

Theses of the doctoral (PhD) dissertation

**Biography of a German Panzer General - Command
activities of Hermann Breith, 1939–1945**

ANDRÁS KERÉKES

Supervisor: Colonel Dr. László Töll

Co-Supervisor: Dr. József Kaló



UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN

Doctoral School of History and Ethnology

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I. The aim of the research

This thesis examines the military leadership activities of General Hermann Breith during the Second World War, with a special focus on his (permanent) position as a corps commander.

During the Second World War, on the battlefields the German armed forces made a performance that fundamentally shaped warfare, and remains at the forefront of military history and military studies to this day. The German success had a number of components – such as doctrinal foundations, training, troop cohesion, leadership perceptions etc. – which naturally interacted with each other. One of the most important of these factors was the military leadership.

During the Second World War, a large number of German military leaders proved through their combat activities that they were excellent in combat and manoeuvre warfare at various levels, but the careers of most of these officers are largely unprocessed. Apart from a few biographies, memoirs and diaries, historians have mainly written prosopographies. The latter typically examine the pool of personnel associated with the award of higher decorations. As many historians have already explored the subject in depth, I chose a different approach: I focused on a detailed study of one person. My basic premise is that a close examination of the service record of a military leader, selected on the basis of appropriate criteria, will help to determine how successful the commander and his military organisation.

My doctoral thesis examines the military career of General der Panzertruppe Hermann Breith. Breith had consciously prepared himself for a military career, fought in the First World War, and after the German surrender, he remained a member of the scaled-down German armed forces, named Reichswehr. Between the two world wars he was involved in the creation of the German armored forces. After the outbreak of the Second World War he first became a regimental, then brigade and later division commander. From 1943 until the end of the war, he was the commanding general of the III Panzer Corps, which was quite unusual in the Wehrmacht, mainly because of the high fluctuation. This longer time span allows a broad analysis of Breith's activities as a corps commander through the examination of a number of military actions.

Although there are many sources available for Hermann Breith, his biography remains unprocessed and his military leadership is often lesser known even to historians, making him an ideal choice for this thesis.

Consequently, my general aim is to present and analyse Hermann Breith's military leadership by examining and synthesising the available sources. To this end, I will primarily

examine the decision-making, command and task execution processes of the different levels of command involved, in contrast with the objectives of the opposing side, in the light of an analysis of the events that took place.

My further aim is to describe the military events of the Second World War that are relevant to understanding Breith's career as a military leadership. In addition to the conclusions that can be drawn from an analysis of the combat experience, I have examined, closely related to the subject, the German officer selection system, the rewarding and rating system of the German officer corps, the provisions of the service regulations, and the operating mechanisms of the divisional and corps headquarters.

In line with the title and the objectives of my thesis, I did not intend to go into the political, economic and military events of the First and Second World Wars, which are not relevant to the specific topic selected. I have only described the larger context at the level that is necessary for a better understanding of the events that took place. The topics that fit into the system of military science - such as the theory and practice of armoured warfare, the different concepts of leadership, the art of war of the opposing sides, etc. - were used in the course of the thesis primarily to answer question of cause and effect, but it was not my intention to go into them in depth.

Based on the above, I formulated the following key hypotheses:

1. Although politically motivated promotions were not uncommon in the German armed forces, most military leaders in the Second World War owed their promotion to their performance in the field. My hypothesis is that Hermann Breith fell into this latter category. The aim of my research is to explore the military leadership competencies that Breith had, and the combined effects of selection, education, military training, talent as a military leader, etc., that earned him the accolades and positions he held.
2. My hypothesis is that Breith's reliability and balanced performance in difficult situations enabled him to maintain his command of III Panzer Corps from January 1943 until the surrender. In order to prove this, I intend to examine the influence of Hermann Breith as a military leader (primarily as a corps commander) on the specific military actions of the Second World War.
3. Since Breith began his activities as a corps commander in 1943, when Germany lost the military initiative in the Eastern Front, it can be assumed that his success as a corps commander was due to his better understanding of defensive operations.

