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# A NAZI WAR CRIMINAL REFLECTS ON THE WAR IN RUSSIA

James J. Weingartner



## INTRODUCTION

The name Joachim (or “Jochen”) Peiper is instantly recognizable to any American with a passing knowledge of World War II. He was the commander of the Waffen-SS battlegroup held responsible for the “Malmédy massacre” of American prisoners of war during Hitler’s Ardennes offensive. At the time of his 1946 trial by a U.S. Army court, he was called “the most hated man in the United States.” Given the crimes of which he was accused – the slaughter of hundreds of POWs and Belgian civilians –this is easy to understand. Less so is the attention that this man- a relatively minor figure in the host of World War II villains-has attracted over the three-quarters of a century since its end. Peiper’s life and career have been the subjects of multiple biographies, some superficial, others the product of prodigious research, and have inspired a stage play by a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright. This is due in part to the notoriety engendered by the much publicized Malmédy massacre, the worst atrocity committed by Nazi Germany against U.S. forces, and the war crimes trial that followed, the most controversial of the many trials conducted by the United States. But it is also the outgrowth of Peiper’s personality, one that some people who came in contact with him including, ironically, Americans, found appealing. He was intelligent and well-read, good-looking (a dead-ringer for the actor Ray Milland, one person who met him thought), and fluent in English, a vital advantage in his interactions with largely monolingual Americans. His mysterious death in a remote French village early on the morning of Bastille Day, 1976, has served to further stimulate public interest in Peiper.

He was both Nazi true believer and soldier. This probably could be said of any officer of the Waffen-SS, an organization intended by *Reichsführer-SS* Heinrich Himmler to be a body of *political* soldiers who were thoroughly imbued with Nazi ideology, but Peiper was special. Born in Berlin the son of a Prussian officer in 1915, he joined the SS at the age of 18 and after graduation from *Junkerschule* (SS officer academy) Braunschweig, was posted to the elite Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler, the Führer’s personal guard regiment, in 1936. As an enthusiastic and socially polished young officer, he caught Himmler’s eye and joined the

*Reichsführer's* personal staff in the summer of 1938, rising to First Adjutant the following year. He was assigned to Hitler's military headquarters for the Polish campaign, but joined the Leibstandarte's combat force for the conquest of the Low Countries and France in the spring of 1940. He returned to Himmler's staff until August 1941, witnessing the initial stages of the Holocaust, before requesting reassignment to the Leibstandarte which was then fighting in Russia. Peiper remained with the Leibstandarte until the end of the war as it evolved into a crack armored division, playing major combat roles on the Eastern and Western fronts, although it was in Russia that Peiper, like the Waffen SS itself, achieved combat maturity. In the Russian vastness the laws of war, fragile enough under the best of circumstances, evaporated in a racially construed campaign of annihilation. It was in that environment that Peiper defined himself as the epitome of the National Socialist warrior – recklessly brave and utterly ruthless.<sup>1</sup>

A long ordeal as accused and, ultimately, convicted war criminal followed his capture by U.S. forces at the end of the war. But Peiper retained sufficient intellectual vigor to write shortly before the trial which would culminate in death sentences for him and forty-two of his men, a fascinating commentary on his combat experiences on the Russian front. The work, dated April 7, 1946, is typed and fills fifteen single-spaced legal-length pages. While he may have originally written the work in German, Peiper had a good working knowledge of English and was quite capable of producing the version which is in that language.

Peiper's American captors had provided him with a desk and typewriter, perhaps in the hope that he would produce something of value to the U.S. Army, or perhaps in order to produce resentment over his favored treatment and a willingness to testify against him among the other defendants.<sup>2</sup> But why did he write it? Perhaps as a diversion from months of captivity, during which conditions of extreme stress alternated with long periods of boredom. Conceivably, too, it may have been related in a more direct way to the trial in which Peiper was the chief defendant. He might well have thought it worthwhile to attempt to demonstrate to his American captors the possession of insights into the Russian war machine which would make his survival as an intelligence source more valuable than his death as a war criminal.

