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A Panzer Commander "Working Toward the Fuhrer": The World War II Career of General oberst Hermann Hoth

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dustin c. Whittington

A Panzer Commander “Working Toward the Führer”:
The World War II Career of Generaloberst Hermann Hoth

A Thesis

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Abstract

One of the key points in Ian Kershaw's two volume Hitler biography is the idea of *working toward the Führer* in which he claims that Hitler issued a set of broad reaching ideas in stead of direct orders. To gain political and other favors, most high level officials in the Nazi era began to interpret those ideas to outdo their rivals. By examining the involvement of Generaloberst Hermann Hoth in the Eastern Campaigns and the Holocaust, I will show evidence for this thesis.

Keywords: Hoth: Russian: German: Jewish: Eastern Front: War Crimes

Introduction

On June 22, 1941 the German Wehrmacht launched Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union. The massive campaign was supposed to create *Lebensraum* (or living space) in the east. Among the special units assigned to various tasks throughout the campaign were the *Schutzstaffel* (or SS) *Einsatzgruppen* (special duty squads) and police battalions. In order to accomplish this task, the head of the SS – Heinrich Himmler – issued a decree in 1941 stating that Poles, Jews, Slavs, Russians, and many other *Untermenschen* (sub-humans, or racially inferior people) were subject to removal and/or liquidation. Thus began the Russian phase of the Holocaust.

Due to the publications of many of the Wehrmacht's generals and other officers in the years following the war, some scholars saw the Wehrmacht as a noble actor in the conflict, not enthusiastic participants in genocide. Recently however, scholars and exhibits such as the *Wehrmachtsausstellung* in Hamburg have challenged the notion of a "clean Wehrmacht," and stated the Holocaust as an event perpetrated universally by all German armed forces, be they Wehrmacht or SS. Ian Kershaw's massive two volume biography of Adolf Hitler published in 2000 challenged this assumption also. "Hitler, by contrast, was on the whole a non-interventionist dictator as far as government administration was concerned. His sporadic directions, when they came, tended to be Delphic, and conveyed verbally, usually by the head of the Reich Chancellery Lammers."¹ Kershaw's main theory stems from an idea that the majority of Germans holding power during the Nazi era, whether civilian, military, or SS, were engaged in the practice of "working toward the Führer." By doing so, each individual, rather than carrying out explicit instructions from Hitler himself, interpreted the Führer's broad statements in his own way to please him. In return, these individuals wanted to gain a sense of approval to

¹Ian Kershaw, "Working Towards the Führer," in: Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin, eds., *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 92.

advance their careers in the Nazi system. Kershaw states: “Invoking the Führer’s name was the pathway to success and advancement. Countering the ideological prerogatives bound up with Hitler’s position was incompatible with climbing up the greasy pole to status and power.”² This theory explains why numerous commanders were relieved of their duties after disagreeing with the Führer throughout the war.

The concept of “working toward the Führer” set of goals promoted Hitler’s agenda and pushed forward his war aims. Kershaw describes this process as “the Darwinistic notion of unchecked struggle and competition until the winner emerged; and the simplistic view of the ‘triumph of the will,’ whatever the complexities to be overcome. All these reinforced each other and interacted to guarantee a jungle of competing and overlapping agencies to rule.”³ To accomplish this system, most areas of government, military and industrial concerns pushed Germany toward Hitler’s vision of European dominance throughout the 1930’s. “Foreign Industry mandarins, captains of Industry, and above all the leaders of the armed forces had done everything – in their own interest – ‘to work towards the Führer’ in destroying Versailles and Locarno, pushing for economic expansion, building up a war machine.”⁴

This argument justifies the examination of the Nuremberg trial and its succession trials and one individual in particular: Generaloberst Hermann Hoth. During the initial phase of Operation Barbarossa, Hoth held the position of commanding officer of IV Panzer Group in the Southern Ukraine. He fought in the failed relief efforts of Stalingrad in the winter 1942/43, as well as the battles for Kursk and Kiev in 1943. These operations put him in charge of military activities within the target areas of many SS *Einsatzgruppen* units and police battalions engaging in killing operations. Matching Kershaw’s theory of “working towards the Führer” and Hoth’s testimony in Case 12, the High Command Case at the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials at

² Kershaw, in: Kershaw and Lewin, p. 95.

³ Kershaw, in: Kershaw and Lewin, p. 96.

⁴ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1937 – 1945: Nemesis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), p. 188.

the end of the war, I will show that Hermann Hoth, through his career as an officer in Hitler's Wehrmacht, was "working toward the Führer" to achieve his own personal career goals. An example of which can be found in Ian Kershaw's writings when he states: "In the case of the SS, the ideological executive of the 'Führer's will,' the tasks associated with 'working towards the Führer' offered endless scope for barbarous initiatives, and with them institutional expansion, power, prestige, and enrichment. The career of Adolf Eichman, rising from a menial role in a key policy area to the manager of the 'Final Solution,' offers a classical example."⁵

In 1948, General Hoth stood trial at the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials under Case 12: "The High Command Trial" or as it was officially titled, *The United States of America vs. Wilhelm von Leeb et al.* In Case 12 a mixed bag of Wehrmacht officers were put on trial, including Generalfieldmarshal Wilhelm von Leeb and Georg Kuchler, Generaloberst Hans Reinhardt, Hans von Salmuth, Karl Hollidt, Generalleutnant Karl von Roques, Hermann Reinecke, Walter Warlimont, and Otto Wöhler from the army, Generalfieldmarshal Hugo Sperrle from the Air Force, Admiral Otto Schniewind from the Navy, and Generalleutnant Rudolf Lehmann from the Waffen SS. The charges against Hoth and the twelve other Wehrmacht officers were:

Count 1. Crimes against peace by waging aggressive war against other nations and violating international treaties.

Count 2. War crimes by being responsible for murder, ill-treatment and other crimes against prisoners of war and enemy belligerents.

Count 3. Crimes against humanity by participating or ordering the murder, torture, deportation, hostage taking, etc. of civilians in occupied countries.

Count 4. Participating and organizing the formulations and execution of a common plan and conspiracy to commit aforementioned crimes.

⁵ Hannah Arendt quoted in "Eichman in Jerusalem," in: Kershaw and Lewin, p. 104.

Of these charges, Hoth was convicted of Counts 2 and 3, after Count 4 had been dropped from the proceedings, having been covered by the other charges. On October 28, 1948, he was found guilty and sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment only to have that sentence commuted after serving six years; he was released in 1954. After his release, Hermann Hoth went on to write and lecture on the topics of military history and battlefield tactics within the *Bundeswehr*. On January 25, 1971, Generaloberst Hermann Hoth died at Goslar in Lower Saxony, West Germany.

The SS *Einsatzgruppen* and police battalions, though sometimes attached to the Wehrmacht, were not part of the German Army. Instead they were subject to the SS command structure dominated by *Reichsführer SS* Heinrich Himmler. Himmler's SS who guarded, staffed, and ran the concentration/labor/death camp system, not the Wehrmacht. The SS was one of the most fanatical arms of the Nazi Party, on the other hand many Wehrmacht officers were actual Nazi Party members.