II. Summary of the research methods

In writing this thesis, I have mainly taken into account aspects of military history, military studies and, to a lesser extent, social history and phalleristics.

For the most part, I used archival documents from the period, including the collection of the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv (Freiburg-in-Breisgau) in Germany, the Red Army documents that are available on the Internet,¹ and the collection of German documents captured by the Soviets at the end of the war.² However, it should be noted that archival sources may be incomplete in several cases. The III Panzer Corps War Diary, which is the most important source for this thesis, together with its annexes, is available until the end of June 1944. The following period was primarily covered on the basis of the operational logbooks of the higher headquarters and their annexes, and was cross-referenced with Soviet archival sources.

I have supplemented the knowledge gained through archival research with additional scientific literature. Among the very extensive bibliographical material on the Second World War, I have mainly used the writings of influential foreign authors such as Karl-Heinz Frieser, David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House, Thomas L. Jentz, Niklas Zetterling and Anders Frankson, together with German unit histories. The important details, reminiscences and additional information found in them helped me to expand, clarify and contextualise the events I was examining. It is important to emphasize that in the period between 1945 and 1991, the Hungarian aspects of the Second World War, Hungary's role in the war, the research and publication of political and military events were greatly influenced by the ideology of the ruling Hungarian Communist Party. At this time, only pro-Soviet writings were produced, with a biased portrayal of the German and Hungarian sides. Although these works have a source value when treated with due criticism, truly relevant, professional and unbiased writings have been produced since the change of regime, primarily by Krisztián Ungváry, Norbert Számvéber, Péter Szabó, István Ravasz and others. In the context of the events that took place on the Hungarian battlefield, I have primarily drawn on the research findings of the above-mentioned historians.

The portrayal and analysis of Breith's military leadership has been carried out mainly in terms of the operational art. The masterful application of a military force and the commander's leadership skills are the key factors which ensure that a command decision is taken and executed successfully. The operational art is therefore the effective, professional

¹ www.pamyat-naroda.ru

² www.germandocsinrussia.org

use of military force to achieve strategic and operational objectives through the planning, organisation and execution of campaigns, operations, battles and combat. The operational art translates strategic objectives into an operational plan, which as a result links and integrates combat-level engagements and battles in such a way that their completion will achieve the strategic objectives. In other words, it is the methodology that determines how best to employ military means to successfully achieve the objectives.

The evaluation of Hermann Breith's military leadership is based on the above mentioned interpretation.

I processed the different military actions as follows:

1. First, I studied the orders issued by the superior German command levels (Army Group, then Army).
2. Secondly, continuing my research in the records of the III Panzer Corps, I analysed how Breith transformed the operational tasks he was given into a combat level; what orders he issued, how he organised, planned and then led the combat activity, and what his behaviour was during the events.

In summary, I have reconstructed the decision processes, the issuing of orders and their execution, together with an in-depth analysis of the events, and then

3. Finally, I have contrasted the former with the activities of the opposing side's military units of the same level. The latter is essential, because only by knowing the objectives and activities of both combatants can an accurate assessment of a military action under examination be made.

I have expanded my investigations with the documents in Breith's personal papers and documents found in his estate. Among the documents contained here, the personal ratings, which regularly produced by his superiors are of particular importance. The award of decorations is one of the most significant acknowledgements of military achievement, and it was therefore particularly important to examine what decorations Breith had received, and for what verified achievements. In addition, it was essential to examine the relevant sections of the 1936 Heeresdienstvorschrift 300, the regulations in force, and to compare Breith's military leadership with these regulations to determine the extent to which he met the requirements.

