

Achtung Panzer! - Heinz Guderian!

Introduction - What's New - Site Map
Panzer Profiles - Additional Information
Vehicles of the Wehrmacht - Military Links
Bron Pancerna - Forum

Generaloberst Heinz Wilhelm Guderian
Der Schnelle Heinz / Hurrying or Fast Heinz
HeinzBrausewetter / Hurricane Heinz
(June 17, 1888 - May 14, 1954)

Written & Researched by Jörg Muth
Military Historian, University of Potsdam / Germany.

The Career

Heinz Guderian was born on June 17th of 1888 in Culm (at that time belonging to Germany, West-Prussia, now Poland, Chelmno) near the river Weichsel (Vistula / Wisla), south of Gdansk (Danzig). From 1901 to 1907, he was educated in military schools and in the Military-Academy of Berlin. As an Ensign he joined the Jäger- Battalion Nr. 10 (comparable to a Ranger- or Light-Infantry Battalion), commanded by his father. After successfully attending war school at Metz (which was at that time occupied by Germany) in 1908, he was commissioned 2nd Lieutenant, backdated to 1906 and went again to the Jäger-Battalion. In 1911, Heinz fell in love with Margarete Goerne, but his father thought that his son was too young to marry and sent Heinz for special instruction to Telegraphen-Battalion Nr. 3 (Wireless-Battalion). After finishing the course in 1913, Heinz married Margarete. They had two sons, both fought during the World War II with the Panzertruppen. The elder, Heinz Günther later became Major-General in the Bundeswehr.

Heinz Günther Guderian was born on August 23rd of 1914 and in 1933, started his officer career. In 1935, he became a Lieutenant and in 1942, began staff training and was assigned to lead small Panzer recon units of 116th Panzer Division. In 1943, Heinz Günther became Lieutenant Colonel in General Staff and then First Staff Officer of 116th Panzer Division. During the course of war, he was wounded three times and was awarded Knights Cross of the Iron Cross. Also during the war, he wrote few propaganda essays for books dealing with the Panzertruppe. There is lack of information about him from 1945-1955 period. In 1956, Heinz Günther became Lieutenant Colonel in the Bundeswehr and in 1958, Commanding Officer of the Panzer Battalion. He also performed some various staff assignments. In 1967, he became an Inspekteur der Panzertruppen (same as his father did) and in 1972, Major-General. He retired in 1974. In 1994, Heinz Günther wrote a conservative divisional history of 116th Panzer Division (The Greyhound/Windhund-Division: The last war year in the West. Geschichte der 116. PzDiv 1944-45 / Das letzte Kriegsjahr im Westen. Story

of the 116. PzDiv 1944-45, now available in English). He has five kids and one of his sons in 1972 was a Lieutenant in a Jägerereinheit. He is still alive.

Until the outbreak of the World War I, Heinz was commanded to the War Academy in Berlin for staff training, because he showed great prospect. In November of 1914, he was promoted to 1st Lieutenant and only one year later to Captain. In the war Guderian had various assignments and saw many battlefields on the Western Front, the disaster on the Marne and the slaughter of Verdun, although he never commanded a fighting unit. Nevertheless he was awarded the Iron Cross second and first class, because his Funken-Station had sometimes enemy-contact and thus had to fight its way out. In early 1918, he was tested at the "Sedan-course", where he showed the ability for solving tactical problems with unusual actions, which impressed his instructors. He got the o.k. for the General Staff of the Army High Command (he was the youngest staff officer). After the war he was taken into the Reichswehr, reduced to 100.000 men, because of the Treaty of Versailles. Only the best were taken. Guderian began to write articles about motorization and was commanded to lead various Kraftfahrzeug-Abteilungen (Motorized-Units). Those were only supply units equipped with trucks and motorbikes. In 1927, he was promoted to the rank of Major. All the time he tried to gain every material available about motorized warfare. He spoke fluent french and english and translated the works of Captain B.H. Liddell Hart and Major-General J.F.C. Fuller. When he equipped some of his trucks with wooden turrets armed with guns and successfully manoeuvred them around the battlefield as fighting units, this was at first forbidden by his superiors. In 1929, Guderian traveled to Sweden, where he visited a tank battalion equipped with Strv m/21 and m/21-29 (Swedish built versions of German LK II tank). He also visited the secret tank testing facility at Kazan, Russia (at this time Germany was not allowed to develop tanks), where he met some of the Russian officers, who later became his deadly enemies. At that time, Guderian was in command of the Truppenamt Abtl. Heeres-Transport (Inspection/Command for all motorized transport units) and he was also a teacher of tactics in Berlin (Tactics for motorized transport units). In February of 1931, Guderian was promoted Lieutenant Colonel and two years later to Colonel. Relentlessly, Guderian wrote Articles about armored and motorized warfare and helped with technical problems when the first tanks were build. After Adolf Hitler was in power, he visited a manoeuvre and saw some of Guderian small Panzer Is dashing around the battlefield. He was ecstatic. Officially ignoring the treaty of Versailles and installing conscription, Hitler authorized the creation of three Panzer Divisions. Guderian, who had at that time a very good relationship with Hitler, was made the Commander of the 2nd Panzer Division and shortly after was promoted to Major General (Generalmajor). Not more than one and a half years later he was promoted to Lieutenant General and received the command of XVI. Army-Corps. He spearheaded the Anschluss ("connection") of Austria and the Invasion of the Sudetenland (Czechoslovakia). Only ten months later, Guderian was promoted to Full General (General der Panzertruppen) and got his most important assignment, which well may have changed history: He became Chef der Schnellen Truppen (Chief of fast Troops). It meant that he was responsible for recruiting, training, tactics and technique of all the Wehrmacht's motorized and armored units with the exception of the tracked Infantry-Assault-Guns. Now he was able to bring the full weight of his personality, unique and vast knowledge and rank to bear, to make the German Panzer Divisions to the awesome instrument they became in the war. In the Invasion of Poland, Guderian commanded the XIX. Army-Corps and was

