

## German Soldiers of World War II: Why They Were the Best, and Why They Still Lost



The German soldiers of World War II have often been portrayed, both during the war and in the decades since, as simple-minded, unimaginative and brutish.

**But throughout the war, the German soldiers' performance remained unequalled.**

**Their enemies never matched their extraordinary professionalism.**

Hollywood movies and popular U.S. television shows have for years contrasted confident, able and “cool” American GIs with slow-witted, cynical and cruel Germans.

“Propaganda is an inescapable ingredient of modern conflict,” British journalist and historian Max Hastings has noted. “In the Second World War, it was considered essential for the struggle to defeat the German army that the peoples of the Grand [Allied] Alliance should be convinced of the qualitative superiority of their fighting men to those of the enemy. One [American] dogface or one [British] tommy was worth three wooden-headed krauts. Hitler’s robots could never match the imagination and initiative of Allied soldiers on the battlefield ...” Major

## German Soldiers of World War II: Why They Were the Best, and Why They Still Lost

wartime American motion pictures portrayed German soldiers as dull-witted and simplistic. In the decades since the war, Hastings notes, “a spirit of military narcissism, nourished by such films as 'The Longest Day,' 'A Bridge Too Far' and 'The Battle of the Bulge,' has perpetuated mythical images of the Allied and German armies.” / 1

In accord with the prevailing propaganda image of the enemy, Britain's wartime premier scornfully disparaged German soldiers and officers. In a 1941 radio address Winston Churchill spoke of “the Nazi war machine, with its clanking, heel-clicking, dandified Prussian officers ... [and] the dull, drilled, docile, brutish masses of the Hun soldiery plodding on like a swarm of crawling locusts.” / 2

*Like so much else that the public has been told about the Second World War, this demeaning image bore little relation to reality.* As specialists of military history who have looked into the matter agree, the men of Germany's armed forces -- the Wehrmacht -- performed with unmatched ability and resourcefulness throughout the nearly six years of conflict.

Trevor N. Dupuy, a noted American military analyst, US Army Colonel, and author of numerous books and articles, studied the comparative performance of the soldiers of World War II. On average, he concluded,

**100 German soldiers were the equivalent of 120 American, British or French soldiers, or 200 Soviet soldiers. “On a man for man basis,” Dupuy wrote, “German ground soldiers consistently inflicted casualties at about a 50 percent higher rate than they incurred from the opposing British and American troops under all circumstances [emphasis in original]. This was true when they were attacking and when they were defending, when they had a local numerical superiority and when, as was usually the case, they were outnumbered, when they had air superiority and when they did not, when they won and when they lost.” / 3**

## German Soldiers of World War II: Why They Were the Best, and Why They Still Lost

Other respected military historians, such as Martin van Creveld and John Keegan, have made comparable assessments. Max Boot draws a similar conclusion in his detailed book, War Made New. **“Man for man,”** writes this influential author and military historian, **“the Wehrmacht was probably the most formidable fighting force in the world until at least 1943, if not later. German soldiers were even known for showing more initiative than the soldiers of democratic France, Britain, and the United States.”** / 4

Another scholar who has written about this is Ben H. Shepherd, an author of several books who teaches history at Glasgow Caledonian University in Scotland. In a recent detailed work, Hitler’s Soldiers: The German Army in the Third Reich, he dismantles the image of “zombie-like obedience popularly ascribed to the German military.” In fact, **the Wehrmacht “stressed qualities such as flexibility, daring and independent thinking,”** and **“Nazi ideology placed great importance upon qualities such as courage, endurance, resourcefulness and strength of character, as well as upon comradeship.”** He also takes note of **“the stress that the German army placed on superior organization. At all levels, the German army was more effectively organized than all the opposing armies it faced ...”** / 5

Looking at the 1940 campaign in France, Shepherd writes: **“... It was the Germans’ own strength that enabled them to triumph so spectacularly. Among other things, they profited from an imaginative and daring operational plan. But if one single, overall reason for the German army’s triumph in the west can be pinpointed, it is that its doctrinal approach to tactics and operations far outclassed that of its opponents. At all levels, it possessed qualities of daring and adaptability, and a capacity to react to the rapidly changing battlefield situation ... The qualities of the German soldier, and the ability of commanders at all levels to think and act independently and effectively, were indeed key to German victory ...”** / 6

