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Command Failure in War: Psychology and LeadershipCommand Failure in War: Psychology and Leadership

Phillip Langer
Robert Pois
Indiana University Press (Apr 21, 2004)
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In this meticulous work, the authors analyze the military failures of major leaders in history, due to “dysfunctional personal rigidity.” Using a “psychohistorical” method of analysis, Pois, a professor of history, and Langer, a professor of educational psychology, present eight specific problems in military leadership as exemplified by Frederick the Great, Napoleon, McClellan, Lee, Hood, the British Military during World War I, Churchill, and Hitler. Each chapter, heavy with detail, focuses on one significant campaign, and the authors assume a basic knowledge of the battles they describe.

Hitler has long fascinated historians with his unassailable ambition, brutality, and quest for land and power. By analyzing such a complex personality through the lens of a singular campaign, Pois and Langer suggest that Hitler’s failure, through the failure of the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad, was a direct result of his suffering from frustration-aggression. At this point in the campaign, Hitler “probably hated his generals and staff more than he did the enemy,” and that his “desire to ‘have it all’ was responsible for a two-pronged offensive that posed tactical and strategic problems that proved impossible to surmount.”

Hitler was unable to see the deficiencies in Frederick Paulus’s leadership of the Sixth Army. Despite possessing a “daring and innovative” military spirit and an “encyclopedic memory” for tactical details, it appears that Hitler also proved to be “nervous and indecisive” when faced with the beginning of battle. This chapter also includes a history of the German Sixth Army and the indecisive Paulus.

Another large character in this book is Frederick the Great. In an effort to understand his major defeat at Kunersdorf against the Russians during the Seven Years War, Pois and Langer present a thorough history and psychological make-up. They claim that Frederick’s consistent dedication to an offensive battle style (his famous mantra was “The Prussian Army always attacks”) is a result of the abuse that Frederick suffered at the hands of his controlling and ever-dissatisfied father. Frederick showed an aptitude for the arts, but his father subjected him to “constant criticism and ridicule” in an effort to mold him into a soldier capable of ruling eighteenth-century Prussia, a “relatively small and resource-poor state greatly dependent upon military prowess.”

Frederick turned his anger outward and avoided any possibility of appearing helpless or weak after his adolescence. This personality type, combined with an unwillingness to “see things as they were” and an army always on the offense, spelled disaster for Frederick, despite his strong will to the opposite.

Each chapter in this book offers an interesting dissection of its main character, but the reader should be warned: the writing is extremely detailed.

KRISTIN PUTCHINKSI (August 16, 2004)

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