The *Afrika Korps* of the Wehrmacht, which fought under *Generalfeldmarschal* Erwin Rommel, praised as being the most honorable of German armies to oppose the allies, thanks to Desmond Young, Hans Luck, and others. Furthermore, it is known that while the SD did hold an office in Tunis, Tunisia, there were no actual SS units engaged in combat or any other operations in North Africa. Even though both commanders were from the same branch of the German armed forces, Hoth, convicted of war crimes, had SS units engaging in his area of operations while Rommel did not.

II. The Early Career

Hermann Hoth was born on April 12, 1885, in Neuruppin, a small garrison town in Prussia. Neuruppin had a strong Prussian heritage as it was the former residence of Frederick the Great as the crown prince of Prussia, as well as Carl von Clausewitz, author of the classic book *On War*. It was this Prussian military heritage of obedience, honor, and prestige that influenced Hermann Hoth throughout his life as he followed in his father's footsteps to become an officer in the German Army.

Christopher Clark argues that some members of Prussian society saw the officer corps as “conservative” if not “reactionary, lethargic, narrow minded and crippled by otiose class distinctions.”⁶ He defines the role of the military as being one of great importance and prestige for the Kingdom of Prussia. However, with an emphasis on pomp and pageantry and its recognition of its veterans, the Prussian people saw them in almost mythical terms after 1815. This, in turn, encouraged many of them to join veterans groups: “...what mattered about the military was not the imposition of differences between ranks, but the equality of men who served together.”⁷ It is clear that the idea of military service added a distinction of equality between the men of Hoth's social standing and is confirmed by the idea of a Prussian warrior heritage. When put together, these traditions became a powerful influence for someone in Hermann Hoth's position following in the footsteps of a father in the army and beginning a military career of his own.

In 1903, Hoth joined the German Army when he was commissioned a Lieutenant in the 72nd Infantry Regiment. There he served until being promoted to Captain at the beginning of World War I. His service in various positions of the Reichswehr throughout the Great War

⁶ Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Fall of Prussia 1600 – 1947* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006), p. 602.

⁷ Clark, p. 609.

awarded him both the First and Second Class of the Iron Cross for acts of bravery.

During World War I, Hoth fought on the Eastern front against the Russian army and served as a General Staff officer at a corps headquarters. It was here that the racial ideas began for the German Army vis-à-vis the Russian and Slavic people that carried over into the Second World War. One such case was the battle of Tannenberg, which became famous as Field Marshal von Hindenburg's greatest victory. At Tannenberg the German forces were able to win repeatedly against the Russians through a system of encirclement, a feat that otherwise was unheard of in World War I. The cauldrons – or encirclements – led to the capture of Russian soldiers and equipment by the thousands. Because of this, many racial stereotypes formed about the inferiority of the Russian army and its people as being barbaric. These battles of encirclement also led to the developments of Hoth's ideas on mobile warfare during the interwar years.

In 1916, Captain Hoth was assigned to the air corps where “he saw some of the first aerial fighting of the summer ... Hoth experienced the rise of the new means of warfare first hand.”⁸ Just before the end of the war, Hoth was transferred to the 30th Infantry Division in which he fought in the Champagne region and Flanders.

III. The Weimar Years.

After the defeat of the Central Powers, ending World War I, the German people faced disaster in economic, social, health, psychological, political, moral, and military terms. In a very shrewd move, Generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff blamed the emerging officials of the new democratic government for the military defeats, due to shortages of supplies from the home front. This in turn caused “the infamous stab-in-the-back legend,” an idea of Germany's betrayal

⁸ Franz Kurowski, *Panzer Aces III: German Tank Commanders in Combat in World War II* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2010), p. 142.

by capitalist financiers and communist agitators led by Jewish politicians and intellectuals. The legend in use with stunning effect by Adolf Hitler. It took life “even before the armistice was signed.”⁹ Through the promotion of its theory, the army was able to maintain its moral reputation and standing among the German populace in spite of the military defeats suffered on the Western front. This legend embraced many of the racial stereotypes of the Russian peoples being brought back from the eastern front. Chancellor Ebert’s claim that the army had remained undefeated gave further credence to the stab-in-the-back theory that propelled events that set the Weimar Republic on its downward spiral throughout the 1920’s; an outcome that prompted Hoth to stay in the *Reichswehr* as opposed to face unemployment and an uncertain future outside the army.

During the 1920’s and 1930’s, Hermann Hoth learned about the advantages of armored warfare and tank deployment. This became the subject of his book on tank warfare entitled *Panzer-Operationen*, published only after World War II in 1956. In 1922 Hoth joined the staff of the *Truppenamt* (personnel office) with the rank of Major. He put his knowledge of armored warfare to use in developing tactics for the deployment of motorized troops, serving in this office under the command of future General Heinz Guderian.

In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler laid down his plans for foreign and domestic policy, for the restructuring of government and social life, and the role of the military to gain *Lebensraum*. He also spoke of his hatred of Marxism, capitalism, and “inferior races,” especially Jews. Hitler’s belief in Germany’s need to conquer that living space in the east is best described in his own words. His anti-Semitic views explain the army High Command’s attitude toward the treatment of Jews once the war in Russia began.

By handing Russia to Bolshevism, it robbed the Russian nation of that intelligentsia which previously brought about and guaranteed its existence as a state. For the organization of a Russian state formation was not the result of the political abilities of

⁹ Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 20.

the Slavs in Russia, but only a wonderful example of state-building efficacy [sic] of the German element in an inferior race... For centuries, Russia drew nourishment from this Germanic nucleus of its upper leading strata. Today it can be regarded as almost totally exterminated and extinguished. It has been replaced by the Jew.¹⁰

In this excerpt from *Mein Kampf*, published in 1926, Hitler laid down his vision for an armed conflict seven years before coming to power and fifteen years before he made war a reality. In power he seized every opportunity for getting his message to the masses through public speeches, radio addresses and newspapers.¹¹

After that fifteen year incessant Nazi propaganda onslaught, a military officer in Hermann Hoth's position would have known Hitler's racial ideas. It was through this familiarity and the instructions of his superior officers that Hoth developed an idea of the German Führer's goals. This interpretation set him on a path of working toward those aims in order to further advance his career once the war started in 1939 as will be evidenced by his speeches in Russia concerning Judaism. His career eventually culminated in his actions throughout Operation Barbarossa and the rest of the Russian campaign. In 1929, Hermann Hoth had been promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel. Then, one year before the Nazi seizure of power, he was promoted to colonel, and assumed command of the 17th Infantry Regiment in Braunschweig.¹²

¹⁰ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, (Boston:Houghton Mifflin Company,1927), p. 654.

¹¹ Jeffery Herf, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda During World War II and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006), p. 268.

¹² Kurowski, p. 142.

