

# 1 THE LETTERS OF THE PANZER GENERALS

After eighty years of intensive historiography surrounding the personalities and actions of leading German military commanders, any new study must be able to present its readers with something original. This is especially true for an author who has already written at length about generals in the context of Operation Barbarossa. Yet an expert knowledge of a subject as well as the available literature is the best starting point for identifying new material. The panzer generals' private letters are a unique and remarkable set of documents. My past operational studies had captured the men in uniform in stark focus, but much less so the men beyond the uniform. Previous biographical studies had largely failed to make good use of the letters and the opportunity was suddenly presented both to record what I had found and, in a sense, to complete, or at least complement, my earlier work on the German panzer operations in the East. The letters capture a human dimension to directing the Eastern campaign. They address very real fears, doubts, hopes and motivations, little of which is ever found in official records, and yet it is instrumental to explaining the actions and behaviour of individuals. Moreover, having a group of men to compare allows one to determine what is simple personality and what is better explained by institutional culture or the ethos of the *Panzertruppe* command.

## **Validity, Veracity and Verification**

Importantly, there has never been a substantive study of the panzer generals' letter collections. Despite their seemingly obvious

importance, they have seldom been used in historical studies of Operation Barbarossa, although they have been cited in a number of biographical works. There are two related problems that have militated against use of the letters. First, any scholarly study of Operation Barbarossa confronts the imposing problem of source material. The *Ostheer* (Eastern Army) in 1941 fielded more than three million German soldiers, generating tens of thousands of historical records that make true expertise in this area a more ambitious claim than for any other theatre of the Second World War. The paper trail is simply immense, and while every military historian is forced to impose limits on what they can reasonably access, a scholarly study of the Eastern Front forces an even more judicious approach to primary material. This alone should not preclude study of the generals' letters, but it has been compounded by a second problem. Most of the letters were written in *Kurrentschrift*, sometimes referred to simply as 'old German script', a handwriting form based on late medieval cursive writing. Individual letters of what we know as the Latin alphabet were formed differently. Indeed, some might be thought to emanate from a completely different language. Making matters worse, *Kurrentschrift* is only an umbrella term. In practice different German states, and even regions within states, taught their own unique variants of cursive handwriting with widespread differences. It was only in 1911 that a single uniform handwriting script was introduced in the state of Prussia, which was slowly adopted throughout the rest of Germany, becoming mandatory for every school curriculum in 1935. Even this new standardised *Sütterlinschrift* would be sufficiently foreign to most present-day Germans for it to be unreadable, and it was only in 1941 that another nationwide reform adopted what today is identified as handwriting based on the familiar Latin alphabet. In short, without specialist training and a lot of practice, reading cursive handwriting in the *Kurrentschrift*, which the German generals learned in their youth, is exceedingly difficult.

For this study I had all of the letters transcribed from *Kurrentschrift* by a professional palaeographer (Daniel Schneider) and then had the results checked by a second palaeographer who is also an historian (Dr David Hamann). The exceptions to this were Reinhardt's letters, which had already been transcribed using a typewriter without the original letters being available to consult. Once the letters of Guderian, Hoepner and Schmidt had been transcribed, I worked with

a professional translator and historian of National Socialism (Dr Alex J. Kay) to translate them. Schmidt's letters were translated separately (by Dr Madeleine Brook).

While historians of Germany's 1941 campaign in the East have typically overlooked the generals' letters, biographers have shown more interest, although the results have not always advanced our understanding and, in many respects, have only further entrenched post-war mythologies. In the early 1970s the British historian Kenneth Macksey was the first to seek access to Guderian's letters, contacting his son Heinz Günther Guderian. Heinz Günther was Guderian's eldest son, who followed in his father's footsteps and became an officer in the Wehrmacht, ending the war as the operations officer of the 116th Panzer Division. Macksey himself had been commissioned in the Royal Armoured Corps for service in the war, and the common ground that the two men shared allowed them to strike an immediate chord. Macksey was given access to Guderian's private papers and in return he allowed Heinz Günther to read and comment upon his drafts.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, Macksey's 1975 biography closely followed Guderian's own narrative as established in his 1952 memoir *Panzer Leader*. Importantly, however, Macksey's discussion of the Barbarossa campaign was limited to just thirty-three pages, and his use of Guderian's letters was limited to a handful of favourable excerpts. The result was an idealised portrayal that only perpetuated Guderian's already towering mystique in the Anglo-American world.<sup>2</sup>

