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Heinz Guderian, Col. General, former 'Generalinspekteur' of the German Armored Force, Chief of General Staff from July 21, 1944 to March 28, 1945.

Preamble:

The interview, upon which this report is based, was conducted for the express purpose of getting a picture of Guderian as an individual, his position toward the Regime, and his role in the war. No questions of a military nature were asked. It would seem that only after a long inner struggle did Guderian decide to express his opinion about Hitler and his staff, from a critical standpoint. In closing, Guderian added that his opinions coincided with those of Field Marshals von List and Ritter von Loeb as well as those of General Geyr. He believes that he can speak and make statements on behalf of these officers. Guderian says that this circle has nothing to hide, and would do everything in its power to bring to justice the criminals, and to further the reconstruction of Germany.

1. Attitude toward the Regime:

Guderian claims his position toward National Socialism to have been a completely neutral one, and that he never paid much attention to the Movement. He further states that he had seen Hitler for the first time on the occasion of the opening of an exhibition in Berlin after the "Machtergreifung". Guderian admits that he has been impressed favorably by the successes of the Government and the Party, which had commanded the confidence of the people. To this came the achievements in the social field, the providing of employment which greatly impressed him and many of his colleagues. At any rate the party methods had never received their sanction, but they had hoped that the moral decay (Sittenverfall), which they considered a "childhood disease" and a "hangover from the political-upheaval period" would wear off as time went on. "Unfortunately the opposite took place". Guderian thinks that the persecution of Jews must be rejected because of its disastrous effect. Without doubt, the immigration of undesirable Jewish elements from Central and Eastern Europe to Germany brought with it unpleasant developments which led to an antipathy on the part of a great number of Germans toward the Jews. The National Socialists to solve this problem are termed by Guderian as being "a great catastrophe for which there could be no excuse". He claims to have been aware of the existence of concentration camps and had realized that "they were not convalescent homes". "BUT WE KNEW NOTHING OF THE HORRIBLE THINGS WHICH HAVE NOW BEEN DISCOVERED!"

2. Outlook in 1938 - 1939:

Austria's Anschluss and the incorporation of the Sudetenland into the Reich were, in Guderian's opinion, actions which were still undertaken as part of the effort for peaceful solution of international problems, all the more so since they enjoyed the sanction of both England and France. "With the German march into Bohemia and Moravia the policy of common sense and a peaceful solution of problems was tossed aside. I realized that this new trend in Central Europe could not endure. The conflict with Poland was provoked nonchalantly and without much effort. The possibilities for a peaceful settlement were not fully exploited.

3. The War in the East - Fuhrer HQ:

Concerning the plans for the campaign in the East, Guderian claims not to have been informed. Nevertheless, Guderian states that, several months prior

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to the advance into Russia, he realized what went on since he took notice of the various troop movements. "I could never grasp or understand the War in the East. From the beginning I considered the issue as hopeless. The War in the West was still in progress, and it bordered on insanity to attack in the East while we still had England on our neck. Thus we had the dagger in our back before we ever got started. It is nonsense to maintain that the Western Powers stabbed us in the back while we were fighting Bolshevism, for we were already at war with them."

Guderian goes on to say what tremendous difficulties had to be encountered during the Eastern Campaign, and explains how the offensive came to be halted. The main reasons for this, Guderian thinks, are the ground and weather conditions. "Whoever did not see and experience these things will simply not believe them. Several days of rain resulted in entire armies getting stuck in the mud. Then came the cold, and the soldiers had neither shelter nor winter clothing. They camped in the open with a temperature of 40 degrees (celsius) inadequately clad. They went without hot food for several weeks, as the food froze up on its way from the kitchen to their positions. Often they had nothing to drink because the water froze in their canteens. They frequently had to sleep standing up, cramped into miserable huts, for days on end. When I passed them they no longer reacted, they were so exhausted. The losses, due to freezing and sickness, were enormous. I spent 5 days out of every week with the soldiers at the front and therefore know only too well under what unbearable conditions they had to live. I was aware of their troubles and needs, their suffering and their pain."