IV. The Early Years of the Third Reich

On February 1, 1933, Hitler entered the office of Reich Chancellor and consolidated power for himself and his party. Three days later Hitler attended a dinner party where he described his plans for Germany's future to his senior *Reichswehr* officers. Among them were: 1. Eradication of Marxism and strengthening of the youth and its will to fight; 2. The repeal of the Versailles treaty; 3. Expansion of living space; 4. Buildup of Armed Forces.¹³ As a result of this meeting, many senior leaders of the *Reichswehr* began, as Kershaw's thesis implies, the process of "working toward the Führer." "As the latter goal was also the principal objective of the *Reichswehr*, Hitler could be sure of a sympathetic hearing ... [he] felt no need to conceal his ultimate goal of the acquisition of *Lebensraum* from his generals."¹⁴ Scholars have noted that "Most Army leaders enthusiastically shared the Nazis' goals."¹⁵

In May 1933, Hitler forced the Wehrmacht officer corps to swear an oath of loyalty to him as opposed to the German people, government, or constitution. During the early days of Hitler's chancellorship it was hard to ignore the path and speed in which Hitler's government was leading Germany into criminal directions, as is evidenced by the Reich Citizenship Law and the article in the *Dachauer Volksblatt*, detailing the opening and uses of the Dauchau Concentration Camp . In Article 4, paragraph 1 of the *First Regulation to the Reich Citizenship Law*, all those determined to be of full Jewish descent lost their status as German citizens.¹⁶ Germany was rapidly moving into the abyss of totalitarian state that was the opposite of what "Weimar Democracy" had stood for. Even though Hitler had pledged to President von

¹³ Hitler Quoted in "Hitler's remarks on His Political Goals to Army and Navy Commanders," 3 February 1933 in Stackelberg, Roderick and Sally A. Winkle, eds. *The Nazi Germany Sourcebook: An Anthology of Texts*. (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 128.

¹⁴ Stackelberg and Winkle quoted in "Hitler and the Army," in Stackelberg and Winkle, eds., p. 128.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Quoted in "First Regulation to the Reich Citizenship Law," 14 November 1935, in: Stackelberg, and Winkle, eds. *The Nazi Germany Sourcebook*. p. 188.

Hindenburg to uphold the Weimar constitution upon assuming the office of Chancellor, he was doing everything in his power to destroy that constitution.

In October 1934 the Wehrmacht leadership transferred Colonel Hermann Hoth to Liegnitz, in Silesia, after his promotion to Generalmajor. There he began overseeing and training the 18th Infantry Division. At this point one can divine how a commander as intelligent and resourceful as Hoth began to realize the shift in the Third Reich's policy in favor of military buildup and how this could eventually effect his career as Hoth began his "working toward the Führer" when he and many other junior and senior officers in the army went along with Hitler's military expansion plans in direct violation of the Versailles Treaty. This violation of international agreements included the remilitarization of the Rhineland and the increase in arms production and military personnel. These measures supported by the Army High Command, and many junior officers looked to further their careers in future military campaigns.

In the early years of the Third Reich, Hitler made it easy for his army commanders to support violations to the Versailles Treaty by promising the expansion of the German military. As part of the Four-Year Plan announced in August of 1936, "...the extent and pace of military development of our resources cannot be made too large or too rapid."¹⁷ By 1938, Hitler made his totalitarian rule absolute when on February 4, he took direct command of the Wehrmacht. This came as a result of the dismissals of Field Marshal Werner von Blomberg and General Werner von Fritsch when Hitler effectively decapitated the Wehrmacht High command of its leadership by retiring and dismissing an additional sixty generals.¹⁸ Hitler then appointed the pliant General (later Field Marshal) Wilhelm Keitel as his new Chief of Army High Command. As a result of these actions, Hitler now had more power than ever before over the Wehrmacht. This in turn only accelerated the military's sense of "working toward the Führer," which became

¹⁷ Hitler Quoted in "Hitler's Memorandum on the Four-Year Plan," Obersalzberg, August 1936, in: Stackelberg and Winkle, eds. *The Nazi Germany Sourcebook* p. 197.

¹⁸ Stackelberg and Winkle quoted in "Hitler and the Army," in Stackelberg and Winkle, eds., p. 128.

evident almost two years later when the Second World War broke out.

V. World War II

V. a. Poland

On August 22, 1939, one night before the signing of the Nazi – Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, Hitler called his leading commanders to the Berghof at Berchtesgaden to inform them of his decision to attack Poland. In his speech that evening, he stated that war with Poland had become unavoidable and that it would lead to preparations for a conflict with England and France. He also discussed the “need for” the complete destruction of Poland as a nation, as well as the conduct of his troops and their leaders, “Close your hearts to pity. Act brutally ... The stronger man is right. The greatest harshness, [sic]”¹⁹ foreshadowing the coming events in the East. This sentiment echoed a year and a half later when “In his formative speech in Berlin’s Reich Chancellery on March 30 1941, which was attended, among others, by all army group and army commanders of the Eastern Army, Hitler established that the war against the Soviet Union would be a “struggle for survival” that would have to diverge from the previous “pattern”. In the struggle against the Soviet Union, the army would have to “move away from the position of soldierly camaraderie.” Even the military opponent was “beforehand no comrade and afterward no comrade,”²⁰ detailing his attitude and what he expected from his generals toward the future treatment of the campaigns in Poland as well as Russia.

These were words that Hoth and other Wehrmacht officers took to heart once the engagements began. Words that were also a directive passed down to many of the front line

¹⁹Stackelberg and Winkle quoted in “Hitler’s Decision for War” in Stackelberg and Winkle, eds., p. 242.

²⁰ Felix Römer, “The Wehrmacht in the War of Ideologies: The Army and Hitler’s Criminal Orders on the Eastern Front,” in Alex J. Kay, Jeff Rutherford, and David Stahel, eds., *Germany’s Total War in the East: 1941 and the Radicalization of Nazi Policy* (New York: Oxford Press, 2011), p. 75.

troops that set the stage for Wehrmacht commanders to engage in criminal warfare. In Hoth's interpretation, Hitler's directives included, "...all Communist Party and state functionaries, commissars, ... and Jews."²¹

When the invasion of Poland began, Hermann Hoth held the rank of Lieutenant General and commanded the XV Motorized Corps assigned to Walther von Reichenau's 10th Army under Gerd von Runstedt's Army Group South. Army Group South's major responsibility was for the success of the Polish campaign where Hoth's XV Motorized Corps crossed the Vistula at Opatow and Demblin apprehending 60,000 Polish prisoners and capturing 130 guns.²² In this *Blitzkrieg* campaign, the German Army fought with fast and brutal methods in accordance with Hitler's August 22 Berchtesgaden speech. Senior officers – both in garrison and in the field – were amazed at how quickly and effortlessly the war seemed to be going. One such officer, General Erich von Manstein, later wrote in his memoirs: "During the first nine days of the campaign everything had run so smoothly and so completely according to plan that one was tempted to believe little could happen now to interrupt or cause any real change in the scheduled course of operations."²³ The *Blitzkrieg* methods developed in the interwar writings on rapid tank warfare of such Wehrmacht officers as Guderian and Hoth (though unpublished) were based on their World War I experiences.

Hoth had become so effective in his battle tactics during the early stages of the war, which caused his commanders to call upon him to carry out a special assignment involving the cutting off of Polish troops trying to escape the Radom pocket along the Vistula river. "When it became apparent in the course of the battle that large elements of the enemy were striving to escape along the Vistula to the fortress of Modlin, Army Group (South) even pulled up XV

²¹ Geoffery P. Megargee, *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006) p. 60.

²² Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories: The War Memmoirs of Hitler's Most Brilliant General* (St. Paul: Zenith Press, 2004), p. 55.