Research for the first German-language biography of Guderian was under way even before Macksey's book appeared. Written by Karl J. Walde, it appeared in 1976, with Walde also having access to Guderian's letters through Heinz Günther. Like Macksey, Walde forged a warm relationship with Guderian's son, no doubt encouraged by the tremendous admiration Walde felt for his subject. Indeed, according to Walde, Guderian's picture hung 'not just in the barracks of the West German *Bundeswehr*, one found it in the military halls of all Europe, America and Asia'. Walde's advocacy was followed by the insistence that his biography would 'capture the whole Guderian critically', but then Walde conceded: 'It is based on his memoir, the credibility of which is proven.'<sup>3</sup> Guderian's letters are therefore treated as a confirmatory tool for Guderian's own post-war reconstruction of events, rather than a unique set of documents that reveal far more about the man behind the wartime propaganda and post-1945 embellishments.

In a somewhat different category is Dermot Bradley's 1986 *Generaloberst Heinz Guderian*, which offered a more scholarly treatment of the subject, but one that still divorced Guderian's military achievements from his political, moral and criminal activities.<sup>4</sup> Bradley's focus on Guderian was also linked to his investigation of the 'origins of modern Blitzkrieg', which meant the emphasis was overwhelmingly on the pre-war period, with just ten pages devoted to Guderian's participation in Operation Barbarossa.<sup>5</sup> Guderian's letters constituted the backbone of the primary source material, but Bradley's limited analytical engagement and neglect of archival verification (where it would have been possible) granted Guderian's claims far too much scope within the text.

The best biography of Guderian is Russell A. Hart's 2006 addition to the Potomac Books 'Military Profiles' series.<sup>6</sup> Hart offers a clear-sighted depiction of Guderian, making excellent use of the available contextualising literature. The only limitation is the formulaic scope of the series, which restricts authors to a succinct 120 pages of text. Accordingly, Hart's coverage of the Barbarossa campaign was squeezed into thirteen pages, meaning that, while the book remains a candid and insightful portrayal, it provides no coverage of Guderian's wartime correspondence.

Relative to Guderian, the wartime activities of Hoepner, Schmidt and Reinhardt have been the subject of much less attention, but each of them has been the subject of a German-language biography. The first was by Heinrich Bücheler, who made liberal use of Hoepner's letters for his 1980 study, but the result only served to confirm the author's agenda for writing the book.<sup>7</sup> Bücheler saw Hoepner as a German war hero and dedicated anti-Hitler conspirator. The violent aspects of Nazi policy in the East and Hoepner's role in them are nowhere to be found in his study. Not surprisingly, Hoepner's letters were selectively read and interpreted, rendering Bücheler's biography of limited use.

Rudolf Schmidt only became a panzer army commander at the very end of 1941, following Guderian's dismissal. He started the Barbarossa campaign as a panzer corps commander in Panzer Group 3 and progressed to command of the Second Army in November. His German biographer Klaus Woche incorrectly assumed that Schmidt's wartime letters had been seized and destroyed by the Gestapo, but this oversight is symptomatic of the book's poor research and apologist

narrative.<sup>8</sup> Even though the book appeared in 2002, when a much more critical literature about the Wehrmacht and its senior commanders had emerged, Woche simply ignored scholarly critiques. The result was not only a flattering portrayal of Schmidt, but Woche's determination to present the Wehrmacht in the best possible light led him to ignore evidence of criminality and cast the Germans as victims of Allied bombing and Soviet terror.<sup>9</sup>

The only biography of Reinhardt was written by Christoph Clasen and appeared in 1996.<sup>10</sup> Clasen's comprehensive 720-page text made liberal use of Reinhardt's private letters, citing them at length. He also engaged directly with Reinhardt's National Socialist affiliation and post-war conviction for war crimes committed in the Soviet Union. There is no attempt to isolate or idealise Reinhardt's military career, making it a valuable and underutilised biography.

