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# TRENDS IN WEHRMACHT MORALE

BY M. I. GURFEIN AND MORRIS JANOWITZ

*Surveys of German prisoners of war made shortly after they were captured reveal that the ideology of the German soldier remained singularly steadfast throughout the war, despite the overwhelming superiority of Allied military strength. Loyalty to Hitler and belief in secret weapons buoyed morale almost to the end. The pattern of collapse did not manifest itself strongly until February and March, 1945, two months before V-E Day.*

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In order to guide combat propaganda teams in their leaflet and loudspeaker missions and to direct strategic psychological warfare against the Wehrmacht, the Psychological Warfare Division of SHAEF, under Brigadier General Robert A. McClure, undertook a continuing study of the fighting morale of the enemy's troops. The study, expanding the work started in North Africa and Italy, represented, perhaps for the first time in warfare, an attempt to evaluate trends by procuring and analyzing comparable data.<sup>1</sup>

Main reliance was placed on the systematic analysis of front line interrogations of captured prisoners as well as detailed psychological interviews gathered in rear areas, the results of which were systematically evaluated. Materials gleaned from captured enemy documents, reports of secret agents, recaptured Allied military personnel and the observations of front line combat observers were also evaluated. As an adjunct, a monthly statistical survey of attitudes among captured German soldiers was undertaken. This article summarizes the main trend conclusions of this statistical opinion poll.<sup>2</sup>

The main findings underlined the conclusion that the ideology of the "average" German soldier remained singularly steadfast. Hitler—personification of evil to the democratic world—for example, held the loyalties of more than 50 percent of his army through the defeats of 1944 and until March 1945, two months before V-E Day. Belief in secret weapons was also a source of vital strength. On the other hand, although the German army fought hard until the end, as early as June and July 1944 less than half of the prisoners of war thought

<sup>1</sup> The systematic study of Wehrmacht morale for psychological warfare purposes owes its origin to the work of Lt. Col. Harry Dicks, psychiatrist, Royal Army Medical Corps, and Prof. Edward Shils, Department of Sociology, University of Chicago. Early in 1944, they prepared basic papers on the subject and outlined the goals of research which were followed up during the military operations in Western Europe.

<sup>2</sup> Elmo Wilson, Heinz Ansbacher, Hazel Gaudet, of the Office of War Information, and Major Donald McGranahan were active in launching this survey. Max Ralis was largely responsible for the collecting and processing of the data.

A similar survey was undertaken by Lt. Col. Martin F. Herz in Italy, for the Psychological Warfare Branch, 5th U.S. Army.

that they could eject the Allies from France. Reverses in the fortunes of battle and the deterioration of the conditions of life at the front were reflected in further depression in the German soldiers' expectation of victory. This pointed to the wisdom of non-ideological lines of attack on the psychological warfare front.

### **Stimmung vs. Haltung**

Aside from the technical difficulties involved in measuring prisoner of war opinion, it has become a commonplace among those who worked in psychological warfare against the Germans, that attitudes encountered before or after capture bore only a limited relationship to fighting behavior under combat conditions. The practical difficulties of surrender in modern battle, the habit of automatic obedience and the Nazi terror sustained a fighting effectiveness often unrelated to morale. The Nazis themselves emphasize the sharp distinction between Stimmung (Attitude) and Haltung (Behavior). It was felt, however, that, in strategic terms, sharp deviations from the established norm of attitudes would give the clue to disintegration. And, in fact, the clue was found prior to the last spring offensive, before which there had been no sharp deviation in attitude and, correspondingly, few large scale surrenders.

The conclusions from the attitude data gathered through statistical polling procedures, which this report sets forth, should not, however, be taken as the pattern of the collapse of the Wehrmacht. These polls must be viewed in conjunction with the more important mass of documents collected and prepared on the Wehrmacht as an integral fighting organization and as a social and

psychological entity. The evaluation of this material still remains as a future task.

