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Fascicolo 16. Novembre 2023
Storia Militare Contemporanea

a cura di
VIRGLIO ILARI



Società Italiana di Storia Militare

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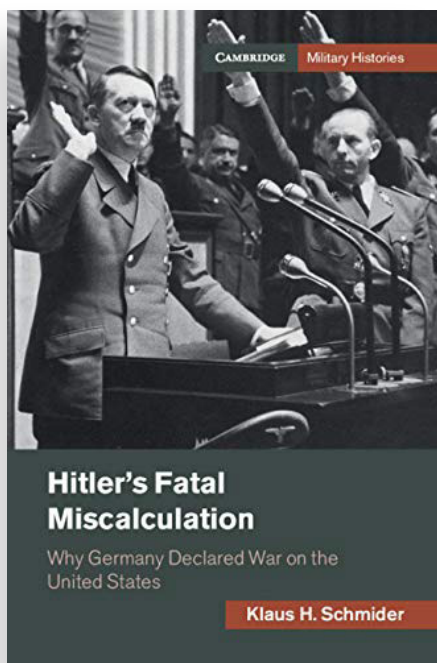
Distintivo speciale del Dipartimento della Guerra concesso agli addetti al Progetto Manhattan per la Bomba A(Atomica) che hanno lavorato almeno sei mesi tra il 19 giugno 1942 e il 6 agosto 1945

Foto 1198 DOE Ed Westcott 1945 Oak Ridge Tennessee (Wikimedia Commons)

KLAUS H. SCHMIDER,

Hitler's Fatal Miscalculation
Why Germany Declared War on the United States

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021



Drawing on a rich, ably-analysed and well-deployed range of archival and primary sources, this is an attempt to make sense of Hitler's declaration of war on the USA. Schmider, a Sandhurst academic, carefully links the decision to context and conjunctures, looking at Hitler's understanding of current and potential geopolitical linkages between Europe, the United States and Japan, and tracing Hitler's decision-making to the changing course of conflict on the Eastern Front and the developing confrontation in the Atlantic between German submarines and American warships. There is also instructive discussion of the German consideration of Lend-Lease Aid and its potential relationship to

Soviet persistence, including the links between this factor and the naval situation.

Schmider's handling of this material is fascinating. The questions of intelligence and decision-making process in Nazi Germany are handled well. He includes important discussing of the factor of timing, and a linkage of this to the question of when Hitler received information which, Schmider correctly claims, is more significant than the actual sequence of events. Thus, he argues that it was only on 14 December that Hitler began to understand that several factors had come together to create a crisis that surpassed anything witnessed thus far on the Eastern Front, and even then he did not adopt a sensible response of more manageable objectives.

The broader strategic dimension possibly invites more scepticism, and certainly calls into question the foolish blurb by Richard Overy that 'this will become the definitive account.' First, the long-term German commitment to 'short-war' strategic thought, while well-established, deserves, in this and other instances, a degree of additional scrutiny. In particular, 'short-war' thinking is an operationalisation of strategy that can rest on a fundamental failure to understand the contrast between the two. Whatever rationality is ascribed to Hitler, this very much undermined the processes of his thought, let alone the notion that he had 'a remarkable strategic instinct.'

So also secondly with the extent to which Schmider underplays the role of prejudice in Hitler's consideration of other powers. This role was neither context nor add-on but hardwired into his thought. How that played through in the decision-making is necessarily a matter at least in part of speculation, and that helps explain why claims for definitive status are foolish.

For Hitler, relations with both America and Japan were problematic. The non-aggression pact between Japan and the Soviet Union had woeful strategic and operational consequences for Germany, and it was necessary to avoid a wider crisis. For Japan to attack America and Britain was important, and indeed threatened by Japanese-American negotiations in late 1941. In the event, the German declaration of war on America did not lead to any concerted attempt at grand strategy. The two powers fought what in effect were separate wars, which was an aspect of a more general failure of Hitler's alliance-strategy.

Moreover, there was a significant gap between Hitler's determination to impose his will on events and thus mould the context, and the multiple pressures of

reality. This extended to a failure to assess the likely trajectory of war between Japan and America. Hitler's use of his ideological suppositions when considering his opponents was scarcely unique but to regard America as weakened by deracination, democracy and consumerism, and as lacking in martial spirit was seriously mistaken. Schmider captures a present trend to emphasise 'pragmatic' considerations in a sharp contrast to the previous stress on ideological prejudices. This approach is only so useful as Hitler's outlook clearly framed how he processed information.

Schmider should be congratulated on an impressive work that adds much to our discussion of German strategy. It deserves widespread attention.

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JEREMY BLACK



Francobollo sovietico del 1990 in memoria di Kim Philby (1912-1988), ufficiale dell'intelligence service di fede comunista e spia sovietica.



Lev Nikolaevič Tolstoj in uniforme di capitano d'artiglieria

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