Whatever his motives, Peiper produced a document whose historical value lies at least as much in its exposition of the prejudices and thought-processes of a field-grade officer of an elite Waffen SS division as in its revelations concerning combat on the Eastern Front. Notable are his generally low regard for German troops other than those of the Waffen-SS and his unwillingness, unlike postwar German Army memoirists, to saddle Hitler with responsibility for the failure of the war against Russia. The typical frontline soldiers' contempt for the troops of the rear echelons and the common German tendency to view the Russian soldier as a mysterious and elemental force are evident.

Although Peiper's command of English was excellent, he wrote in a verbose and rambling style with many constructions that seem awkward to the native speaker. Consequently, his text has been substantially condensed and edited, where necessary, to render it into clear English while preserving the flavor of his often florid writing style.

## **BRIEF REVIEW AND REFLECTIONS ABOUT THE BATTLE IN THE RUSSIAN THEATER OF OPERATIONS**

**Joachim Peiper**

The report laid down here is based ... on the experiences of a front-line officer. It reflects my own interpretation and does not claim ... overall validity.

The start of the war in the East ... saw the German Army ... intoxicated with ... the necessity [of waging] a “preventive war.” In spite [of the fact] that one did not know hardly anything about the enemy, we thought we would be able to force the military decision in about three months’ time. Our arrogance [and] also the underestimation of the enemy was typical .... The inner structure [of the army], not grown organically, was like an oversize head on legs of putty and could in no way compare with the Army of World War I ....

The divisions of the Waffen SS were small in numbers and not yet [tested]. They [represented] in every respect an elite. On account of the political reputation attached to them, there existed tension with the Army Command. [They] felt our existence as an innovation without tradition and as a political hazard, and therefore endeavored to wear us down as quickly as possible....

The Ukraine received us as liberators and waited for [our] proclamation of their independence. The shortsighted setup of our civil administration created the enemy in the [rear] ...and was, in my opinion, a decisive error. It is also my [belief] that the backbone of the Soviet Army was broken in the autumn of 1941. If ... German politics and propaganda would have had the same ... impact as the army, the war could have been brought to an end in the same year.... A peace at this time without doubt could have been within reach and also would have ... given us protection in the rear for a one front war in the West.

The incredibly severe winter of the year 1941-1942 forced the German Army to halt the offensive and was the beginning of the end ... The capacity of the extremely poor road net did not suffice ... to satisfy the front lines ... At the time when rear echelon life was gaining ground and constituted the first crystallization points of a moral disintegration which extended its magnetic field up to the troop headquarters, the front line had to be self-sufficient and looked gloomily at the thriving poison flower flourishing in the hinterlands. At an average freezing temperature of -30 Celsius, I remained with my company in the foremost [trenches] without a day of relief. Our winter clothing was almost entirely of Russian origin and the food consisted only of millet. <sup>3</sup>

The year 1942, in spite of apparent successes, had absorbed the last offensive strength of the Army. The Air Force, through long hibernation and high standards of living, had become a gentleman's weapon which lent no ear to the needs of the petty infantry soldier but spoke uneasily of bad flying weather. Since our own propaganda forecasts turned out to be incorrect, the Russians had come through the winter amazingly well and nowhere [could an end] be seen. The first voices of discontent were raised and the seed of disintegration fell on favorable ground. It is my conviction that the Chief of the General Staff was the driving [force] .... [Possessing] a strong caste spirit, he often stood indifferently ... and regarded [developments] more from a scientific than a national viewpoint.<sup>4</sup> As they regarded the Führer from the beginning ... as a political adventurer, many of them felt ... a certain satisfaction without considering that they were sawing the branch on which they themselves were sitting ....

Stalingrad became the moral turning point of the war. Had Paulus (as we all expected...) fought to the last man, the sacrifice in this critical time would have proved itself to the entire Army as an immense moral boost.

... the cruelty of the enemy leadership had up to then forced the German soldier to extreme [exertions] and did not let arise the thought of the possibility of capture. [Since] now a German Field Marshal. And his troops fell into the hands of the Bolsheviks alive and since they also received good treatment judging from the propaganda ..., it was established that the

Bolshevik could also be humane. The Army soldier thus lost to a great extent the fear of capture .... It is superfluous to mention that the Waffen SS did not fall for this siren's song.