awarded the Iron Cross second and first class again, followed by the Knights Cross.

Brest, Eastern Poland, September 22nd of 1939.

The Brigade General S. Krivoshein and Gen. H. Guderian during the common military parade in Brest. Both of them were at Kama poligon near Kazan in 1929, where Guderian was on the inspection of the tank school for the German officers.

Photos and information provided by Dmitry Pyatakhin.

When Germany attacked France, Guderian made the real Blitzkrieg come true by constantly disobeying orders of his superiors and driving relentlessly as far as his men and tanks could go, wrecking havoc far beyond the expected frontline, cutting communications, taking french staffs as prisoners, who thought that the Germans were still on the western side of the river Meuse and so leaving their own troops without command. The "beheading" of the French units by overrunning their command facilities was crucial for winning the war in the west. The defeat of the French army was not completed by the superiority of the German tank weaponry. Only one of the German tanks, Panzer IV armed with 75mm gun, was a match for the French heavy Char B tank, while Panzer I, Panzer II and Panzer III were greatly inferior and outclassed. There were other reasons, such as that every German tank had a wireless communication system and that Panzers were fast and easy to maintain. They were set in action as whole and independent units and were not attached to the Infantry units. And last but not least, they were on the army-level and below commanded by officers who were often trained or commanded by the creator of the Panzerwaffe himself - Heinz Guderian. After reaching the English Channel, the Panzergruppe Guderian was created and thrust deep into France, cutting off the giant Maginot Line. Since that time, every unit that served in the Panzergruppe Guderian wore a large 'G' on every tank, truck or motorcycle. Before the invasion of Russia, Guderian was promoted to General-Oberst (Colonel-General, one step to Fieldmarshall) and Commander of the Panzergruppe 2, later Panzer-Army 2. In the first stages of the invasion, Guderian earned the Oak Leaves to the Knights Cross. Because of permanent problems with his superior Fieldmarshal von Kluge, who always tried to stop his drive and because of taking back his units from a dangerous position against orders he was relieved from his command.

In February of 1943, (after Stalingrad) he was recalled as Generalinspekteur der Panzertruppen, again responsible for modernizing of the armored troops. He quickly formed a good relationship with Albert Speer, the Minister for Armament and Ammunition and both were able to dramatically increase the rate of Panzers build per month, also many corrections to the Panzers were made by Guderian in person, who traveled relentlessly around factories and shooting ranges. Guderian fought for the decision not to stop the production of Panzer IV. Though many Russian tanks outclassed this model now, the Panzer IV was far more reliable than the Panzer V Panther and Panzer VI Tiger. The soldiers could handle it in their sleep and it was available and produced in great numbers. After the failed assassination of Adolf Hitler in July 1944, Guderian was also made Chief of Army Staff, which was at that time just a puppet position, because Hitler himself called the shots. After having a hot discussion with Hitler, he was relieved from his new post in March of 1945.

The Aftermath

Heinz Guderian surrendered to US-Army units in May of 1945 and became

prisoner of war. He was send to Nuremberg, but not put on trial. The Russians wanted to charge him with war crimes, but the Western Allies didn't comply. In 1946, Guderian was imprisoned in Allendorf and Neustadt (Hessen) but in 1948, he was released. In the following years, he published his reminiscences and some other works and articles (see Bibliography). He died on May 14th of 1954, in Schwangau bei Füssen (West Germany), exactly 14 years after his decisive breakthrough over the Meuse at Sedan.