### **Method Employed**

A write-in questionnaire, preceded by a standardized introductory talk, was administered to periodic random samples of prisoners of war collected at transit cages. This was necessitated by limitations of personnel and by field conditions. Such a procedure gave continuing samples of prisoners, rather than of the enemy army itself.<sup>3</sup> But, since the results of the questionnaire were considered only on a trend basis, it was possible to analyze important shifts in opinion, which should reflect important changes in attitude in the Wehrmacht itself.

The validity of the replies was dependent on two unique factors. First, the prisoners were almost wholly unfamiliar with the procedures of write-in questionnaires. Second, they who had been living for twelve years under Nazi controls might have become psychologically inhibited from stating their true opinions. Thus, Nazis might tend to hide their Nazism, and members of the non-political center might tend to exaggerate their anti-Nazism. To meet these difficulties, (1) a standard set of detailed instructions for filling out the questionnaires was administered to each sample. Spot checks revealed that the prisoners were making only an inconsequential number of errors in the com-

<sup>3</sup> Professional statisticians would certainly be amused at the prospect of being called upon to draw a representative sample of the enemy army from prisoners of war. The exact size and composition of the enemy army was unknown, nor could it be assumed that all those taken prisoner were equal in fighting quality to those who were not captured.

pletion of the forms. (2) Extreme care was taken to overcome resistance to expression of genuine opinion by the use of a standardized introductory talk which emphasized that the poll sought after free independent expression of opinion in line with American traditions and that the identity of the individual prisoner would be protected.<sup>4</sup> Although exact scientific tests were not undertaken to determine any significant differences between answers obtained through direct interrogation techniques with those obtained from questionnaire surveys, extensive matching of the results revealed a high degree of similarity.

### The Theory of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire generally contained about twenty questions, most of them of current interest for psychological warfare. To measure basic attitudes on a trend basis, however, five key questions were used. These questions were selected on the basis of psychological evaluation of the patterns of German thought developed by interrogation. The aim was to select questions which would give not detached, objective answers but which would, rather, reveal a relative adhesion to the German ideological position and propaganda line, both in current belief and in longer term trends.

The key questions were thus selected to reflect: (1) Expectation of Victory, (2) Confidence in the Battle Situation, (3) Belief in Secret Weapons, (4) Fear of Revenge by the Allies (a favorite Goebbels' theme "Strength through Fear") and (5) Faith in Hitler. (See Table No. 1)

### Pattern of Collapse

When viewed as a whole, the five key questions represent strikingly the long

term, relative stability of Wehrmacht attitudes until the beginnings of the final collapse in March 1945. Expectations as to the outcome of the war fluctuated with the success of Allied advances. As to ideological attachments, there was no significant break until February and March 1945, at which point of time significantly large scale surrenders began to occur.

### Expectation of Victory

The hardships of battle, the shock of capture and the sight of vast quantities of military stores and mobile equipment behind our lines limited "after capture" belief in victory among prisoners of war even during the first phases of the Normandy campaign. In June and July only about 40 percent of samples of prisoners of war thought, "It is possible to eject the Allies from France."

But as the campaign progressed expectation of success among prisoners of war deteriorated as the Germans were pushed back across France until a low point of widespread and almost utter defeatism was reached in mid-October.

<sup>4</sup> The stage of their imprisonment at which to administer the poll was not easy to determine. Theoretically, it might have been immediately after capture, or a long time after capture. There was no firm data on the point, but researches in North Africa and Italy had indicated a marked difference in response depending on the time of questioning. It seemed that the shock of capture tended to obscure prevailing attitudes. On the other hand, long incarceration tended to create new post-capture attitudes which were of slight interest. Either Nazi convictions were often strengthened as a result of the persistence of Nazi leadership in the camp or life in a static camp eliminated, among some, all political attitudes. Pragmatic tests indicated that by a week to two weeks after capture the shock of battle had worn off, while the effects of prison camp life had not yet taken root.