## **German Soldiers of World War II: Why They Were the Best, and Why They Still Lost**

Even after the tide of war had turned, he writes, German troops fought well. **“The army sustained its initial success thanks to high levels of training, cohesion and morale among its troops, and thanks also to excellent coordination with the Luftwaffe [air force] ... Much has been made of the German soldier’s qualitative superiority in the [June-July 1944] Normandy campaign, and there is indeed much to be said in this. One especially exhaustive study of the [German] Westheer in Normandy concludes that, all other things being equal, a hundred Germans soldiers would have made an even fight against 150 Allied soldiers.” / 7**

“As a result of all this,” says Shepherd, “German army units exhibited great staying power in defense [that is, especially during the final year of the war]. They also exhibited great resourcefulness and flexibility ... From 1943 onwards, the German army executed a fighting retreat of unparalleled tenacity, against an increasingly formidable Red Army in the east, and a Western Allied coalition powered increasingly by the economic and military might of the United States.” / 8

Max Hastings, a respected and widely read British historian, is the author of more than a dozen books, including several about World War II. These include Bomber Command and Armageddon, and a masterful overview, Inferno: The World at War, 1939-1945. In Overlord, a history of the 1944 Allied invasion of northern France, and the tough campaign to take control of Normandy, he writes: / 9

**“The Allies in Normandy faced the finest fighting army of the war, one of the greatest that the world has ever seen ... The quality of the Germans’ weapons - above all tanks - was of immense importance. Their tactics were masterly ... Their junior leadership was much superior to that of the Americans, perhaps also to that of the British ... Throughout the Second World War, wherever British or American troops met the Germans in anything like equal strength, the Germans**

## **German Soldiers of World War II: Why They Were the Best, and Why They Still Lost**

**prevailed. They possessed an historic reputation as formidable soldiers. Under Hitler their army attained its zenith."**

Moreover, Hastings points out, the German military fought with equipment and weapons that were usually better than those of their adversaries. **"Weapon for weapon and tank for tank, even in 1944, its equipment decisively outclassed that of the Allies in every category save artillery and transport,"** he writes. Even during the war's final years, "the Allied leaders invited their ground troops to fight the Wehrmacht with equipment inferior in every category save artillery and transport. German machine-guns, mortars, machine-pistols, antitank weapons and armored personnel carriers were all superior to those of Britain and America. Above all, Germany possessed better tanks." / 10

**Throughout the war, the German soldiers' performance remained unequalled. "... The Americans, like the British, never matched the extraordinary professionalism of the German soldier,"** Hastings writes. "Few Allied soldiers saw themselves for a moment as other than civilians temporarily in uniform, while their German counterparts possessed an uncanny ability to transform themselves from butchers and bank clerks into natural tacticians. One of the more absurd propaganda clichés of the war was the image of the Nazi soldier as an inflexible squarehead. **In reality, the German soldier almost invariably showed far greater flexibility on the battlefield than his Allied counterpart ... The inescapable truth is that Hitler's Wehrmacht was the outstanding fighting force of World War II, one of the greatest in history."** / 11

After the war, Winston Churchill commented on the conflict more truthfully than he had while it still raged. In his memoirs, he compared the record of British and German forces in the Norway campaign of April-June 1940 -- the first time during World War II that soldiers of those two nations faced each other in combat. **"The superiority of the Germans in design, management and energy were plain,"** Churchill wrote. **"At Narvik a mixed and improvised German force barely six**

## German Soldiers of World War II: Why They Were the Best, and Why They Still Lost

thousand strong held at bay for six weeks some twenty thousand Allied troops, and, though driven out of the town, lived to see them depart ... The Germans traversed in seven days the road from Namsos to Mosjoen which the British and French had declared impassable ... We, who had the command of the sea and could pounce anywhere on an undefended coast, were out-paced by the enemy moving by land across very large distances in the face of every obstacle. In this Norwegian encounter, some of our finest troops, the Scots and Irish Guards, were baffled by the vigour, enterprise and training of Hitler's young men." / 12