The only study to make use of all the generals' letter collections was Johannes Hürter's majestic 2006 study *Hitlers Heerführer (Hitler's Army Commanders)*, which unfortunately has never appeared in English.<sup>11</sup> This encompassed twenty-five of Hitler's leading generals in the East throughout 1941–1942.<sup>12</sup> The research and analysis are impeccable, but the number of subjects necessitated a very wide lens, meaning that the panzer group/army commanders, and especially their letters, could not be given particular emphasis or attention.

The intention of this study is to place the generals' private letters in the foreground and consider these documents as a unique source not simply to chart the momentous events under way, but to consider how and why the panzer generals behaved as they did. Importantly, unlike later generations of wartime generals, who might well suspect that any 'private' letters or records would one day enter the public record, there is little suggestion that the panzer commanders wrote with such ideas in mind. Allowing for the exception of Reinhardt's personally transcribed collection, the authenticity of the letters and the fact that they were not written with a view to any future historical purpose provides a view of the generals that moves us beyond wartime representations or post-war justifications. That the letters served as an ostensibly private outlet for the generals' thoughts and emotions underscores the importance of the collections.<sup>13</sup> Even one of Reinhardt's letters candidly admitted: 'Outwardly, I do not lose my composure and I also retain my faith in victory, but inwardly, I wrestle with myself and suffer.'<sup>14</sup> Clearly, there was a dichotomy between the public and the private self, which the

letters capture. Yet, while the letters provide many tantalising private insights, we must be mindful that the generals still intended to project a certain self-image, albeit a less guarded one. Notions of early twentieth-century German masculinity cannot be ignored and appear, to varying extents, as a constant theme in both what was expressed and how it was represented. For example, after Reinhardt's open admission of inward suffering, he quickly qualified his remarks with the reassurance: 'In no way should my letter create the impression that I am subdued or that we are failing or despairing.'<sup>15</sup> Maintaining an appropriate disposition before his wife, even in the face of his evident anguish and pain, was clearly essential.

Reinhardt's letters have been available the longest, having been donated to Germany's Military History Research Office (*Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt*) in 1962, a year before the general's death.<sup>16</sup> Hoepner's letters were not donated to the federal German military archive until 1983, some thirty-nine years after his death. The donation of Schmidt's collection of letters took until 1999 and Guderian's until 2001. Previous to these donations researchers had to gain family permission, which appears to have affected the conditions of use.

While the authenticity of the letters raises few concerns, this is not to say a degree of manipulation has not occurred. We must consider that individual letters may have been destroyed or at least withheld from the public record to avoid incriminating the generals or tainting their post-war image of honourable and decent men serving in a 'clean' Wehrmacht. To determine if this was the case, I averaged the frequency of each general's correspondence for 1941 and checked this against the individual dates of letters in order to identify behaviour patterns and therefore any anomalous irregularity. Guderian wrote his wife thirty-one letters between 27 June and 16 December, which overall equates to an average frequency of five and a half days between letters. Yet, when one checks the actual dates of his letters, unexplained gaps appear. In September, for example, there is a conspicuous gap of seventeen days between his letters of 8 and 25 September. There is another gap of twelve days in late August and two further periods of ten days between letters. On the surface none of this need raise particular suspicion; there could have been numerous explanations that do not involve a suggestion of wilful manipulation. If we focus on the seventeen-day gap in September, Guderian was no doubt busy conducting the final