The worst [result of Stalingrad] ... was [the] "getting surrounded complex." The local commander...felt henceforth the Stalingrad "Sword of Damocles" float over his head. The fear of getting surrounded as well as a consciousness [of] ... flanks and ... rear became a mania with the German Army. The retrograde movement itself became heroically tinted and [legitimized] by false reports.

[He] who quietly and bravely did his duty caused no comment and in his seclusion remained the fool. [He] ... who did a lot of hollering, making an elephant out of every attacking mouse, was officially commended and on top of it received quick aid in cases of emergency ....

In the course of time the command realized that fifty percent [of front-line reports] should be disregarded. Since ... this procedure had no bearing on the actual situation, many a small honest commander was expected to do tasks which were sheer madness and which had to shake ... [his] confidence in his superior. At first the orders were followed; later on, one was satisfied with the telephone report of fictitious combat ....

Once, upon orders from my commanding general, I had to attack a place which had thirty-two ... anti-tank guns .... I had four Panzer IV's at my disposal .... After attacking three times, each of them had received about fifteen hits .... The panzer generals had taken part in the initial stage of the war in the West as subordinate panzer commanders. They had the delusion that they were still living in that happy period, and did not want to recognize the decisive development of the anti-tank defense. As a matter of fact, due to all this, disobedience spread alongside fictitious reporting. Fictitious reporting and expedient reporting as well as resulting military disobedience were, in my opinion, the causes of the inward decay. The rear echelons demoralized the young reserves passing through .... The actual state of affairs ... did not penetrate ... the wall of the higher headquarters and the decisions of the Fuehrer were thus based on wrong suppositions ....

The old divisions of the Waffen SS, as “fire brigade of the Eastern Front,” rode from one crisis to another.<sup>5</sup> Together with some good tank divisions of the Army, they ... performed amazing deeds. Severity against friend and foe became a necessity for survival and ... human life lost its value.

Germany’s nerves were exhausted by culture and civilization. The efficiency of the cultured Occident lost out against the primitive, instinctive strength of the Asiatic onslaught!

I have not encountered a well-prepared German attack yet ... which did not lay claim to a decisive success .... The extent of the breakthrough was dictated by the bringing up of supplies and the poor road network. An effective pursuit was therefore always strictly limited. As the attack was usually halted with the beginning of darkness, we ... gave the adversary the opportunity ... to organize a new line of resistance .... The Russian himself concedes that this was his salvation in the first year of the war.

The tremendous [extended] front made all sector commanders wish to organize ... a continuous line. [Since] for one division a sector of twenty to thirty kilometers ... was not an unusual occurrence, it is not difficult to compute how thin these positions were .... “He who wants to protect everything protects nothing!” .... By intentionally weakening ... forward positions and by ignoring the resulting gaps, ... a reserve could be created and entrenched in depth. Our infantry companies ... always operated with counterattack reserves of four to six [experienced] men who were able to throw back entire companies of the intruding enemy. If our infantry divisions would always have had an anti-tank battalion (divisional assault gun battalion) as a backbone, it would have resulted in an invaluable stabilization of the front. The panzer divisions committed for the defense had but little infantry at their disposal. However, they possessed ... strong mobile fire power. From this, the development of an “offensive defense” resulted ....

The war, oscillating in great spaces, created the combat team and ... and it received more and more significance. This [was] an independently operating unit of [from] company up to brigade size which, due to its special missions and the great distances which are so difficult to bridge

from a communications point of view, [was] generally self-sufficient. The composition depends on the missions. The ideal form was the armored group which, besides the panzers as backbone, had at its disposal infantry (on armored cars) , artillery (self-propelled) and engineers.<sup>6</sup> This is a composition similar to the panzer brigades which were organized during the last years [of the war]. The open plains of the Ukraine were the right hunting grounds for these units and they ... often accomplished astonishing results far in the rear of the enemy. Decisive here was the personality of the commander. The division commander remained in the background .... [With] virtual elimination of major headquarters sitting in the rear, the brunt of the fighting was ... borne and its course determined by the [machine] gunner, group leader, assault troop leader and combat team commander.