²³ *Ibid.*

Motorized Corps from Radom region to block this last escape route.”²⁴ Hoth engaged in fighting at Radom on a reversed front in what Franz Kurowski called “a decisive role in the first pocket battle of the Second World War.”²⁵ Kurowski further states “The success was largely achieved thanks to Hoth’s own initiative. As a result, he was one of the first members of the German armed forces decorated with the newly instituted Knight’s Cross of the Iron Cross at the end of the campaign.”²⁶ Hitler witnessed the battle himself as he was visiting Eighth Army headquarters when Army Group South decided to take direct control of this operation.

The efforts of Lieutenant General Hoth and other Wehrmacht officers in von Reichenau’s 10th Army and von Rundstedt’s Army Group South culminated in a knockout blow against Warsaw on October 6, 1939. The Polish campaign lasted only thirty-six days and in that brief amount of time, the Wehrmacht and its officer corps had been tested and shown the effectiveness of Hitler’s idea of acting brutally during their military engagements by showing no mercy to the Polish army. This effectiveness would continue to serve as a guideline for the German army as it began the next phase of the war in France and then later on in the Soviet Union. In other words, “Hitler wanted not only to eradicate the Jews; he wanted also to destroy Poland and the Soviet Union as states ... If the German war against the USSR had gone on as planned, thirty million civilians would have been starved in its first winter, and tens of millions more expelled, killed, assimilated, or enslaved thereafter.”²⁷ That thirty million living primarily in Poland and the USSR. All of this was supposed to be accomplished by the hands of the SS and its related forces such as the SD, along with the Wehrmacht.

²⁴ Manstein, p. 57.

²⁵ Kurowski. P. 143.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), p. ix.

V. B. France

On May 10, 1940, Hitler unleashed the Wehrmacht on France. During these battles, commanded by General Gerd von Rundstedt, Hoth was assigned to Army Group A and was part of the main strike force in the invasion. Hoth took his XV Armored Corps under General Gunther von Kluge's Fourth Army on the primary thrust "crashing through the feeble Belgium defenses Southeast of Liege."²⁸

General Hoth showed great initiative in France when he drove his forces through a heavily wooded area of the Belgium frontier known as the Ardennes Forest. Then, "After von Kluge and Hoth's counseling, Rommel kept pushing his forces for a beachhead on the western shores of the Meuse river rather than slowing down the battle altogether."²⁹ Though the Germans suffered heavy casualties during the crossing of the Meuse, it was the French lines that eventually broke and allowed Hoth's forces to continue on into France. "Thereafter the general intention of Hoth's corps – and of the Fourth Army – was to drive west, to drive deep,"³⁰ headed toward Paris.

David Fraser describes Hoth's service, and that of his traffic control authorities in France, as efficient and impressive when dealing with traffic control problems and movements of tank divisions on terrain that was not always suited for such movement.³¹ These were all qualities that gained him recognition in the eyes of his superiors and demonstrated when Hoth authorized the strengthening of Rommel's command by assigning the 31st Panzer Regiment to him in order

²⁸ William L. Shirer, *The Collapse of the Third Republic: An Inquiry into the Fall of France in 1940* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969), p. 609.

²⁹ David Fraser, *Knight's Cross: A Life of Field Marshall Erwin Rommel* (New York: Harper Prentice Hall, 1993), p. 168.

³⁰ Fraser, p. 160.

³¹ Fraser, p. 166.

to further his advance across the Meuse at Dinant.

After Rommel's successful crossing of the river and establishment of a beachhead, Hoth moved his forces toward Arras and Bethune in order to surround and cut off British and French forces in the area where he continued his advancement northward creating a salient to bypass strong enemy forces that began a serious attack against his 7th Panzer Division.

Shortly afterward on May 24 Hitler issued his famous "halt order" stopping the advance of all German armored units into France. On May 18, however, General Hoth had already exercised caution in commanding his own panzer forces to halt after taking Cambrai.³² The reason for Hoth's actions suggest that he had already gained a sense of Hitler's tactical wishes. This would appear to be more than just common sense in light of the rapid advancement of German tanks. By observing situation maps, the panzer thrusts appeared to be overreaching their infantry and soon to be cut off by enemy forces. This was the reasoning Showalter places behind Hitler's order to halt on May 24. He further describes Hoth's actions as recognizing "...hot dice when he saw them – especially when they came up "promotion," as the High Command on May 17 created Panzer Group Hoth from XV Corps and XVI Corps redeploying from Belgium"³³ in recognition of his feats.

Fearful of overextending his lines in the face of an advance that was considered too far too soon, the actions of Hoth and other commanders in the French campaign impressed Hitler. "Hitler had watched the westward progress of the Wehrmacht with awe and a good deal of astonishment."³⁴ Here it could be assumed that the Führer was now looking in General Hoth's direction. Especially since it was for this campaign that he was promoted to *Generaloberst* and in Kurowski's opinion "marking him for future field army command,"³⁵ all of which led to

³² Dennis Showalter, *Hitler's Panzers: The Lightning Attacks that Revolutionized Warfare* (New York: Berkley Caliber, 2009), p. 114.

³³ Showalter, p. 116.

³⁴ Fraser, p. 187.

³⁵ Kurowski, p. 145.

General Hoth's coming out of the French campaign with an enhanced reputation in Hitler's eyes.

V. c. The Soviet Union

On July 22, 1941, Hitler unleashed "Operation Barbarossa." This event ultimately changed the course of the war for Germany and all nations involved. It also redefined Hitler's speech in which he called upon the leaders of the Wehrmacht to ensure that the troops under their command were to "act brutally." It was also the ultimate testing ground for those commanders "working toward the Führer." Because the larger strategic picture was so confusing due to Hitler's repeated change of mind, these commanders would be continuously reevaluating what they thought to be Hitler's wishes.

The ideology for the battles of the East was a drastic change from those of the West. Throughout the Eastern campaigns the Nazis, and many in the Wehrmacht considered the Slavic, Russian, Ukrainian, Jewish and all other peoples barbaric hordes, and undeserving of the established rules of civilized armed warfare. Just before the invasion on June 6, 1941, Adolf Hitler issued the infamous "Commissar Decree." This was a TOP SECRET order issued to the commanders of armies and the Air Force. From here it was to be communicated to lower commands by oral orders only. This document was a death sentence for political commissars serving in the Red Army. Its sweeping wording left interpretation open enough to include any military or civilians in the area who may be trying to sabotage or hinder German war efforts.

The order stated:

To show consideration to these elements or to act in accordance with international rules is wrong and endangers both our own security and the rapid pacification of conquered territory.

Political Commissars have initiated barbaric, Asiatic methods of warfare. Consequently they will be dealt with *immediately* and with maximum severity. As a matter of principal they will be shot at once whether captured *during operations or otherwise showing resistance*.³⁶ [emphasis in the original]

This was an order issued by the head of state and the chancellor of the German nation. According to the international rules of warfare, it was an illegal order and therefore every member of the armed forces who was supposed to execute it would have been obliged to refuse to obey it. Upon receiving orders of a similar nature, General Heinz Guderian – who was not tried for war crimes at Nuremberg – had this to say in his postwar memoirs:

This order, [the Martial Jurisdiction Decree] which was to play an important part in post-war trials of German generals by former enemies, was consequently never carried out in my Panzer Group. At the time I dutifully informed the Commander-in-Chief of the Army Group that I was not publishing or obeying this order.

