



Topics in Military History: Modern German Military History
Prothro-Yeager College of Humanities and Social Sciences
HIST 4683
Summer 2026

Contact Information

Instructor: Dr. John Ashbrook
Office: 215 O'Donohoe Hall
Office Hours: via email only
E-mail: john.ashbrook@msutexas.edu
Phone: 434-386-1750

Course Description

When examining the history of German military power since the early modern period, one must begin with the fact that no unified German state existed before 1871. Unlike France or Britain, the lands that later became Germany were politically fragmented for centuries, and military development took place through a patchwork of princely states, free cities, dynastic territories, and imperial institutions. What we will examine in this course is the evolution of German warfare, military institutions, and military thought from the age of the Holy Roman Empire to the present, with particular attention to the ways in which war helped shape state-building, nationalism, and political culture. We will consider the military weakness and decentralization of the Holy Roman Empire, the rise of Brandenburg-Prussia as the most successful military state in German-speaking Europe, the impact of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, the role of armed force in the failed Revolutions of 1848, and the wars of unification that created the German Empire in 1871. From there, we will follow the development of German military power through the Wilhelmine era, World War I, the crisis of the Weimar Republic, the rise of the Nazi regime, World War II, the destruction of the Third Reich, the divided military systems of East and West Germany during the Cold War, and the place of the Bundeswehr in reunited Germany after 1990. What makes this section unique is that we will be examining this history in Berlin, Germany, a city that stood at the political and military center of many of these transformations.

Some of the more important questions we will cover include how and why Prussia became identified with military efficiency and state discipline. In what ways did military institutions help create, rather than simply defend, the German state? Why did war play such a decisive role in German unification? How did industrialization, bureaucracy, and nationalism reshape German armies and the experience of warfare? Why did Germany fight the world wars as it did, and to what extent were German militarism and authoritarianism products of long-term historical development rather than temporary deviations? How did the Nazi regime transform older military traditions, and where did the Wehrmacht fit into the crimes of the Third Reich? What did military service mean in the socialist East German and democratic West German states

during the Cold War? Finally, what role does military power play in German political culture today, and how has reunified Germany balanced the burdens of its past with the demands of NATO, European security, and the post-Cold War world.

Beyond presenting a narrative of events, this course is meant to stimulate discussion of historical issues, while challenging preconceived notions or prejudices in an environment of respect for those with differing perspectives.

You will be expected to have read the textbooks for the course in the weeks **before** we travel to Berlin. You will write short summaries for your readings, which will help you understand the history of Germany and its peoples, particularly in the development of the state and nation (about 200 words for each book to be sent via email before we fly to Berlin (except for two books on general German history [*A Concise history of Germany by Fulbrook* and *Nazi Germany and World War II by Donald Wall*]. No summaries necessary for these two). In country you will be expected to make constant connections to the German history presented in the books and in your experiences on various field trips. Your final project, due six weeks after you return to the United States, will be a paper in which you explore a topic that relates to some aspect of German Military History from 1500 to the present. We will determine the paper topic together in the days before we travel, or in the first week of the program in Berlin. If you wish to do the research and writing before we travel, speak to me as soon as possible.

Student Engagement in the Material

Students will be held personally responsible for their own education. I am a harsh taskmaster and do not accept excuses that tend to be pervasive in today's society. You are adults, and with age comes responsibility for your own actions or lack thereof. Active student participation in learning (which includes careful reading of ALL assignments, the completion of ALL assignments in a timely manner) and adequate preparation is essential to meeting the learning goals of the course. A grade of A is a designation for superior work, and B for good work. If your work ethic, written work, and other efforts are merely satisfactory, you will EARN a C. The bare minimum earns a D.

Textbook

We will be using two textbooks for the course. The books are affordable from a bookstore or online, but I encourage you to get an electronic copy, if available, so you have it on an electronic device immediately after ordering. I will not accept "the book didn't come in" or similar excuses.

Texts

- 1) Mary Fulbrook, *A Concise history of Germany*, 9780521540711
- 2) Donald Wall, *Nazi Germany and World War II*, 9780314093608
- 3) John Laffin, *Jackboot: A history of the German soldier, 1718-1945*, 9781566197502
- 4) Gordon Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army, 1640-1945*, 9780195002577
- 5) D. S. V. Fosten and R. J. Marrion, *The German Army, 1914-18*, 9780850452839
- 6) Peter Tsouras, *Fighting in Hell: The German Ordeal on World War II's Eastern Front*, 9781510703568

- 7) Johann Voss, *Black Edelweiss: A memoir of combat and conscience by a soldier of the Waffen-SS*, 9780966638981

Online Readings: As assigned

Readings MUST BE DONE by the first week of the Berlin program.