...a few points [concerning German weaponry] deserve to be brought up. The best the infantry had was the MG 42. This unpretentious wonder-weapon free of stoppages is by far the best machine gun known to me.<sup>7</sup> Also outstanding was the 8.8 [ cm or 88 mm] anti-aircraft gun, the heavy infantry gun ( s. I. G. 15cm ) and ... the heavy smoke screen mortar ....<sup>8</sup>

In general it should be noted that we had too many different ... overdeveloped weapons. A panzer division with 150 different kinds of ammunition is in the long run unbearable for the supply system.... Our panzers were superior to all enemy tanks. But here, too, the fancy of the German for complicating became apparent ... which ... had [its] effect on ... output .... [This] required ... the servicing crews to become more and more efficient and competent. Since, however, the crews necessarily had to become worse [less efficient?] as time went by, the standard of technical development during the last two years [of the war failed to match] the performance and knowledge of the crews. The loss of a great numbers of panzers due to faulty servicing had to be the result .... Of the great number of panzers which I lost, three-fifths of them had to be blown up. This is the [result] of ... mechanical failure ....

The race between armor and Pak (anti-tank guns) has without doubt been decided in favor of the latter (if no new steel alloy ... is invented).

Therefore, it appears to me ... senseless to go over a weight of seventy tons.<sup>9</sup> More important than heavy armor are high speed and the covering of great distances.... The present guns are quite ample with the exception of [their] optics. An automatic gear connecting telescopic sight and range-finder [are] required.<sup>10</sup>

The *Panzerjaeger III* ... was our most dependable assault gun. The *Panzerjaeger IV* (7.5 cm gun, length 70 ) introduced in the last year [of the war] was good ...<sup>11</sup> ( I consider the American TD/M10 as superior).<sup>12</sup> I do reject *Jagdpanther* and *Jagdtiger*. They did not prove themselves, in my opinion.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Russians**

I only experienced the "Russian" in time of war. Because of [that] and also on account of the innumerable [component] races ..., it impossible for me to analyze the man as such. Generally, one could only note that his cruelty increased [as] the square of the distance from our Reich border ....

The people are indoctrinated ... politically to such an incredible degree that a comparison with the former regime of the National Socialists is entirely out of place. As a matter of fact, one would have to classify the latter practically as democratic by comparison.

If, at the outset of the offensive, the Waffen SS [considered] itself a well-educated body of troops ... politically, it soon had to realize that, compared to the Russians ... political indoctrination had hardly been touched. This fact certainly was the greatest surprise we experienced at the beginning of the offensive ....

Although uneducated as a rule, the Russian is by no means ... dumb. A master of improvisation, he possesses to an amazing degree the ability [to adapt] himself to situations.... He learns from mistakes and experiences ... one finds in all fields good but one-sided specialists. The leadership of the lower and intermediate commands improved steadily [during] the course of the war. The ability to keep going even on very little and [the] capacity for suffering surpasses our European comprehension. His instinctive

connection with nature ... at night makes him especially dangerous at night and during inclement weather .... The darker the night, the heavier the rain, and the stronger the snow storm, the more [certainly] an attack ... can be expected.

The “political” officers were, according to my experience, always the driving force. [If] these people were absent, the resistance collapsed quickly in most cases. The officers mostly shot themselves prior to capture because they did not dare to go to the rear [and they] were afraid of reprisal measures against their families. Without the ... “shot-in-the-neck system,” the Red Army would have folded up a number of times.<sup>14</sup>

Although a great number of types [of tanks] were developed,...prime importance was placed on the ... T-34 in production and actual use .... If one likes to talk about the decisive weapon of the Eastern Front, then the honors unquestionably have to go to the T-34 ....

As the development of artillery on self-propelled vehicles went hand-in-hand with [that of] the assault guns, a sharp distinction could not be observed .... The enemy considered the ability to cover great distances and high caliber guns of decisive importance. On account of the heavy oil [diesel] motor, they had an immense radius and were capable of detaching themselves for longer period of times from their supply bases. Only [in this way] did they become really dangerous to us. The best model, which appeared at the front only in March 1945, was the assault gun SU 300. Having an operating radius of about 380 km., it has an extremely low silhouette and a 10 cm. gun with a large capacity for carrying ammunition. The performance of this gun is superb. At 1000 meters it shot [through the Panther’s armor] and, according to Russian reports, it [could] fight the *Königstiger* successfully at two kilometers ....