The question naturally presents itself whether the group of prisoners captured in mid-October who were surveyed presented an atypically low morale group or whether the objective situation had deteriorated so as to affect attitudes in this fashion. (Col. 6 of Table 1) Observations at this time indicated no serious

TABLE 1  
TRENDS IN WEHRMACHT MORALE BASED ON WRITE-IN QUESTIONNAIRES

Date of Capture	(1) June 26-28 1944	(2) July 1-17 1944'	(3) Aug. 1-10 1944	(4) Sept. 1-10 1944	(5) Mid- Sept. 1944	(6) Mid- Oct. 1944	(7) Nov. 15-30 1944	(8) Jan. 1-14 1945	(9) March 1945	
Number of Prisoners	363	155	160	643	634	345	453	324	388	
Place of Capture	ST. CHER- BOURG		ST. TON ST. LO	ST. MALO to LE MANS	METZ- NANCY Region	WEST FRONT	WEST FRONT	AA- CHEN- WEST FRONT	WEST FRONT	
QUESTIONS	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Do you trust the Fuehrer?	Yes No N.A.	67 18 15	57 27 16	68 17 15	65 19 16	60 24 16	42 43 15	64 22 14	62 30 8	31 52 17
Do you think it is possible to eject the Allies from France?	Yes No N.A.	42 38 20	37 49 14	49 29 22	27 51 22	— — —	— — —	51 30 19	39 47 14	10* 83* 7*
Do you believe that Germany is winning the war?	Yes No N.A.	— — —	— — —	52 11 37	38 39 23	46 33 21	28 57 15	50 27 23	44 42 14	11 78 11
Do you believe that revenge will be taken against the population of Germany after the war?	Yes No N.A.	16 75 9	13 81 6	36 51 13	28 61 11	21 67 12	18 74 8	— — —	— — —	— — —
Do you believe that Germany still has war decisive "Secret Weapons"?	Yes No N.A.	37 35 28	44 37 19	66 15 19	49 37 20	48 32 20	33 52 15	53 29 18	47 40 13	14 77 9

Note: \*Question on March 1945: "Do you think it is possible to eject the Allies from Western Germany?"

divergence in the type of prisoner in this randomly selected sample from earlier or later samples. The events of the late September drive which took the Allied armies to the borders of Germany had apparently caused this serious fall in German expectations.

The sharp rise in November troop morale similarly reflects the stabilization which set in after we failed to follow up what theretofore appeared a vast strategic retreat of the German army. (Col. 7, Table 1) This feeling grew in large measure out of the relative security of a temporarily stabilized front, and a sky partly free of Allied aircraft grounded by bad weather. Their conceptions of victory also underwent revision and meant in large measure an absence of total defeat. Nevertheless the degree of recovery reflects faithfully the Wehrmacht's ability to effect as complete a defense as was technically feasible.

In January (Col. 8), expectation started to decline when the tonic of temporary advance after many months of retreat began to wear off. When the failure of the offensive was clear to the troops, Germany's psychological reserves became exhausted. In the spring of 1945, critical defeatism set in as the final combined two-front assault against the Fatherland developed. It was a defeatism which failed to develop into any positive efforts among large groups of soldiers to remove themselves from the battle. Group surrenders were relatively few. However, the troops and even their junior officers once cut off by our armored thrusts surrendered at the first opportunity.

In March, about 10 percent of the prisoners of war sampled still persisted in their belief of continuing the war. They were the fanatical "hard core" on

whom events made no impression and who would have retired into the Bavarian Alps for a last ditch stand if they had been called upon or if it were technically feasible. They were the minority who had held the Wehrmacht intact during the constant defeats of the last months by their willingness to apply sanctions short of nothing.

Early in the Normandy campaign the approximate size of the fanatical "hard core" was first established at this figure of between 10 and 15 percent of the total Wehrmacht. Subsequent events proved that this figure was accurate. Although in the initial period of the Western campaign, the success of Nazi indoctrination gave the impression of much more widespread fanaticism, detailed interrogation made it possible to separate out the minority of "total Nazis." They not only held the full pattern of Nazi ideas—many more than 10 percent did—they held these concepts with a deep religious fervor. They were men who were profoundly shocked by capture, unlike their weaker comrades who, though hopeful of victory, were glad that they themselves had survived the battle.

