New and Recent German Books on Technology and War in the Age of the World Wars

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The first book the author ever reviewed as a young historian, back in 1983, was a book on military and technology: Oswald, Werner: *Kraftfahrzeuge und Panzer der Reichswehr, Wehrmacht und Bundeswehr. Katalog der deutschen Militärfahrzeuge von 1900 bis heute*, Stuttgart 1982. After explaining the book, I ended the review on the note that the book propagated a naive, exclusively technical picture of modern war. Those were the days when war was in fact portrayed largely as a conflict of military technologies, and when such technology could easily be portrayed without any reference to the havoc it might wreak. In fact, the book was a good – or bad – example of the kind of books on military technology which dominated then.

At that time, academic military history did not trouble itself much with questions of technology. A closer look at the groundbreaking, ten-volume series “Germany and the Second World War” reveals that questions of technology are practically never mentioned. The development of modern jet propulsion engines, rocket technology, modern submarines or diesel-driven tanks do not seem to have had any impact on the course of the war, not to mention nuclear weapons.¹

It was only after the archival records had been returned to Germany during the late 1960s that academic, source-based research became possible. For many years, the German discourse about World War II military history was centered around the Wehrmacht’s role in the crimes committed during the war. For a long time, this precluded more distanced analyses, including questions concerning the role of technology. In fact, much of this new work

¹ See *Germany and the Second World War*, ed. by the Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, 10 volumes, Oxford: 1990–.
came into Germany only through the Anglo-American market. It is may be indicative that a book such as Neufeld, Michael J.: *The Rocket and the Reich. Peenemünde and the Coming of the Ballistic Missile Era*, New York: Free Press 1995, should be published first in the United States, and later (1999) in a German translation. This was the first major academic book which looks into the German rocket development in several contexts, specifically its part in the concentration camp system, its military value and economic cost, and its contribution to technological development.

In fact, technology became part of the academic discourse first and foremost from the realms of economic history and from war crimes, taking into focus the interaction between these fields. A book in question would be the dissertation by Peter, Roland: *Rüstungspolitik in Baden. Kriegswirtschaft und Arbeitseinsatz in einer Grenzregion im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Munich: 1995, which presented a regional case study on World War II economy and forced labour, but it did not refer to the technological side of the war industry. Another book in this line deals with a very different aspect of war technology: Foedowitz, Michael: *Bunkerwelten. Luftschutzanlagen in Norddeutschland*, Berlin: 1998, which discusses not military technology, but the development of technologies to protect civilians as well as the government and party infrastructures from Allied bombing raids.

A changing approach is discernible in a book which had been published a few years previously: Schabel, Ralf: *Die Illusion der Wunderwaffen. Die Rolle der Düsenflugzeuge und Flugabwehrkaten in der Rüstungspolitik des Dritten Reichs*, ibid. 1993. This book approaches its subject from the economic and industrial angle, but it goes on to explain the technological developments during World War II which affected both the conduct of the air war, the industry and the overall national economy. As an aside: Karl-Heinz Frieser’s seminal book about the German campaign in France in 1940, Frieser, Karl-Heinz, with John T. Greenwood: *The Blitzkrieg Legend. The 1940 campaign in the West*, Annapolis, Md. 2005, lists among the reasons for the French defeat not only the superior German operational thinking. The authors explain in great detail the different tank technologies, and their basis in the respective pre-war concepts of modern mobile warfare. While Frieser’s book is primarily an operational study and a battlefield history, it does have parts which represent the interaction between technology and warfare.

The book by Kehrt, Christian: *Moderne Krieger. Die Technikerfahrungen deutscher Militärpiloten 1910-1945*, Paderborn: 2010, deserves to be presented more prominently. This highly successful doctoral thesis from Darmstadt Technical University starts with the assumption that military pilots had to