

A Man-Made Myth in the West:

Examining Erwin Rommel and the Myth of a Clean Wehrmacht

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Erwin Johannes Eugen Rommel (1891-1944) is one of the more mainstream and famous German Field Marshals during and after WW2. He participated in many military operations, but his most popular is, without a doubt, his command of the Afrika Korps in WW2. However, discussing Rommel without acknowledging the immense and dense propaganda and almost deification of him as a general would be foolish as his perception, especially in the West, is undoubtedly contaminated by propaganda that ran rampant for decades. This research paper aims to examine and analyze the role that Erwin Rommel played in promoting the myth of the Clean Wehrmacht through the actions of the West attempting to deify and elevate his status for many reasons like explaining the initial catastrophe in Northern Africa to many other reasons like to restore the image of Germany for the people of the West due to the onset of the Cold War.

To understand one of the main reasons Rommel received such status through propaganda, it is pertinent to examine the situation in North Africa during WW2. By the end of June 1942, the Allies had suffered great defeats and setbacks in their attempts to defend and attack Rommel and his forces in Northern Africa, with failure in both Operation Battle Ax and 'Crusader,' as well as the cities of Gazala and Tobruk exchanging hands to the Germans.¹ The series of events were devastating, and an embarrassment for the British specifically, who "seemed to be in control"² of the situation in North Africa before the Germans miraculously reversed the situation. Reuth gives more context and writes:

Of course Churchill did not want to publicly admit that he did not have enough troops there...In order to justify British reverses in Northern Africa he found it useful to portray the German general as a virtual superman. They were dealing with an 'extraordinarily bold and clever opponent, a great field commander'...Churchill said in the commons.³

¹ Khanna, "Art of Generalship," pgs. 11-20.

² Ralf Georg Reuth, *Rommel: The End of a Legend* (Haus Publishing, 2009), pg. 141.

³ Reuth, *Rommel: The End of a Legend*, pgs. 141-142.

It is much better for public perception to be defeated by a great enemy than to be defeated because of incompetence and lack of readiness. This was the sentiment of those responsible for Northern Africa and also a leading reason why such praises were given to Rommel. Such a thing wasn't the first time either, as even before Churchill gave that speech, Rommel had "become the German General best known to the British public" and "wrung grudging praise and almost daily headlines from the British press."⁴ In this instance, praise of Rommel was substituted to placate the British people of the failure of the higher-ups. Sadkovich summarized this point when he writes:

To question Rommel's achievements is not only to question Rommel and German superiority in war, it is to question Winston Churchill - who kept his job in part by blaming his errors on Rommel - and to call into question the competence of British commanders in the Mediterranean theatre.⁵

It is this point that undoubtedly drives a sizable chunk of Rommel's propaganda in the West, at least pushed by the British and the Allies by this point and after the war.

A counterpoint to be made about the previous point could be made simply about the aftermath of the fierce struggle in Northern Africa. If it was being used as an excuse for British failures, why would it continue after Montgomery defeated Rommel? The simple answer is that the image that was built of Rommel being "a kind of magician or bogey-man to our troops"⁶ made for a good story of triumph over the British who defeated, in the minds of the public, a brilliant and dashing knight-like general.

⁴ Reuth, *Rommel: The End of a Legend*, pg. 140.

⁵ James J. Sadkovich, "Of Myths and Men: Rommel and the Italians in North Africa, 1940-1942," *The International History Review* 13, no. 2 (1991), pg. 286 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40106368>.

⁶ Khanna, "Art of Generalship," pg. 11.