Academic Integrity, Misconduct Policy & Procedures

Academic Dishonesty: Cheating, collusion, and plagiarism (the act of using source material of other persons, either published or unpublished, without following the accepted techniques of crediting, or the submission for credit of work not the individual's own). Additional guidelines on procedures in these matters may be found in the Office of Student Conduct.

Notice: Understand the following – it applies to all assignments, including drafts of papers. If you in any instance “cut and paste” from any internet source without citing that source (plagiarism) or use unapproved internet sources, you will fail the assignment in question. Depending on the severity of the offense, the professor reserves the right to employ any and all university sanctioned disciplinary actions, of which I will pursue prosecution to its fullest extent. I will drop you from the course and report the incident to Student Affairs and any other office as per university policy. **This also applies to any work done with ANY AI tools.** I run your assignments through AI and plagiarism detectors, so **DO NOT use AI in your assignments.** This includes tools like Grammarly or other AI assisted editing tools.

Grading

In the past, I've used a number of different assignments to evaluate student learning and retention. This summer you will be evaluated on a final research project, short written assignments, including summaries, and on class participation.

| Assignments | Percentage of grade |
|---|----------------------------|
| Final Research paper | 40% |
| Participation and short written assignments (summaries) | 60% |

| Final Grade | Percentage |
|--------------------|-------------------|
| A | 90% plus |
| B | 80 – 89.9% |

| Final Grade | Percentage |
|-------------|---------------|
| C | 70 – 79.9% |
| D | 60 – 69.9% |
| F | Less than 60% |

The final paper may be a new exercise to some in the class. It is meant to be a focused research paper on some aspect of German military history. The topic should fall into the timeframe of the class (1600-present) and we will discuss a proper topic in the weeks before we travel. It should be about 3600 words in length and should draw on about 15 resources (academic resources and may include your assigned textbooks). It should be well-written, edited, and argue a thesis.

I also want summaries of about 200 words for EACH of the books assigned except for the two specified above. It is easier to do this if you take notes and/or write them while you are reading. These, too, should be well-written and edited.

Early work is encouraged. It will be due, without exception, six weeks after our return date. No late work will be accepted.

Extra Credit

I do NOT offer extra credit for any reason. Don't ask.

Make Up Work/Tests

I will only allow make up work if there is a legitimate excuse. I have the sole discretion in determining whether or not an absence is excused. Other reasons must be documented in some acceptable form or fashion (proof).

Desire-to-Learn (D2L)

MSU Texas uses this platform for online instruction. Each student is expected to be familiar with it as it provides a primary source of communication between student and professor. Check D2L regularly for announcements, course material, and recorded lectures on specific topics. You can log into D2L through the MSU Homepage. If you experience difficulties, please contact the technicians listed for the program in the Distance Learning Office at MSU.

Online Computer Requirements

It is your responsibility to have (or have access to) a working computer for this course. *Assignments and tests are due by the due date, and personal computer technical difficulties will not be considered reason for the instructor to allow students extra time to submit assignments, tests, or discussion postings.* Your computer being down is not an excuse for missing a deadline! Your future boss will tell you the same thing when he is dismissing you.

E-mail: Note that e-mail correspondence is the most effective and convenient way in which to communicate with me. The professor/student relationship is professional by nature and, accordingly, your e-mail correspondence should be constructed professionally.

Withdrawals (Course Drop): The professor is NOT responsible for student withdrawals. The student is responsible for meeting all academic deadlines including withdrawal deadlines.

Services for Students with Disabilities: In accordance with Section 504 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Midwestern State University endeavors to make reasonable accommodations to ensure equal opportunity for qualified persons with disabilities to participate in all educational, social, and recreational programs and activities. After notification of acceptance, students requiring accommodations should make application for such assistance through Disability Support Services, located in the Clark Student Center, Room 168, (940) 397-4140. Current documentation of a disability will be required in order to provide appropriate services, and each request will be individually reviewed. For more details, please go to Student Disability Office.

Grade Appeal Process: Students who wish to appeal a grade should consult the Midwestern State University Undergraduate Catalog.

Changes in the course syllabus, procedure, assignments, and schedule may be made at the discretion of the instructor. The videos for viewing are listed in the contents section on D2L by day.

Course Schedule

As this is a study abroad course, our final schedule will be determined in Berlin itself. I will have a tentative schedule once our field trips have been booked. However, I expect you to have read the books and have done your short summaries by the time we travel.