The structure of the dissertation is as follows

1. Introduction
2. Historiographical background and sources on the topic
3. The career of Hermann Breith up to the outbreak of the Second World War

4. Hermann Breith's career from the outbreak of the Second World War until January 1943
5. Commanding the III Panzer Corps in 1943
6. Commanding the III Panzer Corps until September 1944
7. Commanding the III Panzer Corps during the fighting in Hungary and the last month of the war
8. Conclusions
9. List of sources
10. Appendix

III. Results of the dissertation

In my dissertation, I set out to present Hermann Breith's military leadership in a thorough, multi-faceted study. My aim was also to describe the events in which Breith and the III Panzer Corps he led played an important and decisive role. Throughout my work, I constantly sought to explore, analyse and objectively evaluate the military leadership of Hermann Breith and the military operations of the III Panzer Corps under his command. In addition to the presentation of Hermann Breith and the evaluation of his military leadership, I have further illustrated the previously partially unknown activities of the German III Panzer Corps, some related events of the Second World War, and some of the key internal mechanisms of the German land forces and the factors that contributed to the high standard of German military effectiveness.

In relation to the three main hypotheses set out in the introduction, I have come to the following conclusions:

1. Hermann Breith descended from a civilian family, and he entered the military in the traditional way. This suggests good ability at a time when there was a serious over-subscription, and the descendants of families with a traditional military background had an advantage in selection.

He served in an infantry unit throughout the First World War, fighting on both the Western and Eastern Front. Although there are no further details in his personnel file to suggest this, Breith's performance in combat is well illustrated by the fact that he was awarded the Iron Cross second class in September 1914 and first class in July 1916. In addition to these two prestigious decorations, he was later awarded the Hanseatic Cross of Hamburg and, at the end of the war, the Knight's Cross of the Sword of the Order of the Royal House of Hohenzollern. The latter decoration was also referred to as the 'forerunner' of the Pour le

Mérite.³ He was alternately a troop officer and a staff officer, which gave him a wide range of skills.

Between the two World Wars, he was also an organiser and an active participant in the creation of the German armoured forces. Apart from a brief period in 1941, when he held the post of General of the Fast Troops, Breith held exclusively command positions during the Second World War, first as regimental, then brigade, then division and finally corps commander.

During the Second World War, Breith's achievements earned him, among others, the Repeater's Cross for both of his Iron Crosses, the Knight's Cross for the Oak Leaf and Swords decorations. In Breith's case, it is clear that all his decorations were awarded for his proven military achievements. In summary, an examination of the documents, and in particular the evaluations of Breith, shows that his military record is solely and exclusively due to his talent and military leadership, and that no political favouritism was shown.

In conclusion, it can be said that, on the basis of his organisational and leadership activities and the recognition received, Hermann Breith must be regarded as a prominent and influential member of the German military elite.

2. The battlefield performance of III Panzer Corps, the execution of various combat tasks, the success of the battle with the Soviet forces was of great importance for the operation of the superior army groups. The operational employment of the III Panzer Corps was influenced by Breith's orders, his leadership and command experience, and his military knowledge and experience. Breith was generally able to perform his duties effectively. I have concluded that, as a result of the effective performance of III Panzer Corps, the opposing Soviet forces were usually unable (even in the last period of the war) to carry out their assigned tasks completely and on time.

Breith was a "permanent" corps commander of the German ground forces. Despite a high degree of turnover, this was possible because he was a reliable and well-performing officer. After 1942, ranking in the German armed forces no longer mattered as much as it had previously, mainly because of the necessities of war. This was also taken into account by the Personnel Office of the Army. A promotion and the associated higher rank could be limited not only by lack of ability, but also by the need of the armed forces to retain a well performed commander in his position. Even so, Breith's abilities had their limitations. His superiors were agreed that he was unqualified to be an army commander, although

³ It was the highest decoration by the Kingdom of Prussia, awarded only for exceptional personal achievement.

this is somewhat contradicted by the fact that he led several army-level detachments in the later stages of the war.