The equally notorious, so-called ‘Commissar Order’ never even reached my Panzer Group. No doubt Army Group Center had already decided not to forward it. Therefore the ‘Commissar Order’ was never carried out by my troops either.³⁷

The Martial Jurisdiction Decree which Lieutenant General Conrad von Cochenhausen instructed his subordinates on June 16, 1941 “...courts-marshal and military courts are abolished. Whoever even attempts to resist, even passively, will be shot without further ado. Every officer is permitted to immediately pass a sentence of death.”³⁸ However, Army Group Center, had in fact, forwarded the Commissar Order as indicated by the prosecution and testimony of General Hoth at Nuremberg after the war. “At the conference at Reich Chancellery on 31 March 1941, which Hoth attended, Hitler made the announcement regarding the war against Russia and the extermination of Commissars. Hoth thus had advanced notice of Hitler’s criminal intentions.”³⁹

³⁶Quoted in Kershaw, *Hitler*, p. 358.

³⁷ Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2002), p. 152.

³⁸ Römer, “The Wehrmacht in the War of Ideologies” in Kay, Rutherford, and Stahel eds., p. 75.

Hoth confirmed this statement of acknowledgement of criminal intent by his own testimony when cross examined, “The fact that it (the Commissar Order) was passed on by me is beyond any doubt.”⁴⁰ If Guderian’s remarks about never having received this order are true, then it indicates that his refusal to support previous illegal orders along the same lines as the Commissar Order can be seen as the generals having a way out of such criminal orders without fear of repercussions. In light of this, one can argue that Hoth did not refuse to obey previous illegal orders and therefore was seen as reliable enough to carry out the “Commissar Order” as well. This in turn is evidence of his compliance with Hitler’s aims. Among those aims were Hitler’s desire to rid Soviet Russia of all Communist political advisers.

On the Eastern Front, many generals followed and in some cases exceeded the “Commissar Order” with their own orders. Omar Bartov has stated: “Once the fighting began, rather than attempt to temper their troop’ brutality, many commanders seemed to think that the soldiers were still showing too much compassion for the enemy, and strove to instill in them a greater understanding for, and a firmer will to participate in, the brutalities deemed essential.”⁴¹ Felix Römer argues how ideological behavior such as General Hoth’s needed little swaying in following the criminal orders. “Militant anticommunism was already deeply rooted in the socialization of the Wehrmacht elite and received an additional radicalizing stimulus as a result of military defeat and revolution of the years 1918-1919.” He adds: “Thus, barely any of the anti-Bolshevist troop leaders in the Eastern army doubted the forthcoming war was to be an existential conflict with an unscrupulous deadly enemy in which all and every means were justified; indeed special measures even appeared essential.”⁴²

³⁹ Germany. Territory under Allied Occupation, U. S. Zone. 1945 – 1955. *Trials of War Criminals Before the Nuremberg Military Tribunals Under Control Council Law. 10: Nuremberg October 1946 – 1949* (Washington, D. C. : United States Printing Office, 1951), p. 581.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Omar Bartov, *Hitler’s Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and the War in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 129.

⁴² Felix Römer “The Wehrmacht in the War of Ideologies,” in: Kay, Rutherford, and Stahel, eds., p. 86.

Omar Bartov detailed how von Reichenau issued a statement that supported the racial and ideological ideas of Hitler, specifically focusing on Jews. The order was then followed a few days later when “General von Manstein, commander of 11 Army, issued his own, if anything even more radical version.” Manstein’s order called for the *eradication* “...once and for all...” of the Jewish-Bolshevik system and advocated “the harsh atonement of Judaism.”⁴³ Bartov quoted General von Manstein subordinate General Hoth’s directive to his troops at length.

It has been increasingly clear to us this summer, that here in the East spiritually unbridgeable conceptions are fighting each other: German sense of honor and race, and a soldierly tradition of many centuries, against an Asiatic mode of thinking and primitive instincts, whipped up by a small number of Jewish intellectuals; fear of the knout, disregard for moral values, leveling down, throwing away one’s worthless life.

More than ever we are filled with thought of a new era, in which the strength of the German people’s racial superiority and achievements entrust it with the leadership of Europe. We clearly recognize our mission to save European culture from advancing Asiatic Barbarism. We know that we have to fight against an incensed and tough opponent. This battle can only end with the destruction of one or the other.⁴⁴

Kershaw examines the wording of Hoth’s intentions in his November 25, 1941, speech, as being ideologically motivated. “His men should act out of ‘belief in a change in their times, in which, on the basis of the superiority of its race and achievements, the leadership of Europe has passed to the German people.’”⁴⁵ Kershaw further explains Hoth’s actions by saying “He pointed to the way the Red Army had ‘bestially murdered’ German soldiers.” Hoth believed the sympathy toward native Russians was “misplaced” and blamed them for Germany’s problems after World War I.⁴⁶ Kershaw believes that Hoth called for the extermination of partisans as “a rule of self-preservation. Jürgen Förster also states that Hoth “believed that he was passing on

⁴³ Bartov, p. 130.

⁴⁴ Hoth quoted in Bartov, p. 130.

⁴⁵ Kershaw, *Hitler*, p. 466.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

the unequivocal views of Hitler, which ought to be the sole guiding principle of the Wehrmacht.”⁴⁷ A sentiment that has been further supported by “[Hoth] also strove to render Hitler’s unequivocal maxims in terms which were to become the only guidelines for the Wehrmacht.”⁴⁸

In the directive to his troops, Hoth shows how deeply he had imbibed Hitler’s murderous Nazi ideology. His testimony at Nuremberg, in which the prosecution states: “Hoth seems to say that he disapproved of the order, but unlike von Leeb and von Kuechler he does not claim that he gave any oral expression of his disapproval when passing the order down. Instead, he expressed the extraordinary view that his subordinate commanders and troops knew that Hoth would disapprove of such an order even though Hoth did not say so, and that therefore, they would not carry the order out, even though he passed the order out to them without qualifications of any kind.”⁴⁹ These statements show that while Hoth may have been operating under orders from the Führer and Army High Command, he still had the option to disobey, or express disapproval of direct orders, if they were criminal in nature – just as three other officers of equal or superior rank had done. Instead, however, he justified the Commissar Order in yet another statement: “The annihilation of those same Jews who support Bolshevism and its organizations for murder, the partisans is a matter of self-preservation.”⁵⁰ His belief in these orders and commitment to embracing them can be shown by the zeal in which General Hoth displayed while engaging in the rapid response of his command to carry out such criminal orders as the Commissar Order.

Furthermore, Hoth went on to issue a list of war aims to his commanders. That list Included:

⁴⁷ Jürgen Förster, “Securing Living-space: Pacification of Conquered Territories,” in Horst Boog, Jürgen Förster, Joachim Hoffmann, Ernst Klink, Rolf-Dieter Müller, and Gerd R. Ueberschär, eds., *Germany and the Second World War*, vol. 4: *The Attack on the Soviet Union* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1998), p. 1214

⁴⁸ Jürgen Förster, “New Wine in Old Skins? The Wehrmacht and the War of ‘Weltanschauungen’, 1941”: in Wilhelm Deist, ed., *The German Military in the Age of Total War* (Warwickshire: Berg, 1985), p. 316.

⁴⁹ Germany, p. 338.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad: The Fatefull Siege: 1942 – 1943* (New York: Penguin, 1998), p. 16.

