MANSTEIN, THE BATTLE OF KHARKOV,  
AND THE LIMITS OF COMMAND

Robert M. Citino

I. Introduction

As I contemplate the scholarly career and impressive body of work of Dennis Showalter, I find myself thinking about the nature of history itself, of the relationship between personality and the impersonal phenomena that are said to determine how things unfold. No military historian has been as adept as Showalter at analyzing both sides of this equation. He knows his battles and leaders as well as anyone, and can “throw down,” as our students say, on the details of battle, campaign, and strategy. At the same time, he is the best military sociologist around. No one can better trace the relationship of armies to the societies that spawn them and the matrix of factors that turns some forces into sharks and others into their bait.

In this, as in so many other things, Showalter has been anything but typical. Military history, by and large, is still wedded to the role of personality. Armies, doctrines, “ways of war,” competing socio-economic systems and political ideologies: we all recognize that they have a role to play, of course, and often a very important one. As a collective, however, we continue to look to the individual—usually, of course “the man”—who at some crucial moment managed to bend an unruly battlefield situation to his will. It might involve a commander shifting a reserve division to a crucial spot on the battlefield; or identifying a critical enemy weakness that he is then able to exploit; or devising a bold stratagem that transforms a hopeless situation; or being aggressive enough to take advantage of fleeting opportunities when they offer themselves. Indeed, add those four items together—clever planning, skillful maneuver, the ability to take things in at a glance and see what must be done (Napoleon’s famous coup d’œil), and an innate sense of aggression, and you have a decent taxonomy of the term “genius,” or at least what military historians usually mean when they employ the term.
No matter how sophisticated the analysis, therefore, we still tend to look to the man. We can take into account the differences in military systems between the Prussians and the Franco-Imperial Army in 1757, for example, parsing matters of soldierly motivation, variances in training, and the different societies out of which they sprung, as Showalter did so expertly in *The Wars of Frederick the Great*, but we still tend to say that Frederick the Great “won” the battle of Rossbach. And indeed, there is some truth to the claim. The steady calm when he realized the French were trying to slip around his left flank, the rapidity with which he had his army break camp and head to the east, the ease with which his well drilled cavalry outpaced their adversary, and then finally the culminating maneuver down onto the point of the Franco-Imperial column, literally “crossing their T” and riding over them before they were fully deployed: well, let’s just say there was a reason his contemporaries decided to dub Frederick “the Great.”

We can quibble with this particular *Rossbach-Bild*, of course. It was General Friedrich von Seydlitz who commanded the Prussian cavalry, not Frederick, and the *brio* of both the top-speed ride and the great charge itself may belong as much to the general as it did to the King. The Franco-Imperial army, with a dual-hatted leadership and a polyglot rank and file, was a command and control implosion waiting to happen. The French were tied to a logistics train a hundred miles long, burdened not just with the traditional military *impedimenta*, but with wigs and perfumes and cognac and silk stockings and every manner of creature comforts, and as a result any maneuver they tried to make was probably going to be too slow. All these things are true. And yet, Rossbach seems destined forevermore to be one of the battles trotted out when historians want to discuss Frederick’s greatness.

It is much the same with other alleged examples of battlefield genius: Robert E. Lee at Chancellorsville; Helmuth von Moltke (the Elder) at Königgrätz; Napoleon at Arcola or Ulm or Austerlitz or Friedland or any number of his other battles. Certainly we can say that there were systemic factors at work in all these decisive victories. Lee had a gifted subordinate commander, General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson, whose

---