3. The hypothesis that Breith would have been more competent in defensive operations is wrong. If we examine the activities of the III Panzer Corps in detail, we can see that, in accordance with the practice of the German armoured warfare, during the defensive the corps involved in offensive combat. The corps was typically held in the second echelon of the superior army's order of battle, and was deployed on the flanks of developing Soviet breaches to lead attacks here in order to restore the front line while attempting to cut off advancing Soviet tank and mechanised units, or to eliminate established Soviet breaches and bridgeheads. During these attacks, the Corps tried to inflict as large losses as possible on the attackers in order to prevent them from achieving their operational objectives or, in less favourable conditions, to slow them down. German armoured formations were thus able to fight most effectively against Soviet superiority. In the ensuing armoured engagement, the superiority of German armoured technology and the Germans' more flexible command and control approach were more effective.

In addition to the typical dynamic defensive fighting based on counter-attacks and counter-thrusts, there were of course situations when the III Panzer Corps was deployed in a front-line, partially static manner. In such cases, there was either insufficient time to fortify the defensive sector and/or there was insufficient force available to occupy it. In such cases, the area was defended by grenadiers either by supporting positions or by manoeuvring defences based on armoured platoon counter-attacks. In the depth of operations, they prepared mainly those sections of the terrain which ensured the closure of the main lines and the reception of the retreating forces. Apart from a few cases examined in this thesis, this was mainly characteristic of the second half of the Hungarian campaign and cannot be considered as a general phenomenon.

In addition to the hypotheses detailed above, I have made further conclusions about the personal and military activities of General Breith. According to the qualifications found in the personnel file, his recollections and information from the operational logs, Breith was a steadfast, dynamic, impulsive and temperamental officer, sometimes quick-tempered, with a wealth of experience in organisational, technical and, above all, combat leadership matters. He possessed a high degree of initiative and fighting spirit, typical of an armoured officer, but was neither aggressive nor reckless, and did not run headlong into a wall. He showed great concern for his subordinates, which, especially in his role as a division commander, led to situations where he happened to overrule the orders of his higher commanders.

Among Breith's qualifications, there is only once mentioned of being a national socialist. On this basis, however, it would be a mistake to declare him a party sympathiser and/or extreme right-wing. As the Second World War progressed, Hitler's confidence in the abilities of his military leaders, who were otherwise mostly limited by him, diminished. As a result, the award of promotions and decorations was increasingly made subject to the formal requirement that the person's ideological background was also appropriate to the regime. The majority of officers classified as National Socialist were not even members of the NSDAP⁴ – nor was Breith. It can therefore be said that this label is a kind of compulsory element. Irrespective of his political convictions, Breith enjoyed the confidence of the leadership, thanks to his military training and his performance.⁵

It is notable that after the Second World War, Breith was not prosecuted for any alleged or actual war crimes. There is no evidence in his personal files or in the various operational logs that he was involved in or ordered to commit any war crimes.

My work further details Hermann Breith's biography, his military leadership and the role of the military units he led, particularly the III Panzer Corps, in the Second World War. It also provides an insight into the hitherto little known military events of the Second World War (particularly in the Eastern Front), which contributes to the knowledge of both historiography and military history.

Based on the content of the thesis, I consider the results of my research to be useful primarily in the field of military science and in the context of military leadership training of the Hungarian Defence Forces. The relevance and actuality of the processed topic is significantly determined by three circumstances:

1. Changes in the security environment in Hungary, in particular the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict since 24 February 2022, which has once again demonstrated that the proper use of tanks and other armoured fighting vehicles remains an indispensable condition for military success. The theory and practice of armoured warfare, joint force cooperation and mission-oriented leadership are still a crucial area of research today. The military leaders of the present and the future should be prepared on the basis of the latest experiences, but with an appropriate historical background. This dissertation reflects on the latter circumstance.

⁴ Ungváry, 2019. 20. o.

⁵ The only exception to this was the command position of the Budapest fortress, where an SS officer was appointed to replace Breith, mainly for political reasons, at Himmler's intervention.