Enemy infantry weapons which proved to be most irritating [sic] were:

1. The medium and especially the heavy mortars.
2. The bazookas
3. Explosive ammunition for rifles and machine guns

The Russian mortars of all sizes were very much superior to ours with respect to range. By collective commitment and by organization into batteries and battalions, devastating effects were achieved due to [their] rapid firing as well as ... accuracy.

Hand-in-hand with the development of the Pak went the distribution the distribution of bazookas to the infantry on a mass scale (30 weapons in a 300 meter-wide trench [was not exceptional]). The weapon is simple and unabusable. It shoots more accurately than an infantry rifle. The Panzer IV was pierced easily at the sides. The same applies in rare cases to the Panther. Even several Tigers have been lost in this manner! The bazooka was mainly feared, however, by our infantry. Their attack was usually stopped by the fire of the bazookas ....<sup>15</sup>

Explosive-type ammunition was used by the enemy to an increasing extent as time went by. The wounds caused by even the slightest contact [were] terrible.... Had we decided to introduce it in the German Army, the Russian losses would have been infinitely higher ....<sup>16</sup>

On account of his whole nature ..., The Russian as “cut out” for the defense. The peasant, not yet touched by civilization, moves with much more confidence through the landscape and knows ... how to make use of nature ....This became apparent in the selection of his positions. What is accomplished here in respect to digging, sometimes during the night, defies ... description! Besides the extremely clever choice of terrain ... the characteristic feature is the immense depth of the battlefield. While we furnish the necessary backbone to the main battle line by crossfire and flanking positions, this was less apparent with the opponent. Instead, he [had] a maze of supporting bases, lying one behind the other. I have seen them up to a depth of sixty kilometers which deprives even the swiftest attack slowly but surely of its driving power.<sup>17</sup>

The concept of “all around defense” is generally applied. Usually all trench systems have a second line of protection of tanks or anti-personnel mines. The infantryman possesses an unusual amount of close combat equipment:

machine pistols, hand grenades, anti-tank grenades (an oversized edition of the former), fire bottles ("Molotov Cocktails") and the bazooka. Also the sharpshooters play a part which should not be underestimated. They receive their training at special schools where one differentiates between head and stomach-hitting specialists. The sharpshooter's psychosis is acquired very quickly by the attacker....

The backbone of a [Russian] position is the Pak ...committed [in the]" Pak Front," "Pak Bar," [or] "Pak Resistance Point."<sup>18</sup> As a rule, the gun is dug in up to the muzzle and is excellently camouflaged and adapted for 360 degree fire. Under "Pak Front" we [understood] a continuous array of guns entrenched [at] equal height. Great emphasis was placed here on the flanks. Often the arrangement was ... in [the] form of a horseshoe with the opening towards the opponent. The Russians let the [enemy] tanks enter this "dead-end street" and run on mines, in order to shoot them up from three directions. The fight against these Pak Fronts is extremely difficult and high in losses. The "Pak Bar" was the Pak Front on a smaller scale and was used for the blocking of terrain strips favorable to tanks. The "Bar Resistance Points" were distributed in a chessboard manner over the entire depth of the battlefield. Adjacent to sectors, villages or heights, they [constituted] fortresses shooting into all directions and were extremely difficult to combat.

The fight against the Pak was much more difficult for us panzer people than against the tanks. It constituted our "daily bread" and as a rule was fought without any assistance. If we had had the... help of artillery and especially of airplanes, Oak Fronts would not have been any problem.... In the winter [of] 1943, we destroyed a Pak nest east of Zhitomir. In a sector of 600 X 400 meters, thirty-two heavy Paks were dug in. In the spring of 1945, I started with the mopping up of the Gran bridgehead with about seventy vehicles, mostly Panthers. Within six days, we had destroyed about 400 heavy Paks... I had twelve usable vehicles left.

...the [Russians] used to bury all not fully maneuverable tanks into the ground up to the turret. They were echeloned in depth in such a manner

that they could support and cover each other. Their elimination is extremely difficult. Usually, this succeeded only through [the use of] Tigers or 8.8 cm. flak at great distances or dive bombers....

