteuffel was ordered to the Führer's Headquarters where he was appointed Commander-in-Chief, Fifth Panzer Army, on the Western Front, receiving at the same time promotion to *General der Panzertruppe*, which made him one of the youngest three-star generals in the army. There was also the implication in the appointment that Hitler thought a battle-hardened commander from the Russian Front would have the necessary resolve to stabilise the situation. Still, Manteuffel was well aware of the impact of Allied air superiority on the defensive battle in France. Nonetheless, in mid-September his army was able to at least slow down the Allied advance towards Germany's border.

On 3 November 1944, Manteuffel was called to a meeting at the Headquarters of Field-Marshal Walter Model in Krefeld at which General Alfred Jodl from the Wehrmacht High Command and Field-Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt were present. It was here that he was informed of the plans for the Ardennes Offensive. Both Manteuffel and Model later argued with Hitler that the plan was unworkable, and its goals needed reducing, not least of all due to lack of trained troops, aircraft, and adequate fuel supplies. When the offensive finally started, Sepp Dietrich's Sixth SS Panzer Army became bogged down, while Manteuffel's Fifth Panzer Army struggled to capture Bastogne. On 23 December the fog cleared, allowing Allied aircraft to start interdiction missions again. With Bastogne finally reinforced on 26 December, the German offensive ground to a halt. On 8 January 1945, Model was forced to admit Hitler's gamble had not paid off. Manteuffel then had to try and extricate as many men and machines as he could, a task he succeeded in against the odds. His ability to conduct withdrawals was a further hallmark of his skill as a commander.

On 2 March 1945, Manteuffel was summoned once again by Hitler and told he would be taking over command of the Third Panzer Army on the Oder Front, with orders to push towards the town of Stettin. When he assumed his new assignment on 11 March, he found his Panzer Army had just suffered serious losses, so all he could do was to conduct a fighting withdrawal. By mid-April, the Third Panzer Army had been reduced to 242 tanks, 600-700 anti-aircraft guns, with no artillery, and found itself facing Marshal Konstantin Rokossovski's

Second Belorussian Front, equipped with 951 tanks and over 6,500 artillery pieces. The ensuing offensive proved impossible to stop. Manteuffel was finally captured by the British at Schwerin on 3 May 1945.

After his release from captivity in December 1946, he soon became a prominent figure in the debate over rearmament, writing articles for regional and national newspapers, calling for Western Germany to be permitted to form 12 divisions. He joined the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and was elected to the Federal Parliament in 1953. He rapidly became one of the country's leading defence experts: he gave the Federal armed forces their new name – *Bundeswehr*; he was also a member of the parliamentary Defence Committee from 1953-57. Among former officers, and indeed among some West German politicians, his military reputation was such that he was widely considered as a possible future commander of the Federal armed forces.

However, his star began to fall as rapidly as it had risen. As a result of a split in the FDP, Manteuffel joined the breakaway Free People's Party (FVP) in 1956, then joined the German Party the following year when it absorbed the FVP. Worse was to come when he found himself accused of the illegal execution of one of his soldiers while he was serving as commander, 7th Panzer Division, in January 1944. It emerged in 1957 that Manteuffel had overruled a court martial sentence of prison for a corporal, turning it into a death sentence. To prevent problems arising for the armed forces, he asked that he no longer be considered for a military appointment; he was subsequently forced to give up his seat in parliament. The trial, which took place in August 1959, caused considerable controversy in the press and among former officers. According to Manteuffel, a young corporal had failed to open fire on a Russian reconnaissance patrol which then captured two soldiers; the 7th Panzer-Division had found itself in a dangerous situation, with a recent desertion leading to a crisis in morale; to restore order, he had decided to execute the young corporal. To support his portrayal of the situation at the front, he called on *General der Panzertruppe* Hermann Balck and Field-Marshal Erich von Manstein as expert witnesses, who both supported his version of the military situation.

The court took his positive reputation as a commander into account, although it determined they could not identify cowardice in the face of the enemy on the part of the corporal. The prosecution had demanded two years' jail; but, due to mitigating factors, the sentence was reduced to 18 months (he only served four months). Many newspapers disapproved of the sentence, yet some agreed with it. The ensuing public debate saw some former officers accuse him of having been a fanatical supporter of Hitler. In fact, Manteuffel

had remained a regime favourite until the last weeks of the war: awarded Swords to his Knight's Cross in February 1944, this was followed by Diamonds in February 1945.

Without doubt, Hasso von Manteuffel possessed a unique combination of qualities as a commander of armoured forces: a high level of tactical understanding, an ability to motivate his men by not asking too much of them and sharing the conditions at the front. But his impulsiveness, which was a necessary quality for a panzer commander, proved his undoing one night in mid-January 1944 when he overruled a military court. He also shut his eyes to the true nature of the Third Reich. However, despite his unrepentant attitude in court, old age brought time for a reconsideration of earlier views. As he remarked towards the end of his life: 'If Hitler is – rightly – to be made responsible for the later disasters of the German Army, he is entitled to the major share of credit for the victories in Poland (1939) and France (1940) and the beginning of the Russian Campaign (1941). The German generals cannot have it both ways.'

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Schaulen, Joachim von, *Hasso von Manteuffel. Panzerkampf im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Berg am See: Kurt Vowinckel, 1983). Despite the fact that Manteuffel's name is not given as the author of this work, it is in fact in large part his military memoirs. While Joachim von Schaulen has written the summary of Manteuffel's postwar career and the conclusion (pp. 212-226), the bulk of the text has been written by Manteuffel.

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