The Character

When Heinz Guderian was a boy and a young man at the Kadetten-Anstalt, his teachers described him as 'always serious' or 'very serious'. Very soon, Guderian gained the ability of speaking very concise and clearly, and if he wished, cold and hurting. For this he was equally famous and feared. He made no friends until he got his first command. When his Funken-Station was overrun at the Marne, because of his incapable Division-Commander, he then wrote a devastating report, which would have costed him his career (Guderian was a Lieutenant at that time). But his Division-Commander felt in Disgrace shortly later, because of an unnecessary retreat. Many times his hot temper brought him trouble and he was often saved by a superior who saw a young officer with exceptional military ability, but a bad control over his temper. Many times later Guderian disobeyed orders from his superiors. They often tried to hold his advance, fearing his exposed flanks and wanting to bring the marching infantry up, which could not cope with the advance of the tanks. This was a grave mistake and Guderian knew it. Armored warfare knows no flanks. The German Wehrmacht's officers were no bunch of good comrades. Everyone wanted his share of glory and the youngest made the most progress, so this was another reason to stop him. There are many pictures of Guderian, because some Propaganda-Officers followed the popular generals wherever they went and took a lot of shots. Every picture shows smiling Guderian on the front and surrounded by his soldiers. Guderian had a very affectionate smile, which states "follow-me-and-gain-glory". Although when pictured with his staff or superior officers Guderian seldom smiled. His soldiers and officers loved him, because he was always with them and they knew what he knew. Guderian could drive, aim and shoot every tank. His ability as a commander, came not from recklessness and intuition, as with Erwin Rommel, but from deep knowledge. He knew exactly how far every tank could go and over which landscape, were he wouldbe slowed down and were he could speed up. Heinz Guderian knew all that, because he was the creator and the German Panzerwaffe wash is creation. This was never fully recognized by the German High Command.

The Verdict

It is impossible to separate the Wehrmacht, the Holocaust and so many war crimes. The high ranking officers of the Wehrmacht were no Knights in shining armor, but simply lifelong trained soldiers. Many sacrificed their conscience and honor, others rather died. It is not possible to look in one's head, but the chain of command of the Wehrmacht and all the connected offices is reconstructible. Now we have even access to the long closed Russian archives and are able to exploit them (see this page for the latest research). So we can state what one must have known and what one only possibly knew. Guderian had a great affection for Hitler, who

made his dream - a large Panzerwaffe - come true. He would state in 1950, that Hitler wanted only the best for Germany, though he made some mistakes. This was a time when every German - even the blind and deaf - knew about the Holocaust. After the World War I, in a letter to his wife, Guderian wrote that the Polish farmer was dirty, dump and uneducated. He stated similar things about the Russians. Guderian was not anti-Semite like so many Germans, but he simply didn't care about them. He possibly didn't know about the systematic killing of Jews - the final solution (Endlösung). Although, he knew they were all brought to the concentration camps and that they were not "treated well". Even his wife, a stronger admirer of Adolf Hitler than Guderian, later was disturbed because of the treatment of the Jews. Both seemed to think that not Hitler, but Himmler and the SS were the only responsible - after the war they most have known better. In his position as Generalinspekteur Guderian traveled through Germany and visited many weapon factories. In many of these worked thousands, sometimes ten thousands, of slave workers from the East - under horrible conditions. It was impossible to ignore them. These facts are not mentioned in any memoir from a Wehrmacht's general known to me and also not by Guderian. They simply didn't write about it and so it happened that many thought they didn't knew. They knew very well. When Guderian was imprisoned in Neustadt and Allendorf in Hessia, he was asked as nearly all high-ranking officers were, to work for the U.S.-Army Historical Division (German section). Many did not dare to make this decision alone. Though Guderian was in function (ordered-to-do-the business of the Chief of Staff) the highest ranking officer, he went on July 26th 1945 with General Leo Geyr von Schweppenburg, who served under his command for years, to General-Fieldmarshal Wilhelm von Leeb to ask for his permission. Though von Leeb was retired in his commanding function, a General-Fieldmarshal was in the Prussian tradition never out of service. The prisoner barracks were all bugged by the Seventh Army Interrogation Center. The prisoners did of course, not know this. Unfortunately I only have the copies of the English transcriptions of the bug-tapes. So I cannot stand for the translations. Knowing from experience of other tapes, the translation are of high quality because the U.S. Intelligence usually used officers as translators, who had lived in Germany for years or had German parents. The transcriptions are signed by the commanding Major. Most of the talking does General von Schweppenburg though he has the lowest rank. He was a military attaché in London before the war and wrote the very first book about the flexible defence in armoured warfare. The talk of the three high-ranking officers reveals that they constantly thought about politics but wanted to persuade the U.S. intelligence officers that "the German officer was content in confining his interests to his own narrow sphere" (von Schweppenburg). Von Leeb then cautions his comrades not to reveal too much information because "we will be unable to prevent them from beating us in writing the history of the war". We know by now that the German officers were highly successful in this case. More than 80% of all officers employed in the U.S. Historical Division wrote some sort of war stories or memoirs and were so able to shape history in their view. This view is unfortunately persistent until today - especially in North America. The rest of the conference of the three officers deals only with the case of how could the written questions of the U.S. interrogation officers be answered to present the Wehrmacht and especially his officers in the most favourable view. The most important part is the end of the transcription and I will quote it without shortening it.