stages of the Kiev encirclement, but there had been plenty of frantic periods previously in which the general had studiously maintained his correspondence. It is also noteworthy that in his letter of 25 September, Guderian made no attempt to excuse or explain his unusually long absence from writing. This is because Guderian had in fact written to his wife at least once during this seventeen-day period, but no trace of the letter exists in the general's personal papers that were donated to the archive. The reason we know Guderian wrote in this time is a letter in reply, from his wife Margarete, on 19 September thanking him for his letter 'of the 13th', which had arrived that morning.<sup>17</sup> Not only is there no letter from Guderian from 13 September; there is none in his collection written on the thirteenth day of any month. So what happened to this letter? Clearly, it was received by Margarete in Berlin and she was saving his letters. The Guderians were not subject to the usual delays in postal communication between the Eastern Front and Germany (often four to six weeks) because, like a lot of the senior commanders, they used privileged connections in the Luftwaffe to ferry their letters.<sup>18</sup> In fact, when Heinz wrote his letter on 25 September, he had already received Margarete's last letter from 19 September, written just six days before.

Whatever may have happened to Guderian's letter from 13 September, we can at least confirm that the panzer general's public collection is not complete and that the other long gaps in his correspondence strongly suggest that this is not the only example. If letters were deliberately excluded or destroyed (as opposed to simply being lost), it seems a reasonable hypothesis that they contained information that Guderian or his family wanted to suppress. In fact, on three occasions in 1941 Guderian included separate letters from third parties that he thought would interest Margarete, but on each occasion, he instructed her to destroy them after reading. For example, on 31 October he wrote: 'I'm enclosing a letter from Hirtenlein, which will interest you and which you should please destroy.'<sup>19</sup> There is never any mention of why these letters should be destroyed, but it shows Guderian was clearly sensitive about certain information.

A simple explanation might be that Guderian wrote about sensitive military matters, which even for everyday soldiers was strictly forbidden according to censorship rules, but this seems highly unlikely given that all four of the panzer generals flouted such regulations in letter after letter. In theory, letters were bound by the 'Ordinance on Communication', which was published on 12 March 1940 and

stipulated that information was subject to secrecy regulations in six key areas, the most important being number 1: 'Distribution of information on army matters which are subject to secrecy'.<sup>20</sup> This required soldiers to withhold all specific details of their service, such as the composition, size and location of their units, the names of superiors and comrades, and information related to equipment and arms, military intentions and combat losses.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, one of the things that makes the correspondence of the panzer generals so fascinating is just how much confidential military information the generals shared with their wives (as will be explored in Chapter 5). Any one of the letter collections would have been a goldmine for Allied intelligence, but the generals, whose letters were excepted from censorship checks, clearly did not consider this a risk. If Guderian was not therefore worried about sharing military information, then what was it that proved so sensitive and potentially compromising?

Apologists might speculate, on the basis of Guderian's post-war claims, that he was perhaps destroying incriminating evidence of supposed anti-Nazi views, but, as this study will demonstrate, Guderian (and his wife Margarete) were committed National Socialists. While purely speculative, it is not unreasonable to consider that Guderian was sharing some form of information about Germany's killing programme in the East (a subject he also chose to exclude from his memoir). Such a hypothesis may also fit with the period of time in which Guderian's correspondence becomes noticeably sparse. Between 18 August and 25 September Guderian's public record includes just three letters for the entire thirty-seven-day period, well below his usual average. In this same period, post-war statements from members of *Einsatzgruppe B*, the SS killing squads operating in Guderian's rear area, identify mid-August as the point when they received instructions to mass murder entire Jewish communities.<sup>22</sup> By the end of October *Einsatzgruppe B* had already murdered 45,467 Jews.<sup>23</sup> Senior army commanders were no doubt aware of what was happening in their rear area; if Guderian communicated any of this information to Margarete, especially if the framing suggested a justification or even endorsement, the whole post-war image of Guderian would have been ruined. Of course, this is pure supposition, but it is hardly an implausible hypothesis, given Guderian made antisemitic remarks even after the war.<sup>24</sup>

Hoepner's collection of letters contains the same anomaly. Hoepner wrote his wife Irma thirty-one letters between 23 June and