(b) to instill in the Russian population an awareness of impotence of its former masters, and of the implacable will of the Germans to exterminate these holders of power as bearers of Bolshevik thinking.⁵¹

This directive clearly shows the intent in Nazi euphemisms, to kill the leaders of the Bolshevik party, and less clearly – in light of other euphemisms – the belief in Jews as the political wire pullers of that system.

In describing his view of Russia and the Soviet system, General Hoth went even further:

‘We are the masters of this land which we have conquered.’ Since Red Army men had ‘bestially murdered’ German soldiers, ‘sympathy and leniency toward the population are completely misplaced’. Any trace of active or passive resistance, and ‘any form of machination by Bolshevik-Jewish rabble rousers, is to be wiped out’. The soldiers especially must understand the *‘necessity of harsh measures against racially and nationally alien elements’*.⁵² [emphasis in the original]

During the Russian campaigns, the German army suffered from torrential rains and freezing temperatures that slowed their progress down. In a campaign dealing with the vast distances of the steppe, time became a crucial factor in the movement of troops and the securing of objectives. Geoffery Megargee provides an explanation for how all these elements would play against each other in creating the mindset of the German army while conducting its war. “From the top command down, many believed that their role was to bring ‘civilization’ to the region, but that mission gave way in part to feelings of frustration, hopelessness, and disgust as attempts to ‘reform’ the inhabitants failed. Many Germans concluded that the easterners were beyond reforming, and that future attempts to control the area would have to take a more absolute form.”⁵³ In addition to this, many supply roads used by the Germans were dirt roads that became soaked and turned to mud during those rains, Russian railways were of a different

⁵¹Quoted in Förster, “Securing Living Space,” in, *Germany and the Second World War*, vol. IV, p. 1214.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Megargee, *War of Annihilation* p. 2.

gauge than German trains and were difficult to convert, causing further delays in supplying the German troops.

As a matter of contrast with Hoth, however, there were some military commanders of a much lower level on the Eastern front who chose to disregard or, at the very least, modify the Jurisdiction Decree and the Commissar Order. One such unit included the commander of the German 296th Infantry Battalion's toning it down. "Cases like this demonstrate the considerable room for maneuver that was available to the front line commanders to handle the criminal orders. The fact that only few troop leaders took advantage of the option to modify the decrees represents strong evidence as to their approval of the projected criminal warfare."⁵⁴

Another case of interest is that General Walther von Weikersthal. Here was a man with a "more conventional outlook (than other Eastern Front commanders) on war and ... the various peoples of the East."⁵⁵ Von Weikersthal was a man who "while reflecting a sense of German superiority, still fell well short of National Socialist doctrine."⁵⁶ And also: "According to one postwar account, the arrival of the *Kommissarsbefehl* at divisional headquarters led to a triage of all senior divisional officers, after which Weikersthal expressly forbade the passing of this order down to the troops."⁵⁷ The question that remains then, is why did General Hoth choose to follow the criminal order unlike these commanders? The answer can most likely be found in Hoth's speeches in which he speaks of racial superiority and war against the Jewish intellectuals. By comparison, "Weikersthal's personal directive to his troops for the attack on the Soviet Union is devoid of the ideological language of other frontline commanders."⁵⁸ The commanders in the East had room to maneuver when pursuing or not pursuing Hitler's criminal orders. In

⁵⁴ Felix Römer, "Criminal Orders: The German Army and War Crimes on the Eastern Front, 1941 – 1942," paper presented at the Annual Conference of the German Studies Association, Oakland, CA, October 9, 2010.

⁵⁵ David W. Wildermuth, "Widening the Circle: General Weikersthal and the War of Annihilation, 1941 – 42," paper presented at the Thirty-Fifth Annual Conference of German Studies Association, Louisville, KY, September 23, 2011.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Weikersthal's limiting of such orders we see how indoctrinated Hoth had become by the National Socialist propaganda.

The postwar prosecution at Nuremberg goes on to make references to other official statements received by Hoth during the early days of the Barbarossa campaign. "His troops began killing commissars on June 22 – the first day of the campaign. That day, 20th Infantry Division reported to the XXXIX Motorized Corps that one commissar was killed, and followed that up the next day with a similar message."⁵⁹ Furthermore, the actions of Hoth's panzer corps commanders speak for themselves. "The troops of the panzer corps, which advanced furthest and were involved in the bloodiest battles, also exceeded the formations of the infantry corps in their implementations of the Commissar Guidelines. The average execution figures attained by Hoth's panzer corps Operation Barbarossa amounted to more than seventy-three shootings, while the infantry corps averaged only around thirty-one executions,"⁶⁰ showing evidence of Hoth's approval of the Commissar Order due to his knowledge of it, and lack of countermanding it.

While the war progressed and the Germans drove deeper and deeper into Russia, Hoth fought at Minsk, Smolensk, and Voronezh. In all of these cities he ordered the handing over of prisoners to slave labor battalions and the SS, or summary execution squads, designed for the killing of political commissars. "Hoth justified the exterminations being carried out by Special Duty Squad C by directing his subordinates to look at German history, at the supposed guilt of the Jews for domestic political events after the First World War. The extermination of the 'same Jewish class of people', which Hoth described as the 'intellectual supports of Bolshevism, the exponents of its murder organization, the helpers of partisans,' was a 'requirement of self-preservation, [for Germany]'"⁶¹ all of which were actions that discredit the general's statements about not having approved of the order, or thinking that it would not be carried out.

⁵⁹ Germany, p. 339.

⁶⁰ Römer, "Criminal Orders."

⁶¹ Quoted in Förster, "Securing Living Space," in: *Germany and the Second World War*, vol. IV, p. 1215.

At Minsk alone Hoth's division captured up to 290,000 prisoners who faced not only freezing temperatures and starvation, but also deportation to Germany and forced labor in support of the German war effort. Such treatment of POW's defied the Geneva Conventions and the rules of armed warfare. In Smolensk in 1941, even though the treatment of prisoners was still the same, the weather conditions were deteriorating. Hans von Luck, who commanded a recon battalion under General Hoth, observed that "We were given a few days rest, one of which I used to go to a makeshift collecting camp that had been set up near Smolensk. In it were penned thousands of Russian prisoners in a closely packed space with no protection from the hot sun or the torrential showers of rain."⁶² After getting closer to one of these pens, von Luck found that the treatment of these men was so bad that "Many of them called out to me for *voda*, water. They seemed to be suffering severely from thirst. Our services behind the lines had not been prepared for so many prisoners."⁶³

However misleading von Luck's words may be in regards to the German "...services behind the lines had not been prepared for so many prisoners,"⁶⁴ Stackelberg argues that "In the months following the invasion of the Soviet Union, the Wehrmacht leadership and the SS allowed millions of Soviet prisoners to die of starvation and exposure."⁶⁵ This was a "policy of deliberate, if gradual, liquidation."⁶⁶ This 'policy' had been practiced in effect all over Hoth's area of command showing evidence that those services "hand [*intentionally*] not been prepared" by the Germans. [sic]

The prosecution at Nuremberg – when discussing Hoth's area of command – stated;

Since the beginning of operations altogether 236,636 PW's were taken by elements of the Army up to 15 November 1941. Moreover, 129,904 PW's have passed