Geyr: "Any objective observer will admit that National Socialism raised the social status of the worker, and in some respects even his standard of

living as long as that was possible."

L (Leeb): "This is one of the great achievements of National Socialism. The excesses of National Socialism were in the first and final analysis due to the (warped) personality of the FUEHRER [capitals in the orig. script]."

GUD (Guderian): "The fundamental principles were fine." L: "That is true."

This is one of the few statements of Guderian. Is a man who agrees to the "fundamental principles of National Socialism" a nazi? What does it need to make a nazi? What are the "fundamental principles"? The fundamental principles of Hitler were to wage war and to expel or to kill the Jews. He never made a secret of that since the year of 1923. How do the quoted officers distinguish between Hitler and National Socialism? Because the above questions can hardly be answered as a whole, I leave the judgment to the reader. At the least the quotations are disturbing. Clearly the officers thought political and Guderian did so also. Guderian did everything to make his dream come true: To make Germany strong again by his Panzers and to get back the lost territories. He was one of the few that were not afraid of Adolf Hitler. In the last years of the war Guderian did everything to save the East, even if it meant to take all troops away from the Western Front, but he was not able to convince Hitler. A real great General not only has to know, when he has won, but also when he is defeated. Heinz Guderian loved his fatherland Germany very much, but unfortunately he didn't love the Germans enough.

Guderian's famous Quotations

"Klotzen, nicht Kleckern!". (Boot'em, don't spatter'em) - Guderian's favourite quotation and Adolf Hitler was so impressed by it, that he used it himself often.

"Es gibt keine verzweifelten Lagen, es gibt nur verzweifelte Menschen". (There are no desperate situations, there are only desperate people).

"Fahrkarte bis zur Endstation". (Ticket to the last station) - Shouting to his Panzer troops when they were roaring past him, meaning that they should go as far as they could.

"Man schlägt jemanden mit der Faust und nicht mit gespreizten Fingern". (You hit somebody with your fist and not with your fingers spread) - Meaning that you should concentrate your Panzers for one mighty push in one direction and not distribute them.

"Der Motor des Panzers ist ebenso seine Waffe wie die Kanone". (The engine of the Panzer is a weapon just as the main-gun).

"Der Kampf gegen die eigenen Oberen macht manchmal mehr Arbeit als gegen die Franzosen". (It is sometimes tougher to fight my superiors than the French) - When he got orders to stop and wait for the following infantry and tried to persuade his superiors that this would mean to throw away victory.

The Bibliography

"Achtung - Panzer! Die Entwicklung der Panzerwaffe, ihre Kampftechnik und ihre operativen Möglichkeiten", Stuttgart 1937, countless editions, engl. Transl.: "Achtung Panzer! The Development of Armored Forces, their Tactics and operational Potential", Arms and Armor Press ISBN 1-85409-282-0.

"Die Panzertruppen und ihr Zusammenwirken mit anderen Waffen" (Armored Troops and their Cooperation with other weapon systems), o.O. 1937.

"Gruppe Guderian", (Ed.), Berlin 1940 (Propagandastaffel Guderian, 2nd Platoon / PK (Propagandacompany) 666).
"Mit den Panzern in Ost und West", (Ed.), Berlin/Prag/Wien 1942 (Propagandawork).
"Die Tiger-Fibel", and "Die Panther-Fibel", (Ed.), o.O. (H.Qu.) 1943, (famous tank manuals with erotic cartoons on every page in the Tiger-Fibel).
"Erinnerungen eines Soldaten" (Memories of a Soldier), Heidelberg 1950, fourth edition, (sold more than 200.000 copies) engl. Transl.: "Panzer Leader", (Foreword by B.H. Liddell Hart), New York 1952, Reprint: 1981 Zenger Publish. Comp., Inc, ISBN 0-939482-06-1.
"Kann Westeuropa verteidigt werden?" (Is it possible to defend Western Europe?), Göttingen 1950 (Not a strategic or operational study ,but a very polemical work).
"Panzer-marsch", Published from his notes after his death; edited by Major-General ret. Oskar Munzel, München 1955.

George Parada
Copyright@1996-2003