High-ranking British military figures were similarly impressed with the skill, tenacity and daring of their adversaries. **"Unfortunately we are fighting the best soldiers in the world - what men!"** exclaimed Lt. Gen. Sir Harold Alexander, commander of the 15th Army Group in Italy, in a March 1944 report to London. One of General Montgomery's ablest staff officers, Brig. Frank Richardson, later said of the German soldiers he and his comrades faced: "I have often wondered how we ever beat them." / 13

Similar views were shared by front-line soldiers on both sides of the conflict. Italian artillery lieutenant Eugenio Conti, who was deployed along with units of other European nations in the savage fighting on the Eastern front in the Winter of 1942-43, later recalled: "I ... asked myself ... what would have become of us without the Germans. I was reluctantly forced to admit that alone, we Italians would have ended up in enemy hands ... I ... thanked heaven that they were with us there in the column ... Without a shadow of a doubt, as soldiers they have no equal." / 14 A US Army officer who fought in Belgium in late 1944, Lt. Tony Moody, later spoke about how he and other American GIs had regarded their adversaries: **"We felt the Germans were much better trained, better equipped, a better fighting machine than us."** / 15

## German Soldiers of World War II: Why They Were the Best, and Why They Still Lost

Even during the final weeks of the war, when the outlook was gloomy indeed, Hitler's men continued to battle with astonishing verve -- as a Soviet intelligence report of March 1945, acknowledged: **"Most German soldiers realize the hopelessness of their country's situation after the January advances, though a few still express faith in German victory. Yet there is no sign of a collapse in enemy morale. They are still fighting with dogged persistence and unbroken discipline."** / 16

Milovan Djilas was a senior figure in Tito's anti-German partisan army, and after the war served in high-level posts in Yugoslavia. Looking back, he recalled the German soldiers' endurance, steadfastness and skill as they slowly retreated from rugged mountainous areas under the most daunting conditions: **"The German army left a trail of heroism ... Hungry and half naked, they cleared mountain landslides, stormed the rocky peaks, carved out bypasses. Allied planes used them for leisurely target practice. Their fuel ran out ... In the end they got through, leaving a memory of their martial manhood."** / 17

However better the training, dedication and resourcefulness of Germany's fighting men may have been, and however higher the quality of their tanks, machine guns and other equipment, none of that was enough to offset the great quantitative superiority of their enemies.

Despite limited resources, and especially a persistent shortage of petroleum, as well as other formidable challenges, the German nation and their leaders showed extraordinary organizational ability, inventiveness and adaptability in 1942, 1943 and 1944 in utilizing the available human and materiel resources to dramatically increase production of high-quality weapons and equipment. But during that same period, the Soviet Union and the United States harnessed their much more abundant natural resources and manpower reserves to turn out far greater quantities of weapons, ships, bombers, fighter planes, tanks and artillery.

Above all, the major Allied powers had vastly larger numbers of men to send into battle, and many more people to deploy at home to support

## German Soldiers of World War II: Why They Were the Best, and Why They Still Lost

the war effort. (Contrary to Hollywood's portrayal of World War II, Soviet forces did much more than those of the US to defeat Germany. Some 80 percent of Germany's armed forces were destroyed by the Soviets.) / 18

It was the superiority of numbers that was ultimately decisive. The Second World War in Europe was a victory of quantity over quality.