23 December 1941, giving him a statistical frequency of one letter every 5.9 days of the campaign. Yet in November the collection has only three letters, with a notable break of twenty-two days between 5 and 27 November. Hoepner's letter from the 27th also confirms the incomplete inventory of the archival holdings. The letter opens: 'Tomorrow, an air force officer on my staff is flying to Lötzen. I want to quickly use the opportunity to send my regards and pictures to you, although I wrote only the day before yesterday.'<sup>25</sup> Needless to say, there is no letter from Hoepner on 25 November. There are no letters from Irma to gauge her response, but if she had not received the letter her husband had referred to, she would presumably have mentioned this to him. Yet nowhere in Hoepner's subsequent correspondence does the general respond to a missing letter and the personal couriers that they used meant letters were much less likely to disappear on route. Thus, it seems likely that this letter did indeed reach Irma, which again raises the question of why it was not included in the public collection. Indeed, even with knowledge of a letter written on 25 November, there was still an unusually long gap of twenty days since the previous known letter. Moreover, the statistical average of one letter every six days is only based on letters we have in the collection. The more letters, the higher the frequency of correspondence, making interruptions of the length that we see in November all the more conspicuous.

In Reinhardt's case, the fact that he did not submit his original handwritten letters, but rather a typed document purporting to be his wartime correspondence, poses its own problem. This may simply have been to reduce the problems of reading his handwriting, but we cannot ignore the potential this poses for manipulation. Importantly, a close reading of Reinhardt's letters against wartime records does not suggest that the available content has been falsified, but his periodic use of ellipsis makes clear that choices were made about what content was included. The general absence of any intimate exchanges with his wife or discussion of family matters suggests one likely aspect of Reinhardt's edits. This is by no means conclusive, though, given that Schmidt's handwritten letters are likewise completely devoid of personal remarks towards his wife. Since Reinhardt expunged details, even if only personal exchanges, it still reduces the overall value of his collection. Encouragingly, however, the last letter Reinhardt wrote before the beginning of Operation Barbarossa derisively asserted that the Soviet leaders were 'very Jewified'.<sup>26</sup> Such a flagrant characterisation not only

reveals Reinhardt's penchant for antisemitism, but also that his post-war editing was not beyond the inclusion of such revealing, even if prejudiced, remarks.

While Reinhardt's letters concentrate mainly on military matters, subjecting the available collection to the same analysis of statistical frequency suggests further significant anomalies. Reinhardt wrote thirty-four letters between 26 June and 31 December 1941, which on average equalled one letter every 5.1 days, but in practice the dates of Reinhardt's correspondence are extremely uneven. On nine occasions he wrote a letter the very day after having written, on four occasions he wrote after just two days and eight times the interval was three days. Thus, two-thirds of all his letters are written in close proximity to each other, while at the other end of the spectrum large gaps appear, the longest being a twenty-three-day break from 24 October to 16 November. Nor did Reinhardt's letter from 16 November offer any explanation or apology for the supposed interruption in his correspondence. Moreover, there are further gaps of sixteen, fourteen and two of thirteen days, suggesting a number of possibilities: Reinhardt's commitment to personal correspondence swung rather wildly, the demands of command dictated his haphazard results, letters were simply lost or, finally, not all letters were included in the submission to the archive.

Schmidt's collection of correspondence is unique in that many of the items he sent to his wife may not have been conceived as conventional letters. At the top of numerous letters, Schmidt prefaced the date with the words 'Report from' (*Bericht vom*), implying he saw the correspondence more as a record of what had happened in the campaign than a letter addressed specifically to his wife. Importantly, not all the letters are prefaced in this way and some of them do veer much more into the personal realm. Schmidt's letters are also on average much shorter than the other collections. In a few cases they consist of only a sentence or two. As Schmidt, however, explained in one letter early on in the campaign, 'things are not propitious for long letter-writing'.<sup>27</sup>