"HQ knew nothing about all this because it did not care to. They did not believe our reports and doubted our veracity; for this reason they instigated the most nonsensical investigation. Neither Keitel, Jodl, Duhle nor Hitler himself spent a single day at the front during the entire Russian campaign. Hitler only visited the front once - in Poland. When I appeared at the Fuhrer HQ in December '41 and delivered a detailed report about the situation and the conditions at the front, an icy silence prevailed when I concluded my report."

"Thereupon I said: 'I see that I am not being understood.' I then suggested to the Fuhrer that he replace his advisors in the Fuhrer HQ with officers who had had front-line experience. This suggestion was the reason for my discharge which followed a few days later. In this circle one never found a friend who would support one or agree with one in a difficult issue. The best that one could expect of them is that they remained silent. But this they generally did not do. I was discharged on the pretext of having deliberately forwarded false reports to the Fuhrer HQ. To clear myself of this serious charge I demanded a court martial. It was denied me." (In Guderian's opinion the generals in the Fuhrer HQ had shirked their assignments out of sheer convenience and their fear of unpleasant incidents. In time they developed an 'indispensability complex'. From this criticism, Guderian excepts General Zeidler, whom he considers to be a man of perception and honesty, and who asked to be relieved of his command on five separate occasions, although it was never granted.)

After his discharge, and, as he says, as a result of it, Guderian fell seriously ill, and it was doubtful whether he would survive it. As, at the end of 1942 he was again called for duty, he requested 24 hours to think it over, and only accepted after a long inner debate, since he did not believe in standing idly by while Germany fought for her existence. He had anticipated this inner conflict with his conscience and his decision was preceded by many sleepless nights.

Concerning Hitler Guderian made the following comment: "He undoubtedly possessed the characteristics of a genius - but Genius and Insanity are often closely allied. As, in December '41 (the date of his first discharge) I looked into Hitler's eyes. I got the impression that all was not well with him. I cannot define it more clearly. At any rate, one got the impression that one dealt with a man whose thoughts were no longer in this world."

Guderian goes on to relate that the entire Eastern border as late as the Fall of 1944 had not been fortified whatever. The General of the Engineers, Jacob, as well as the General Staff had, during the course of the war, frequently suggested fortifications. These suggestions were turned down by Hitler because

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he considered a line of fortifications in the West of the only importance, and was concentrating all available means toward the completion of the Atlantic and West Walls. In January 1944 Guderian repeated his plea that fortifications be constructed in the East, since the Dnioper Front was beginning to crumble. Guderian favored the reinforcement of the Bug and Dnioper Lines. After receiving this suggestion, Hitler pointed out that all available construction troops and materials were urgently needed in the West for the completion of the Atlantic Wall and U-boat bases along the French coast. Moreover, Hitler stated that fixed fortifications might give Army commanders the idea of retreating back into them. And that he did not want.

Guderian claims, that in July 1944 he finally succeeded in bringing about the first construction work on field fortifications in East Prussia and in the Oder and Warthe bend. This project had hardly begun when the Anglo-American forces broke through in the Avranches sector and the majority of the construction troops had again to be shifted to the West. At that time Guderian decided to suggest the organization of the Volkssturm to the General Staff. He claims to have originated this idea, but due to the fact that the organization was left to the Party Chancellery, the Volkssturm lost its military value.

4. War Prospects and Efforts Toward an Armistice:

During all these years Guderian states that he had never believed in the possibility of a German victory. To him it had only been a question of keeping the war as far away as possible from German soil or, at least, protect the Eastern borders from a Russian breakthrough. Wherever he had found it possible, he had pointed out the futility of continuing the struggle and had also attempted to influence the foreign policy in that direction. He relates that he discussed these problems with Goebbels and Himmler very seriously in 1943 but met with complete lack of understanding. He also stood in close contact with Dr. Speer, who, in an earlier memorandum to the Fuhrer had made it quite plain that "the war was lost". But even Speer's influence was not sufficient to bring the Fuhrer and his associates to their senses. Although he, as a General, was expressly, and under threat of punishment, forbidden to discuss official matters with the Foreign Minister, (as it was similarly forbidden to discuss intended operations with other Generals) he went to see Ribbentrop early this year in order to present to him the cold facts concerning the situation in the East and to demand of him to do everything in his power to initiate negotiations. This, Ribbentrop refused. Guderian said that later-attempted negotiations via Sweden "began in such a pitiful manner that they could not possibly be taken seriously by the enemy, and thus failed". (To express his opinion about Ribbentrop, Guderian employs an expression allegedly made by Francois Poncet: "Ribbentrop is the biggest hindrance to the German Foreign Policy." - The Foreign Policy is the object of the severest criticism uttered by Guderian against the Regime. "It was catastrophic and was made by people who had no inkling of what went on in other countries.")