Only rarely did the Russians organize counterattacks to repulse the opponent who had broken through, since the subordinate commanders did not display initiative and the influence of the higher commanders was eliminated through the destruction of the telephone communication lines which were usually very elaborate.

...camouflage deserves to be mentioned once again. In my opinion, the Russian is unsurpassed in this skill.

The Russian fortifies his rear area tirelessly during times when the front is quiet and even when the superiority is his. Every village is a fortification and all weapons of the reserves and service units located in the rear areas are always organized into a porcupine-like defense. Even here, one still encounters mines....

The strengthened rear areas ... as well as the fortifying of ... villages ... lent to the enemy retreats the characteristics of a holding campaign, always offering new points of resistance. By recklessly sacrificing his rear guards, the Russian knew ... [how] to circumvent decisive blows ....

The opponent knew extremely [well how] to conceal the preparations [for] his offensives. Nevertheless, the signs were unmistakable [and] as a rule consisted [of] intensified reconnaissance activities and the adjusting fire of the artillery. The reconnaissance is carried out to battalion strength, and its feelers cover the entire width of the front. [When] the weakest spot has been located,...[the Russian] immediately breaks through and digs in at once. The reconnaissance ..., now carried out in depth, enlarges the point of penetration (mostly at night) and, with the coming of dawn, the full impact of the attack [exploits] this breakthrough.

It was of the greatest importance on our side to have the boundaries [of defensive positions] overlap, since the enemy reconnaissance was able to locate them with the [unerring] precision of a sleepwalker...

After a scrutinizing reconnaissance ..., the artillery barrages opened up...The prime mission [was] the destruction of our anti-tank weapons. Also numerous Paks were brought up under cover of darkness into prepared positions close to the main battle line which were now able to fire pointblank at the spotted heavy guns and, at the same time, represented the protection for the panzers about to be committed – a practice which definitely proved itself!

While the first wave of tanks fought the [remaining] anti-tank guns..., the second and third waves with mounted infantry tried to force a breakthrough; subsequently, the mass of infantry rushed up ... storming into the gap to combat our trenches from the center towards the flanks. In spite of the penetrations of the Russian steamroller, our panzer counterattacks [achieved] complete success if they were executed at the right time! As a rule, the enemy tanks drove into us blindly like an amok runner. The battles took place at very close range and cases of ramming were numerous. Reverse slope positions are particularly favorable for the interception of these thrusts. One hundred sixty-nine T-34s broke into my sector during the summer offensive "Belgorod" along an 800 meter front. A small force of my regiment, by chance located on the reverse slope, destroyed them to the last vehicle!

Once the enemy main battle line has been broken, the pursuit elements, mostly small in number, are committed along a broad front. A standard formation could not be recognized. [The Russians pursued in] packs of five to twenty vehicles (sometimes up to eighty) joined by up to one to two companies on trucks. Typical were ... the numerous anti-tank guns and mortars towed along. Often, every combat vehicle had its own anti-tank gun attached.

With the mission [to gain space] ... these groups moved westward as rapidly as possible. Their immense ... range played ... a decisive part. On principle they did not engage our rear guards. [If] they encountered resistance, it was [bypassed and] the original direction was maintained. Considering our total lack of reserves,...there was nothing...to stop these wolf packs. Spreading panic and fear, they chased the fleeing service units and shook the entire rear .... Once ... the pursuit-objective was reached, the Russian established himself in a village and prepared for defense. Whenever [it was possible] to improvise a [counter] attack by service units hastily gathered up, they encountered after a few hours ... a well-prepared, all – around defense and were unable to accomplish anything.