Statistically, Schmidt's correspondence was the most frequent, with an average of one letter every 4.8 days, but the collection started almost a month into the campaign on 21 July and ended on 29 December, condensing his thirty-three letters into a shorter period. Once again, however, the actual dates of the letters suggest there may be gaps in the available correspondence. After not writing anything for the first twenty-nine days of the campaign, Schmidt sent his wife Fridel

a short letter on 21 July and then seemingly waited a further twenty-two days before writing again. From that point onwards Schmidt's correspondence markedly increased, with four letters in August, six in September, eight in October, six in November and nine in December. The first letter in Schmidt's archival collection was in fact to Guderian's wife Margarete requesting Heinz's field post number (without which one could not send letters on the Eastern Front). This letter was dated 14 July, whereas his first letter to Fridel took until 21 July. Although it may seem curious that Schmidt found time to write to Margarete Guderian (and wanted to write to Heinz) before his own wife, the explanation appears to be that Allied air raids on Münster, where the Schmidts had their family home, had forced Fridel to flee the city and stay with her cousin in Leipzig.<sup>28</sup> This is important context as it could plausibly explain the absence of letters from Schmidt in the summer of 1941.

Part of the problem in establishing details about these collections of letters is the lack of information surrounding them. The German authorities did not take the opportunity to ask why these collections were being donated, or whether they were complete, or to gather any other context about them. Perhaps letters were lost by the family, or some were purposefully withheld for personal reasons. Attempting to learn further details through the families has yielded nothing. Heinz Günther Guderian died in 2004 and while I was able to meet with Guderian's grandson, Jürgen Grub, before his own death, he was not even aware of the existence of his grandfather's wartime letters, let alone able to offer any further details about them. Schmidt had no children, and no descendants from Hoepner or Reinhardt's families could be located (or when contacted, opted not to reply).

While the correspondence sent by the generals constitutes the central focus of this study, there is another collection of letters that offered vital context. Margarete Guderian is the only one of the wives whose own letters to her husband were also made available to the archive. There are only thirteen letters spanning 31 August to 29 December, which, thanks to her husband repeatedly referencing the arrival of her letters, we know is only a fraction of what she sent to him.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, hearing from Margarete offers all kinds of important context for understanding Heinz, but also for the rare insight gained into the world of a leading German general's wife. Illuminating Margarete's unique relationship to the events under way in the East and considering to what extent wives were participants, rather than

simply passive observers, offers further context for understanding the role of the family in Nazi Germany, especially among elites. Unlike the wives of soldiers, women like Margarete were privy to much more sensitive information and offered feedback on this, thereby becoming part of the conversation. Knowing something about how they engaged with their husbands, what advice they gave and how that might have sustained the men and impacted events is hardly of peripheral importance. Moreover, while there can be no generic characterisation of a general's wife based on Margarete alone, her letters offer at least an impression, filling something of the void left by the absent letters of Eva Reinhardt, Irma Hoepner and Fridel Schmidt.

The five letter collections studied here are directly comparable for the second half of 1941, given it is in this period that they all offer substantial contributions and are writing in relation to the same military campaign. Hoepner's letter collection begins in August 1939 and ends with his dismissal at the start of 1942 (his last letter dates from 4 January 1942). Schmidt's letters, on the other hand, only begin in July 1941 and continue to his own dismissal in early 1943. Guderian's collection of correspondence spans 1939 to 1944, but the Barbarossa campaign boasts more letters than the rest of the war put together. For example, there are no letters from 1942, only two from 1943 and three from 1944. However, Guderian's collection includes considerably more letters prior to Barbarossa, with eight letters from 1939 and nine from 1940. Similarly, the bulk of Margarete's letters date from 1941, with just three from 1940, none for 1942–1943 and nine for 1944. Reinhardt's collection spans the longest period, beginning in September 1939 and ending in January 1945, but June–December 1941 constitutes his greatest volume of writing as compared with any other six-month period of the war.<sup>30</sup> As a result, the role of the panzer generals in Operation Barbarossa, while not the exclusive focus, forms the principal backdrop for this investigation.