Early in March another discussion with Admiral Doenitz and Himmler took place, both of whom considered any negotiation attempt senseless. Doenitz stated, "We must fight on to the bitter end." This conversation was to have been kept secret, but in spite of this Hitler learned about it and, several days later, in one of the daily discussions of the situation called Guderian a "Landesverrater" (traitor). On March 28th Guderian was sent on sick leave.

5. The Dilemma:

Guderian attempts to explain the dilemma by giving the picture of a German General holding a responsible position who was aware of the fact that he was fighting for a lost cause, and simultaneously found himself under orders to a leadership consisting of incapable or insane individuals. "It was no longer permitted to apply for a discharge. One had to stick it out. One asked oneself how it was possible to continue without becoming a murderer. It is impossible to picture this atmosphere to an outsider. Often one thought that it might be best to put a bullet through one's brain. But that would not have helped the

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German people any. During those years I spent many a sleepless night, and I breathed a genuine sigh of relief when offered sick leave. Things had become unbearable for me."

6. The guilt:

Guderian considers Hitler to be primarily responsible for the war, the military developments, and all the crimes committed in Germany's name. But he states that the guilt was also shared by the men around Hitler who lacked the courage to speak the truth. "Aside from that there are criminals who ought to be punished. We would prefer to do the job ourselves. Of the Generals none enriched himself materially, none committed atrocities, in fact they even saw to it that atrocities ordered from higher-up were not carried out. In Orel we received the order to let the population starve, although sufficient quantities of food were on hand. This order, however, was not carried out. In fact, we posted notices throughout the city to the effect that the subsistence for the population was guaranteed."

7. Russia:

Guderian states that he spent 4 weeks of 1932 and the same period of time in 1933 in Russia, and was deeply impressed by the few things he got to see. He says that in a comparatively short time enormous things were accomplished in the industrial as well as the economic fields. "The tractor works in Kharkov were so huge that they would make the Krupp works appear like a tiny blacksmith's shop. Already before the outbreak of the war I had a conception of the potentialities of that country, and upon that I based my pessimism. Although we penetrated it to a depth of almost 1500 kilometers, the war has barely touched that country's border."

Guderian is convinced that a great part of the reported atrocities allegedly committed by the Russians in the occupied regions of Germany are facts. He received official reports on this subject from officers and has seen photographs which he considers as coming from absolutely reliable sources. Guderian thinks that approximately 12-13 million Germans fled from the Eastern regions to the West in order to escape the Russians. The evacuation of the threatened Eastern territories was not the responsibility of the Wehrmacht, but that of the Party which, in most cases, acted after it was already too late. Guderian continues by saying that the flight from the East had cost the lives of tens of thousands of civilians who died on the roadside. Daily, hundreds of women and children froze to death, their bodies remaining wherever they fell.

Guderian states further that he knows that the Russian government had been negotiating with the German government in order to bring about an exchange of prisoners. This, however, had been turned down by the German government, he states. The Russians waged war as it was waged in Genghis Khan's time, the same can be said of the Germans. (By implication, Guderian touches on the subject of an inevitable conflict between the Western Powers and Russia, and his remarks about Russia must, to a certain extent, be regarded as "Zweckpropaganda.")

8. What next?:

Guderian admits a great portion of the German people fell for the "Pied Piper" (as he termed Hitler in his conversations with his wife). He claims that the German people had realized long ago how mistaken they had been and had paid dearly for their errors. "99% of the German people need no education to become kind. The German people is not a cruel one. Not even the few bestial individuals among them can alter that fact. What the German people needs is the re-establishment of Justice (which has already been partially accomplished by

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decrees). It needs a just treatment and just directions. Justice and sensible political measures - that is the crux of re-education."

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