... The main difficulty in this development was the fact that the Russian panzer packs in the rear of our battle line ... controlled the ... umbilical cord of our main supply routes. [If] they succeeded [in] holding their positions there, a withdrawal of the front line was unavoidable in the majority of ... cases. Naturally, the Russian knew how to capitalize on the advantages his own country offered. The civilian population was right away forced to take part in the fighting, and it did not matter at all whether they were old men or women .... The fighting became more ferocious all the time and the conception of a “civilian” disappeared gradually .... There was no cruelty which could have surprised you! While our service units constituted a tremendous burden, growing bigger year by year like a traveling circus, the complete absence of it lent to the Russians an extraordinary mobility and independence. Ammunition and fuel were the only things they carried with them or behind them. Main supply routes which had become completely impassable during the mud and rain periods [they] used to bridge with a human chain. The entire population including children stood in a row up to ten kilometers long ... and the shells were forwarded by a long chain of hands; [in] the same way gasoline barrels were rolled through the landscape. Since [the Russians] lived principally off the land, [they] also did not know regular resupply. The soldier carried a rucksack improvised from an old bag. The contents were bread, pieces of sugar, and *maiorka* (tobacco) besides ... a lot of ammunition. {Thus} the fellows were independent from bases for weeks.

The German soldier faced this asset of ... improvisation ... helplessly. Although the Russian became an example in many ways, our attempts to imitate him remained incomplete and half-hearted. The call for improvisation ... in the end was only another word for incapability .... We became more and more uncertain. The wave of fright grew and with it, the panic. An enemy intoxicated with a spirit of attack cannot be stopped ... with last-ditch or emergency measures.

Picturing [in the above report] the German soldier, I had in mind the average .... Describing the Red Army, I referred generally to the elite, that is, the guard troops. From the perspective of the vanquished, the Russian appears today to many like a superman. That this is not correct, however, nobody knows better than the “old” divisions of the Waffen SS. We were never affected by disintegration and psychoses described previously but ... had learned to beat the opponent at his own game. There was no method of fighting in which we were not superior to the Russians, and there was no attack in which we did not “drive them off in pairs” ....

Although his emphasis was overwhelmingly on the purely military aspects of the war in the East, Peiper did not ignore the factor of “soft power” and German failings (to put it mildly) in that regard and addressed it early in his essay albeit briefly and in bland language. The Leibstandarte had been committed to the southern sector of the Eastern Front, and Peiper commented that

The Ukraine received us as liberators and waited for the proclamation of their independence. The shortsighted setup of our civil-administration created the enemy in the back as ... the partisan fighting and was in my opinion a decisive error. It is my [belief] that the backbone of the Soviet Army was broken in the autumn of 1941. If the German politics and propaganda would have had the same ... impact as the Army, the war could have been brought to an end ... in the same year. Good treatment of the subjugated ... would have been the start mass desertion of the enemy. Instead, the contrary was done. One thus created ... an ‘emergency

organization,' reconciling the national antagonistic trends and opposition and handing Stalin a slogan for a unifying national goal.

Whether Peiper had entertained these reservations at the time is unknown. Ardent Nazi, devoted disciple of Adolf Hitler and protégé of Heinrich Himmler that he was, it is highly unlikely that he would have openly expressed them if he had. In any case, his criticism of German occupation policy was not that it had been inhumane but that it, at least with the benefit of hindsight, had been a key obstacle to German victory not only in Russia, but in Europe generally.

A peace at this time without a doubt would have been within reach and also would have provided us with a time gain of several years and given us protection in the rear for a one-front war in the West.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Peiper's "reflections" are a unique if minor contribution to the vast array of World War II experiential literature. They are based neither on service as a *Landser* (German "grunt") nor as a high-ranking commander, but as a well-connected field-grade officer of an elite division of the Waffen SS who had long been in the thick of the savage fighting on the Eastern Front. An unapologetic Nazi who at the time of its writing was about to stand trial for war crimes committed in the West, Peiper was at pains to present himself as a professional soldier possessing valuable insights soberly expressed on the challenges of fighting the Red Army. But following his conviction and sentencing to death for the Malmédy massacre and other crimes committed during the Battle of the Bulge, he defined himself in very different terms. He recalled the war as "a proud and heroic time. Where we were standing was Germany and as far as my tank gun reached was my kingdom." Nor did he attempt to conceal his devotion to Hitler, lamenting that, at the end of the war, "when the Führer was needing his Leibstandarte the most,...fate had separated us from him ...." <sup>19</sup>

Peiper's was a complex and in some respects a seductively appealing personality. But it is hard to quarrel with Peiper biographer Danny Parker's characterization of him as "Hitler' Warrior."