Another big perpetrator of the Erwin Rommel propaganda that was later used in the clean Wehrmacht myth is no doubt Desmond Young and his book, *Rommel: The Desert Fox*, whose portrayal of Rommel was nothing but praises of his character and seemed to not touch upon any of the negative connotations surrounding Rommel. Young wrote regarding the rumors of Rommel's connection with the Nazi party:

The truth is less highly coloured. Rommel was, from first to last, a regular officer and... from the day he joined his regiment to the day he died, he was never off the strength of the German Army. He never belonged to the Free Corps, he was never a policeman, he was never a member of the Nazi Party, still less a storm-trooper, and his connection with Hitler came about quite fortuitously.⁷

Although mostly true to my knowledge, Young's depiction and description of Rommel does sound as if he attempts to separate Rommel and the Nazi party in a way as to suggest that because he wasn't a part of the Nazi party officially, it meant Rommel was excused from the heinous war crimes committed by the party. It's also pertinent to discuss Young's potential bias with his book on Rommel as Young had seen the general himself and, in the book, wrote of the encounter in which he refuses to comply with a Wehrmacht officer:

Then the officer who spoke English turned to me. 'The general rules,' he said sourly, 'that if you do not choose to obey the order I have just given you, you cannot be compelled to do so.' I looked at the general and saw, as I thought, the ghost of a smile. At any rate his intervention seemed to be worth a salute. I cut him one before I stepped back into the ranks to be driven off into captivity.⁸

⁷ Desmond Young, *Rommel, the Desert Fox* (HarperCollins Publishers, 1950), pg. 26.

⁸ Young, *Rommel, the Desert Fox*, pg. 15.

It is impossible to confirm if such an event truly happened or transpired the way Young had written it down, even if it is true. Such an event is a potential variable for Young's opinion to be biased based on his good experience with Rommel. Young's book was a best seller and was incredibly popular, even being adapted into a film in 1951 called "*The Desert Fox*." Patrick Major says:

One film in particular had a catalytic effect... The movie took great pains to show a chivalrous mutual respect between *Afrika Korps* and Eighth Army. Both sides' troops are treated in each other's dressing stations; the screen Rommel tears up Führer orders to execute Allied commandos; and he treats prisoners-of-war according to the Geneva convention. At one point a captured British officer, who spots the legendary figure from a distance, salutes him as one officer to another. This incident was allegedly based on fact, and the officer playing himself was Brigadier Desmond Young.⁹

The film seemed aimed to rehabilitate the image of the Wehrmacht for the British public to be more of an "honourable Wehrmacht."¹⁰ Like its book counterpart, the film promotes this clean version of the Wehrmacht, showing the conflict in North Africa as if it were two knights dueling in the desert. Whilst there were people who wrote good reviews about the film, many others like Richard Crossman had their complaints. Crossman writes:

As a nation, we deceive ourselves into believing that there are two sorts of Germans — Good Germans and Bad Germans. The 'Bad Germans' are militarists, Nazis, anti-democratic, and perpetrators of atrocities. The 'Good Germans' are peace-loving democrats and real gentlemen. Ergo, since Rommel was a clean fighter, he must have

⁹ P. Major, "'Our Friend Rommel': The Wehrmacht as 'Worthy Enemy' in Postwar British Popular Culture," *German History* 26, no. 4 (October 1, 2008): p. 521, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghn049>.

¹⁰ Major, "'Our Friend Rommel': The Wehrmacht as 'Worthy Enemy' in Postwar British Popular Culture," pg. 521

been anti-Nazi, and men like him would make good allies of democracy against the Russians.¹¹

Like the book, the film seemed to be attempting to disillusion and separate the image of the Nazi from Rommel, which, no matter how much Young would like to distance Rommel from the Nazi party, is almost impossible. At the end of Crossman's quote, he even mentions the point that this was only being done to make it more digestible for the public to accept and trust Germany once again in an effort to combat the USSR in the Cold War, which had started by the time the film was released.

Rommel's conduct in war is also very much up for debate as questions arise about his treatment of prisoners of war in France and Jewish people in Northern Africa. Both sides have a sizable amount of people who would argue for one over the other, which exploration would require more words than can be afforded in this paper, but is most definitely an interesting point to think about and keep in mind. However, to those who deny entirely that Rommel would ever commit such things, David Stone writes:

Some instances of the ill-treatment of prisoners-of-war occurred during the campaign against France...including several cases of the summary execution of French prisoners by army units...similar acts had also been perpetrated by soldiers of Rommel's 7th panzer division on 5 June against the defenders of Le Quesnoy. Rommel noted in his own account of the action that 'any enemy troops were wiped out or forced to withdraw'¹²

¹¹ Richard Crossman, *Picture Post*, 1 Apr. 1950, p. 41, quoted in P. Major, "'Our Friend Rommel': The Wehrmacht as 'Worthy Enemy' in Postwar British Popular Culture," *German History* 26, no. 4 (October 1, 2008): p. 524, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghn049>.