⁶² Hans von Luck, *Panzer Commander: The Memoirs of Colonel Hans von Luck* (New York: Praeger, 1989), p. 157.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Stackelberg and Winkle quoted in "Starvation of Soviet Prisoners of War" in Stackelberg and Winkle, eds., p. 293.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

through the installations of the army who were not tactically under the command of the army, (SD, or *security police*) so that since the beginnings of operations a total of 366,540 PW's were made and evacuated. Approximately 400 were shot.⁶⁷

While the shooting of 400 prisoners falls within the directive of the Commissar Order, that order states that the prisoners to be shot should be political commissars. Hoth's reports mention only that 400 prisoners were shot. They do not say whether the prisoners were commissars or regular Red Army soldiers. However, given the nature of the Russian campaign as demonstrated in the ever more brutal chain of orders dealing with Jews in the Reichenau/Manstein/Hoth addresses to their commands, one may speculate that not all of these prisoners were political commissars. In describing the campaign in Poland, Megaree writes "Heydrich's order, 'Guidelines for the Cleansing of Prison Camps in Which Russians are Housed,' to be in effect all over the areas conquered by the Wehrmacht, called for the *Einsatzgruppen* to select and liquidate broad but precisely defined groups of prisoners in the OKW zone in East Prussia and the General Government. Those groups included all Communist Party and state functionaries, commissars, ... and Jews."⁶⁸ Considering how quickly Poland capitulated, it is not too much to speculate, with the difficulties of the Russian campaign, Hoth and many other commanders would have resorted to such measures especially when reading a document that states "400 were shot."

One may assume that many were, in fact, Jews and others who were causing supply or tactical problems for the commanders as Megargee further explains while describing the first six weeks of Barbarossa. "In many cases the actual nature of the victims remains in doubt, as when units reported liquidating "1,542 persons (predominately Jews)" or "500 Jews, among them saboteurs."⁶⁹ In his zeal to carry out the criminal orders handed down by his superiors,

⁶⁷ Germany, p. 584.

⁶⁸ Megargee, p. 60.

General Hoth, having supplied his need for a sufficient workforce, may very well have had this large number of prisoners shot in order to confirm a solution to the “commissar problem.” This in turn helped to decide a battle that – in Hoth’s own words – “can end only in the destruction of one or the other.”⁷⁰

Treatment of the Russian POW’s was discussed when describing the acquisition of winter clothing due to OKW’s lack of providing such clothing for the Wehrmacht. “Conditions of clothing situation can only be improved if all discernable clothing items are being taken away from the PW’s who are to be released in the rear area of the army group, and placed at the disposal of the armies upon request.”⁷¹ The prisoners’ inadequate clothing conditions witnessed by Colonel von Luck were primarily due to neglect by officers under General Hoth’s command – a responsibility of the general’s to insure that the POW’s had sufficient clothing. These actions show a willingness to allow the mistreatment of hundreds of thousands of POWs in Hoth’s command area in accordance with Hitler’s wishes to “act brutally” and wage an aggressive war to eliminate the “Bolshevik hordes” of the east.

Furthermore, evidence can be found of Hoth “working toward the Führer” when examining the conditions of the POWs’. “The prisoners of war were held for labor purposes with no food to properly sustain them. It was 25 November and the Russian Winter ... was upon them. The prisoners had insufficient clothing.”⁷² These facts were fully acknowledged by General Hoth when, as the prosecution stated: “Hoth admitted his obligation to care for the prisoners in his testimony.” He stated: “I exploited these prisoners of war for labor purposes. I had to feed them.”⁷³

In his desire to “work toward the Führer,” Hoth was responsible for both the shooting of

⁶⁹ Megargee, p. 69.

⁷⁰ Bartov, p. 130.

⁷¹ Germany, p. 585.

⁷² Germany, p. 586.

⁷³ Ibid.

400 prisoners in just one of many such occurrences, and the use of thousands more of these prisoners as slave labor in accordance with the Commissar Order issued by Hitler. The use of these POW's included the maintenance of road and railway stations for military needs, work in construction battalions, and digging anti-tank ditches. Specifically, 2,071 POW's were used on 1 August 1943, for troop supply, and on 4 October 1943, 24 POW's loaded ammunition. The loading of ammunition is in direct violation of the Geneva Conventions Article 50, Paragraph (b) on the subject of Treatment of Prisoners of War, as that ammunition was to be used against the POW's fellow soldiers. Hitler declared that since Russia was not a signatory to the Geneva Convention, it held no authority over the German conduct of war within Russia.

Furthermore, Hoth's turning over of the prisoners to the SD units assigned to the *Einsatzgruppen* represented another form of "working toward the Führer." Hitler had made his intentions plain in *Mein Kampf* for the population of Soviet Russia once the war began. These intentions included the mass murder of Jews and other Russian citizens. In the closing briefs of General Hoth's trial, the prosecution stated that the SD had killed 1,224 Jews, sixty-three political agitators, and thirty saboteurs and partisans on 14 December 1941 at Artemovsk. It went on to discuss the culpability of the General: "There can be no doubt that Hoth knew after the Artemovsk incident that the SD, along with its police functions, operated as a murder organization also. The record shows that after he acquired this knowledge that within his area his own army police, over whom he had command authority, turned over prisoners and Jews as a regular practice."⁷⁴

In spite of this knowledge, as it turned out, the Artemovsk incident was not a singular act. As the war progressed throughout the next couple of years in Southern Russia, "These cases of turning civilian prisoners over to the SD occurred continuously from the time of the Artemovsk incident till Hoth was relinquished of his command of the 17th Army in the middle of the

⁷⁴ Germany, p. 595.

following April.”⁷⁵ By neglecting his duties as area commander to protect these civilians under his administration from undue harm according to the rules of armed warfare established by both the Hague and the Geneva Conventions, Hoth willfully pursued a course of action that was criminal. It was, however, in accordance with the Führer’s directive to “act brutally” and “with maximum severity” in order to secure “the rapid pacification of conquered territory.”

Throughout campaigns in Minsk and Smolensk during 1941 as part of Army Group Center, an *Einsatzgruppe* followed Hoth’s troops in order to accomplish “the rapid pacification of conquered territory.” At his trial at Nuremberg, *Obersturmführer SS – Einsatzgruppen Commander* Otto Ohlendorf testified that even though Heinrich Himmler assigned the *Einsatzgruppen* as killing squads to accompany the German armies into Russia, it was the unit commanders who determined when and where the operations would take place. “According to an agreement with the armed forces high command and army high command, the special commitment detachments [Einsatzkommandos] within the army group or army were assigned to certain army corps and divisions. The army designated the areas in which special commitment detachments had to operate.”⁷⁶ Though Hoth never claimed knowledge nor ignorance of these actions, according to Ohlendorf, corps commanders like Hoth chose the areas of operation for the *Einsatzgruppen*. Given this statement, it is not possible for the General to have been ignorant of the proceedings. In fact, “Hoth’s directive called for the complete extermination of the Soviet war machine, as well as the annihilation of the Jewish-Bolshevik system, and instructed his soldiers to show understanding for the ‘necessity of the harsh punishment of Jewry.’ This could only be understood by the troops as justification of the mass executions carried out by the *Einsatzgruppe C*.”⁷⁷ And since he did not countermand nor subvert these orders in any way, we can only assume that he approved of them with or without passing them on.