#### **Faith in Hitler**

Throughout the entire Western campaign, faith in Hitler was expressed by well over fifty percent of the Wehrmacht, with the exception of one particularly low morale group. Many a German soldier although personally despairing in ultimate victory continued to resist vigorously, in part because of devotion to Hitler. Hitler was a man who had done so much good for Germany. He had so clearly shown his affiliation with the interests of the common man, that he would not have continued the

war had he not believed it to be to the best advantage of Germany, politically at least. This ideological prop remained intact throughout the ups and downs of the battle situation and the corresponding changes in optimism as to the outcome of the war. It was only in March, 1945, when the German armies were cut up and at the verge of disintegration that the figure dropped below fifty per cent.

Yet thirty percent still professed confidence in Hitler under these conditions. This was the group composed not alone of hard core Nazi fanatics, but also of devoted followers, who clung to the hope that Hitler in the final moments of the war would produce a political formula which would soften defeat. A clash between the Western Allies and Russia was their main hope. What sort of citizens these soldiers are likely to make under American occupation is easy to estimate.

#### **Belief in Secret Weapons**

Related to ideological faith in Hitler was the positive contribution to morale arising from the belief that Germany *still* had a decisive "Secret Weapon." Belief in the secret weapon reached a peak in August (the V-1 had been employed in June) and propaganda, both official and word of mouth, among the German troops raised expectations for more powerful weapons. Naturally the failure of the secret weapon to materialize during the critical months of the early fall undermined faith. However, it was maintained and even restored once the Wehrmacht made a stand at the borders of Germany. About half of a sample of November prisoners of war professed their faith in secret weapons.

Hope and faith in secret weapons for many of the rank and file soldiers were merely irrational wishful thinking. During the fall and winter, front line life became unbearable. An understanding of the growing strategical hopelessness was dawning in the minds of all but the most unthinking soldiers, or at least, daily operations at the front were demonstrating the hopelessness of his own unit's position as far as replacements, armament and supply were concerned. Under these conditions, the hope of a secret weapon was the only factor that could translate ideological attachments and the unwillingness to face reality into some sort of plausible explanation for continued resistance. As a result many a German soldier held to this belief with fanatical fervor.

For many of the more educated soldiers belief in secret weapons supplied the same need, but was explained on some sort of a rational basis. It reflected their confidence in German industrial genius and inventiveness which would produce the weapons of war—new ones as well as the traditional ones—in such high quality, if not in numbers superior to the Allies, that the tide would ultimately turn.

#### **Fear of Revenge**

In general, fear of revenge against the population of the home front by the Allies was not widespread among captured German soldiers. Affirmative answers given to the question, "Do you believe that revenge will be taken against the population of Germany after the war?" seldom reached more than about 20 percent of the prisoners. Correlation to other key questions showed that they were confirmed Nazis

whose opinions never varied on the subject. Clearly their opinions were fashioned by fear of revenge not only against Germany but also against themselves personally. Countering the German propaganda line, the traditional respect of the broad masses towards the American and British as people of dignity and fair play was at work. To be sure, the figure of expectation of revenge may have been somewhat decreased by the circumstance that the Germans were captives in American hands. This lack of fear of revenge after the war indicates again that an important aspect of motivation for continued resistance came not merely out of the negative fear of defeat and its consequences, but rather an acceptance

of the positive elements of National Socialist doctrine which sought for victory.

The techniques employed, although subject to limitations as indicated, were undertaken for the purpose of determining psychological warfare output to the enemy. The steadfastness with which the German soldier held to his loyalty to Hitler, for example, indicated that a frontal attack on this particular ideological symbol was less likely to succeed than appeals based on non-ideological considerations, e.g., as promise of good treatment and survival through capture. In general, it was found expedient to concentrate on such primary appeals and on the hopelessness of the battle situation.