¹² David Stone, *Hitler's Army, 1939-1945: The Men, Machines and Organization* (Minneapolis, Mn: Zenith Press, 2009), pg. 103.

Stone's words make it clear that Rommel's hands aren't clean or as clean as someone like Young might quite like to believe what was being said and released about the general. There is a counterargument to be made here that war is inherently messy and that no general can truly be clean of the acts of his soldiers. Still, even so, with the hero worship and deification that was being done for Rommel, it is crucial for people to ground themselves to distinguish truth from illusion.

Another interesting counterpoint to be made is Rommel's participation in the attempted assassination of Hitler in the 20 July plot showed that he originally never agreed with Hitler and that he embodied this idea of a "good German." David Stone writes that Rommel "had not been directly involved in the plot," although he was still forced to commit suicide all the same.¹³ It is also more probable that Rommel was disillusioned with Hitler as Germany was very likely poised to lose the war entirely. After all, Rommel's attitude to Hitler before the plot could reasonably be described as "worshipful" and that "he was not apolitical."¹⁴

Without a doubt, Rommel has been the subject of a campaign to champion him as this hero and knight-like figure to paint the Wehrmacht in a better light. People like Young seem to attempt to separate Rommel away from the Nazi party even though the general and field marshal was very much intrinsically tied to Hitler and the Nazi party. This paper obviously could not dive into every nuance of Erwin Rommel's matter and his representation and actual conduct during his time in World War II. Still, it is clear that people ought to be mindful of what previous media or connotations might have been associated with the man whose exact reputation is still being debated about this day.

¹³ Stone, *Hitler's Army, 1939-1945 : The Men, Machines and Organization*, pg. 49.

¹⁴ Robert M Citino, "Rommel's Afrika Korps," HistoryNet, May 3, 2012, <https://www.historynet.com/rommels-afrika-korps/?f>.

Bibliography

Citino, Robert M. "Rommel's Afrika Korps." HistoryNet, May 3, 2012.

<https://www.historynet.com/rommels-afrika-korps/?f>.

A succinct summary of Rommel and his Afrika Korps. This source especially highlights and emphasizes the myth of Rommel when discussing about the many things that occurred during the North Africa campaign.

Major, P. "'Our Friend Rommel': The Wehrmacht as 'Worthy Enemy' in Postwar British Popular Culture." *German History* 26, no. 4 (October 1, 2008): 520–35.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghn049>.

An informative source on the narrative of "Our Friend Rommel" in British media and culture, tracing it back to the beginning and to various other sources. Major presents both sides but is no doubt pointing out this narrative.

Khanna, K K. *Art of Generalship*. Vij Books India Pvt Ltd, 2015.

A short and succinct summary of Erwin Rommel that focuses mainly on his ability as a general and leader. It discusses his many achievements and battles in North Africa with a clear timeline, particularly with some informative photos of the battles and movements done by Rommel.

Ralf Georg Reuth. *Rommel: The End of a Legend*. Haus Publishing, 2009.

A book that seems to lean more into the whole myth of Erwin Rommel and the whole illusion of a clean Wehrmacht. Provides a nice overview of Rommel and his life as well as a nice commentary on the reasons people like Churchill said what they said about Rommel.

Sadkovich, James J. "Of Myths and Men: Rommel and the Italians in North Africa, 1940-1942." *The International History Review* 13, no. 2 (1991): 284–313.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40106368>.

Similar to Reuth, Sadkovich was very much leaning into the idea and trying to disillusion the myth of Rommel. The article was very much about accomplishing that while touching upon some other things that happened during the North Africa campaign.

Young, Desmond. *Rommel, the Desert Fox*. HarperCollins Publishers, 1950.

A biography that was used as the source material and inspiration for an even more relevant movie that highlights how one part of the myth of Rommel came to be. It is very generous with its praises and accounts of Rommel and depicts him generally in a good light and as a “good German.”