⁷⁵ Germany, p. 596.

⁷⁶ Otto Ohlendorf quoted in “Affidavit of SS Gruppenführer Otto Ohlendorf,” in: Stackelberg and Winkle, eds., p. 342.

⁷⁷ Deist, p. 316.

Executions of commissars, Jews, and Russian prisoners of war were not the only way in which General Hoth was working toward the Führer. On the military front, he was also involved in the high level planning of many strategic assaults. In July 1940, Lieutenant General Hoth had been promoted to full General and XV Panzer Corps transformed into Panzer Group 3 under his direct command. When Operation Barbarossa began in June 1941, Panzer Group 3 was assigned to Army Group Center, under the command of Field Marshal Fedor von Bock – and after von Bock’s dismissal in late 1941, Günther von Kluge. In the opening stages of the attack, Hoth led Panzer Group 3 in Hitler’s northern thrust along the Niemen river to Kaunas and Vilna to meet up with General Heinz Guderian’s Panzer Group 2, after having encircled the city of Minsk, in the middle sector.

Shortly after the battle of Minsk, on July 15, General Hoth fought at Smolensk with much the same results in regards to tactics and POW treatment and the killing of 835 Jews.⁷⁸ However, it is interesting to note that after his combat actions began forming a pattern of genocide, “Two days later, Hoth received the Oak Leaves to the Knight’s Cross of the Iron Cross for his achievements. He was the twenty-fifth member of the German Armed Forces to be so honored.”⁷⁹

On August 4, 1941, while deliberating on whether to strike Kiev or Moscow, Hitler called a conference of his top military theater commanders. Many, including Generals Guderian and Hoth, believed that Moscow could be taken with all haste, then by decapitating its government, a quick and decisive end would come to the Russian campaign. In his diligence to move forward as soon as possible, “Hoth reported that the earliest date by which his panzer group could resume its advance was August 20.”⁸⁰ In spite of these recommendations, Hitler still felt the need to proceed to Kiev first. Hoth, on the other hand, feeling that it was his duty to

⁷⁸ Megaree, p. 145.

⁷⁹ Kurowski, p. 146.

⁸⁰ Guderian, p. 189.

continue pressing for the more logical solution in view of the oncoming winter and the lack of winter clothing and provisions tried once again to convince Hitler of the need for an attack on Moscow. And so on August 23, “Halder, Bock, Hoth, and Guderian intended to make one final effort to convince Hitler,”⁸¹ thereby attempting to capture the Soviet government and ending the ideological struggle at the enemy’s seat of power.

Hitler’s constant change of plans left many to wonder what his actual objectives were. The deeper the German army was able to penetrate into the Soviet Union, the more often Hitler seemed to change his mind about primary objectives. This was due in part to the rapid tactical movement of superior Panzers generals such as Hoth and Guderian. Their swift movements and broad sweeping pincer formations enabled them to capture prisoners by the tens and even hundreds of thousands. It was also these same maneuvers that managed to cut off and encircle large Russian formations, causing Hitler worries about how to deal with Red Army units behind German lines. This in turn led to him ...changing his mind about ... the timing for the big German push for Moscow. ”⁸² Then he instructed Army Group Center to destroy resistance in Smolensk and Vyazma for the beginnings of Operation Typhoon toward Moscow.⁸³

The assault on Moscow would eventually happen, but it would have to wait until October 2, 1941, to begin. This caused even further complications to the German war effort due to weather and increased time for Soviet build up. Here it should be noted that due to his diligent service and ability to go above and beyond what Hitler was directing, General Hoth was considered to replace Field Marshal von Reichenau after Reichenau suffered a stroke on January 13, 1942. However, in spite of his success, this time he missed the ‘hot dice’ of promotion when “Hoth was unable to take up his duties, as Hitler on the very same day appointed Field Marshal von Bock.”⁸⁴

⁸¹ Corelli Barnett, *Hitler’s Generals* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1989), p. 435.

⁸² Andrew Nagorsky, *The Greatest Battle: Stalin, Hitler, and the Desperate Struggle for Moscow that Changed the Course of World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), p. 103.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

For Hoth, the beginning of the end came at Stalingrad. In the autumn of 1942, Hoth was assigned to Field Marshal Erich von Manstein's Army Group Don. In November of that same year, a Russian counter offensive cut through the German lines, forcing Hoth to abandon his relief efforts. Then, from July to August 1943, after his forces were overwhelmed at the Battle of Kursk, General Hoth was relieved of his command. Hoth then sat the rest of the war in retirement until the final weeks of the war in April and May 1945, when he commanded a small unit of reserves and *Volkstrum* in defense of the Harz Mountains.

VI. Conclusion:

In spite of losing favor with Hitler in 1943, it can still be said that from 1933 on, Hermann Hoth's career was based on Ian Kershaw's thesis that many Army commanders "worked towards the Führer." Hoth had participated in successful campaigns in both Poland and France, using tank tactics he had devised while under the command of General Heinz Guderian before the war. These campaigns were based on constant movement of tanks and personnel. He learned the need for such tactics during the First World War. Thanks to the tactical genius of Generals Hoth and Guderian, *Blitzkrieg*, as it turned out, became successful above and beyond Hitler's expectations.

While assessing the Commissar Order and what it meant to the safety of the Russian POW's, Hoth once again went above and beyond Hitler's desires in his executions of large numbers of commissars and prisoners of war. His trial at Nuremberg shows that he began this process within days of Operation Barbarossa's beginning. His speeches as well as the numbers

⁸⁴Quoted in Ernst Klink, "The Conduct of Operations: The Defensive Battles of Army Group South," in *Germany and the Second World War*, vol. IV, p. 755.

of executions and turning over of personell to *Einsatzgruppen* officials is evidence substantial enough to note that Hoth carried out the Führer's criminal orders with excessive zeal. This is also evidenced by the statements he made about the need to eradicate Jews, as well as his treatment and lack of care and provisions for Soviet POWs in his area of operations.

To answer the question as to why Generaloberst Hermann Hoth would pursue such a criminal path with his military career, Megaree attempts to explain in broad terms how many other generals did the same. In doing so, he cites "...a culture that emphasized German superiority within a competitive, racist world view, along with a particular antipathy toward Slavs, and religious and political anti-Semitism. Other influences arose out of the experience of the First World War and its aftermath, such as radical anti-Marxism (and the conflation of Marxism with Jewishness)."⁸⁵ Deist also observed, "Hoth turned his soldiers' eyes to German history, to the alleged guilt of the Jews for the domestic conditions after the First World War."⁸⁶

The final culmination of Hoth's efforts came at Stalingrad, where he offered, in spite of impossible odds, to relieve General von Paulus' Sixth Army after the encirclement was complete. In trusting that Hitler would send enough relief efforts to supply and break through the Soviet encirclement, it was clear that Hoth was thinking of the success of Rommel in Tunisia, and of von Manstein in the Crimea which would have been the pinnacle of his distinguished career as one of Hitler's top Panzer generals. In light of these two comparisons, it leads me to believe that General's Hoth's eyes were on that coveted Field Marshall's baton, a reward that may have been the culmination of his military success and all of his efforts at "working toward the Führer" in such a stellar career as a tank commander.

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⁸⁵ Megaree, p. 149.

⁸⁶ Deist, p. 316.

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