2. The Zrínyi Defence and Force Development Programme and the ongoing internal transformation of the Hungarian Defence Forces make the presentation of military values, the application of leadership in a military historical context and the correct use of new modern military technology a priority.
3. One of the possible applications of this thesis is to support the paradigm shift in the training of officers and non-commissioned officers of the Hungarian Defence Forces, and to illustrate the leadership and command skills required for 21st century combat leadership with historical examples. The historical lessons learned in this thesis may be useful to those working in a joint force environment and may provide a reference point for both the advantages and disadvantages of coalition warfare. I therefore propose that the text of this dissertation be used primarily in higher education and, if possible, in the form of a reference book for those involved in the subject.

In conclusion, I have proved, based on historical facts, that Hermann Breith's military leadership was successful. The III Panzer Corps maintained a high combat value throughout the war in terms of discipline, troop cohesion, morale, initiative and combat readiness. In addition to the components already described, Breith's talent as a military officer, i.e. his masterly use of military force, his preparation and his creativity, had the greatest influence on its success.

Within the given framework, the discussion of the topic cannot be complete, of course, and the research can be continued at several points. Further archival research is warranted to reconstruct Hermann Breith's activities during the First World War in more detail, which will further shed light on his leadership abilities, particularly in the awarding of decorations. Breith's organisational activities, particularly his work as head of the General Staff of the Fast Troops, also require further research. It may be worth examining what changes the office made under Breith's direction, for example in the case of the armoured forces. In view of the possibility that new archival sources may become available, it is also worth considering the possibility that Hermann Breith's military leadership activities, especially in a period when primary sources are already scarce, may need to be clarified over time. The methodology used in researching this topic may also be appropriate for other biographies of German, Soviet or even Hungarian military leaders.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian book chapters (1)

1. **Kerekes, A.:** Hermann Breith, a páncéloscsapatok tábornokának életrajza - különös tekintettel az 1944-1945. évi magyarországi harccselekményekre.
In: A hadtudomány és a 21. század 2015 : Tanulmánykötet. Szerk.: Szelei Ildikó, Berki Gábor, Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége Hadtudományi Osztály, Budapest, 71-80, 2015. ISBN: 9786158004480

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (4)

2. **Kerekes, A.:** A német páncélosfegyvernem megteremtése.
Hadtudományi Szemle. 13 (3), 35-44, 2020. ISSN: 2676-9816.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.32563/hsz.2020.3.3>
3. **Kerekes, A.:** "Szigetvári Zrínyik" Budapest védelmében: A 10. rohamtüzér osztály harcai a magyar fővárosban és annak térségében 1944 decemberétől 1945 februárjáig.
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Hadtört. Közl. 129 (4), 1079-1103, 2016. ISSN: 0017-6540.
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Hungarian conference proceedings (2)

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In: A Balatoni Múzeumban 2015. szeptember 3-án megrendezett "A balatoni csata" című szimpóziumon elhangzott előadások szerkesztett változata, Balatoni Múzeum, [Keszthely], 75-101, 2015.





7. **Kerekes, A.:** Elkésett segítség: A német III. páncélos hadtest a prohorovkai csatában.

In: Tavaszi Szél 2014 Konferencia = Spring Wind 2014: Konferenciakötet. Szerk.: Csiszár Imre, Kőmíves Péter Miklós, Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége, Debrecen, 472-478, 2014. ISBN: 9789638956064

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In: Doktoranduszok interdiszciplináris kutatásai a belügyi nemzetbiztonsági szférában, [Alkotmányvédelmi Hivatal], [Budapest], 22-23, 2021.

List of other publications

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (2)

9. **Kerekes, A.:** A német Panzerkampfwagen (PzKpfw) IV-es harckocsi a német és a magyar páncélos fegyvernemben.

Haditechnika. 50 (1), 59-67, 2016. ISSN: 0230-6891.

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Társad. Honv. 19 (2), 49-58, 2015. ISSN: 1417-7293.

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11. **Kerekes, A.:** The role and creation of the royal Hungarian assault artillery, and the Zrínyi II assault howitzer.

Hadmérnök. 10 (2), 75-88, 2015. ISSN: 1788-1919.

The Candidate's publication data submitted to the iDEa Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of the Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) database.

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