Even as their nation endured ever more crushing privation, destruction and suffering, and as their cities were being pounded into ruins, **German fighting men at the front, backed by their people at home, displayed tremendous dedication, discipline and resourcefulness in defiantly withstanding the quantitatively superior might of great enemy powers.**

This point was underscored in the somber final German armed forces communique, issued on May 9, 1945: / 19 *"In the end the German armed forces succumbed with honor to enormous superiority. Loyal to his oath, the German soldier's performance in a supreme effort for his people can never be forgotten. To the last, the homeland supported him with all its strength in an effort entailing the heaviest sacrifices. The unique performance of the front and homeland will find its final recognition in a later, just judgment of history. The enemy, too, will not deny his respect for the achievements and sacrifices of German soldiers on land, at sea, and in the air."*

### Endnotes

1. Max Hastings, "Their Wehrmacht Was Better Than Our Army," The Washington Post, May 5, 1985 (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1985/05/05/the-ir-wehrmacht-was-better-than-our-army/0b2cfe73-68f4-4bc3-a62d-7626f6382dbd> ). In the popular weekly American television show

## **German Soldiers of World War II: Why They Were the Best, and Why They Still Lost**

“Combat!” (1962 to 1967), a small unit of US soldiers deployed in France in 1944 routinely and easily killed larger groups of unimaginative German troops. In every single episode of the popular US television sitcom “Hogan’s Heroes” (1965-1971), World War II Germans, and especially German military personnel, were portrayed as timid, easily fooled and cowardly, while the Allied soldiers, especially Americans, were always smart, resourceful and creative.

2. Churchill radio address of June 22, 1941. Quoted in: Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, volume 3/ “The Grand Alliance” (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950), p. 371.
3. This assessment of Trevor N. Dupuy first appeared in his book *A Genius for War: The German Army and the General Staff, 1807-1945* (1977), pp. 253-254. An updated summary of his work on the subject is in: Trevor N. Dupuy, David L. Bongard and R. C. Anderson, Jr., *Hitler’s Last Gamble* (1994), Appendix H (pages 498-501). This quotation of Dupuy is given in: Max Hastings, *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy* (New York: 1984), pp. 184, 326 (n. 30); John Mosier, *Deathride: Hitler vs. Stalin, 1941- 1945* (Simon & Schuster, 2010), pp. 443-444 (note 48);
4. Max Boot, *War Made New* (New York: 2006), p. 462. See also pp. 238, 553.
5. Ben H. Shepherd, *Hitler’s Soldiers: The German Army in the Third Reich* (Yale University Press, 2016), pp. 524, 87, 396, 525.
6. Ben H. Shepherd, *Hitler’s Soldiers* (2016), pp. 87, xi.
7. Ben H. Shepherd, *Hitler’s Soldiers* (2016), pp. 87, 437.
8. Ben H. Shepherd, *Hitler’s Soldiers* (2016), pp. 533, xiii.
9. Max Hastings, *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy* (New York: 1984), p. 24, 315-316.
10. M. Hastings, *Overlord* (1984), p. 24; M. Hastings, “Their Wehrmacht Was Better Than Our Army,” *The Washington Post*, May 5, 1985.

## **German Soldiers of World War II: Why They Were the Best, and Why They Still Lost**

11. M. Hastings, "Their Wehrmacht Was Better Than Our Army," The Washington Post, May 5, 1985.
12. Winston Churchill, The Second World War, volume 1/"The Gathering Storm" (Boston: 1948), pp. 582-583.
13. Max Hastings, Inferno: The World at War, 1939-1945 (New York: 2012 ), pp. 512, 520.
14. M. Hastings, Inferno (2012), p. 312. Source cited: Eugenio Conti, Few Returned: 28 Days on the Russian Front, Winter 1942-1945 (1997), p. 138.
15. M. Hastings, Inferno (2012), p. 572.
16. M. Hastings, Inferno (2012), p. 594.
17. M. Hastings, Inferno, pp. 586-587. Source cited: Milovan Djilas, Wartime (1980), p. 446.
18. B. H. Liddel Hart, History of the Second World War (New York: 1971), pp. 257, 486, 487, 710; Ben H. Shepherd, Hitler's Soldiers (2016), pp. 245, 328-329; M. Hastings, Inferno (2012), pp. 315, 351, 369.
19. Final German OKW armed forces communique, May 9, 1945.  
( [http://de.metapedia.org/wiki/Wehrmachtbericht\\_vom\\_9.\\_Mai\\_1945](http://de.metapedia.org/wiki/Wehrmachtbericht_vom_9._Mai_1945)  
)