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The best work on Peiper is the exhaustively researched biography by Danny S. Parker, *Hitler's Warrior. The Life and Wars of SS Colonel Jochen Peiper* (Boston, 2014). Parker followed this five years later with his more diffuse *Peiper's War. The Wartime Years of SS Leader Joachim Peiper: 1941-44* (Barnsley, Yorkshire and Philadelphia, 2019). See also Jens Westemeier, *Joachim Peiper: A Biography of Himmler's SS Commander* (Altglan, Pa., 2007) and Michael Reynolds, *The Devil's Adjutant. Jochen Peiper, Panzer Leader* (New York, 1995).
- <sup>2</sup> Parker, *Hitler's Warrior*, 148.
- <sup>3</sup> Peiper is referring here to the defensive battles along the Mius River in which the Leibstandarte fought in the winter of 1942. K –G. Klietmann, *Die Waffen-SS. Eine Dokumentation* (Osnabrück, 1965), 78.
- <sup>4</sup> Peiper seems to be alluding to *Generaloberst* Franz Ritter Halder, appointed Chief of the General Staff in August 1938 and relieved of that Office by Hitler in November 1942.
- <sup>5</sup> By "old divisions" of the Waffen SS, Peiper probably meant the first three – SS Panzer Divisions *Leibstandarte, Das Reich, and Totenkopf*.
- <sup>6</sup> Peiper was given command of such a battlegroup (*Kampfgruppe*) in the late fall of 1943. Parker, *Hitler's War*, 214.
- <sup>7</sup> This was the weapon which during the war replaced the earlier MG 34 as the standard German ground machine gun. Weighing less than 24 pounds, it had a rate of fire of 1200 – 1400 rounds per minute. *Handbook on German Military Forces. War Department Technical Manual TM-E 30-451* (Washington D.C., 1945), VII—8.
- <sup>8</sup> Referred to here are the celebrated dial- purpose "88," the less glamorous, *schweres Infanterie Geschütz 33*, and the *Nebelwerfer* multi-tube rocket – launcher. *Ibid.*, VII, 20, 42-43, 88-94.

- <sup>9</sup> This is the approximate weight of *Königstiger* (King Tiger) or Tiger B, Germany's heaviest operational tank. *Ibid.*, VII, 83-85.
- <sup>10</sup> Presumably meant a coupled rangefinder-sight arrangement which would automatically compensate for distance, as became common on postwar tanks.
- <sup>11</sup> Both were self-propelled artillery pieces utilizing the chassis of Mark III and Mark IV tanks respectively. *Handbook on German Military Forces*, VII, 58-63.
- <sup>12</sup> This fast, lightly-armored "tank-destroyer" mounted a 3-inch and later a 90mm high-velocity gun. John Batchelor and Ian Hogg, *Artillery* (New York, 1972), 118-19.
- <sup>13</sup> The *Jagdpanther* carried an 88mm (L 71) gun on a Panther chassis. The colossal *Jagdtiger* mounted a 128 mm gun on a King Tiger chassis. *Handbook on German Military Forces*, VII, 72-74.
- <sup>14</sup> Peiper discretely avoided mention of the notorious "Commissar Order" which required the summary execution of political functionaries captured with the Red Army. See Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, "Kommissarbefehl und Massenexecutionen sowjetischer Kriegsgefangener," *Anatomie des SS-Staates* (München, 1967), II, 137-65; Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army. Soldiers, Nazis and War in the Third Reich* (New York, 1991), 83-88.
- <sup>15</sup> It is not clear what Peiper is referring to here, as the Russians did not have "bazookas" during World War II, beyond a small number provided by the United States under Lend Lease.
- <sup>16</sup> By the end of the war, both Russian and German snipers appear to have been using ammunition loaded with explosive bullets. See "Scharfschützenausbildung - Verwendung von B-Patronen," *Oberkommando des Heeres*, 13.3. 1945.
- <sup>17</sup> This may reflect Peiper's experiences in "Operation Citadel, against the Kursk salient in July 1943. See David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House, *The Battle of Kursk* (Lawrence Kansas, 1999), 64-68.
- <sup>18</sup> "Pak" refers to *Panzerabwehrkanone* or anti-tank gun.
- <sup>19</sup> James J. Weingartner, *Crossroads of Death. The Story of the Malmédy Massacre and Trial* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1979), 168.