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Erwin Rommel: Noble Knight of Germany or Nazi Knave?

Jacob Schultz (Mentor: Prof Schiessl, PhD)



Image taken of Rommel during his command of the Afrika Korps

Early Career

Erwin Rommel began his career as an officer of the German Army in 1912 and was noted as a competent commander of troops during the First World War and during the Weimar Era. After the war, Rommel mainly served in a riot suppression role during the socialist uprisings in Germany. While Rommel subscribed to the "Stabbed in the Back" myth that Adolf Hitler did, Rommel pointed to empty stomachs rather than international Jewish conspiracy as the reasons for these attempts of forming socialist governments. Rommel was also noted for avoiding physical violence with putting down these uprisings whenever possible.

Relationship with Race and the Holocaust

Rommel held deeply racist views toward the colonial troops Great Britain had employed to fight in North Africa, Black French troops and colonial Indian forces employed by the British notably. These views would soften after combat with these groups and would go on to praise their fighting abilities. Rommel's exploits in North Africa led to the exportation of a thousand North African Jews to Eastern Europe. Rommel's reputation is complicated by reports from the British 8th Army, whose senior Jewish Chaplain Isaac Levy stating that he had never seen nor heard any reports of antisemitism.

Fraser, D. (1993) *Knight's Cross: A Life of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel* HarperCollins Publishers.

Hanson, R. (2014) *Disobeying Hitler: German Resistance After Valkyrie* Oxford University Press.

Butler, D.A. (2017) *Field Marshal: The Life and Death of Erwin Rommel* Casemate.

Evans, R. (2015) *The Third Reich in History and Memory* Oxford University Press.

The Fox and The Fuhrer

Hitler and Rommel first met in 1934 during a military inspection and held many positions of high importance to the Nazi government, between 1937 and 1939. Rommel was given command of the 7th Panzer Division in 1940 and spearheaded the wildly successful invasion of France through Belgium, earning him notoriety in military circles across the world. From there, he was given command of the German Afrika Korps and earned the nickname "Desert Fox" for his exploits in North Africa. In 1943 Rommel was transferred back to Germany and moved from commands in Greece and Italy and finally commanded the defense of France starting late 1943. Due to Hitler's preference for more optimistic plans made by staff, Rommel's assessments of defenses in France fell on deaf ears. On July 17, 1944, Rommel was thrown from his staff car while under attack from the British Royal Air Force and suffered near fatal injuries.

20 July Plot

Rommel had connections many of the conspirators of the 20 July Plot to assassinate Hitler and sue for peace with the Allied governments. While most of the plotters wanted Hitler dead, Rommel felt that Hitler's death would spark a civil war. He suggested an arrest and trial to prevent Hitler's martyrdom. After the failed plot in 1944, the 20 July plotters were rounded up, including Rommel. Rommel was given the choice of pleading his case to Hitler directly, standing in court, or committing suicide to spare his family from scrutiny. On October 14, 1944, Rommel opted to take a cyanide capsule and end his own life.



Command Portrait of Rommel after the attack on his command car in July 1944.

Rommel's Myth and Legacy

Rommel was highlighted in Nazi propaganda as a transitional figure from the old German military to the Wehrmacht of the Nazi government. During the war, Allied propaganda picked up that reporting and continued that idea, including praise from Winston Churchill. After the war's end, the West made Rommel to be the model soldier for a new German Army, the Bundeswehr, stood up to be the first roadblock in case of a Soviet invasion of Europe during the Cold War. To date, Rommel's name was given to three Bundeswehr bases, one of which still stands with, a German Navy destroyer, many streets throughout Germany, as well as a memorial bearing his name and dedicated to peace and against militarism.

Conclusion

Rommel's legacy with Nazi ideology and politics is fraught and undeniably linked in his life. His legacy will be complicated to be sure. In modern times, his name will most likely remain with many places and monuments around the world. It is important to know and understand that very few people can stand the lens of history and rarely is a legacy untarnished. Rommel is remembered today as both a perpetrator and victim of the Nazi regime by the History Association of Aalen and by independent historians from Dusseldorf. Rommel should be looked back on as someone who fell victim to the idea of the "perfect, apolitical soldier" who served whatever the government was and became. Not a monster, but a man.