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Kenneth Macksey. *Kesselring: German Master Strategist of the Second World War.* London: Greenhill Books/Lionel Leventhal, 1996. 264 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85367-256-9.

Reviewed by Stephen G. Fritz (Department of History, East Tennessee State University)
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A caveat is in order as the first item of business: any reader expecting a new treatment of Field Marshal Albert Kesselring will be greatly disappointed in this book, for it is merely a reprint of Macksey's 1976 book, *Kesselring: The Making of the Luftwaffe*. It contains no new introduction, nor a chapter where the author discusses new and relevant sources. Neither does it provide any citations or an extensive bibliography. And if all of this were not frustrating enough, the large number of typos and other mistakes completes one's irritation with the book.

Still, the larger problem with the book, as with the original, is Macksey's hagiographic treatment of Kesselring. Indeed, in his conclusion the author opines that Kesselring deserves "an exalted position among the highest of the past military hierarchy" (p. 249), with only the likes of Scharnhorst and Moltke of comparable brilliance. Evaluating military leadership is, of course, notoriously difficult and controversial, with constantly shifting parameters as to what constitutes "brilliance." And without doubt Kesselring was a highly skilled and effective leader. No, the problem is that Macksey's own evidence, much of it ironically coming from Kesselring's memoirs, doesn't sustain his thesis that Kesselring was the German master strategist of World War II.

Leaving aside his contributions to the creation of the prewar Luftwaffe, the picture of Kesselring that emerges is of a highly competent leader, one able to control a battlefield, squeeze the most from his men and resources, and deal effectively with his often difficult Italian ally. But he was hardly a military genius, as his errors in judgment certainly equaled his successes, and had a greater impact on the overall negative development of the war from Germany's perspective.

A few examples should suffice to illustrate this point.

During the Battle of Britain, for example, while he was still actively commanding Luftwaffe forces, Kesselring made the grievous mistake of shifting the focus of German aerial activities from the destruction of RAF airbases to that of the bombing of London, and then compounded this error in judgment by persisting in attempts, with a seriously depleted force, to destroy the RAF by day while at the same time bombing the aircraft industry and London by night. As Macksey admits, dilution was the result of this inability to set priorities, and when Kesselring finally realized the obvious, he sought to rectify the situation by resorting to wholly ineffective methods, such as using fighter-bombers to deliver bombs on British factories and cities and then engaging in aerial combat with RAF fighters. And while Kesselring proved competent in commanding a *Luftflotte* during Operation Barbarossa, the major tactical innovation, namely spreading activity against enemy artillery over time as well as space, was actually forced on him by Heinz Guderian. Moreover, although this hardly sets him apart, it should also be noted that Kesselring seems neither to have doubted the German ability to defeat Soviet Russia, nor the urgent need to do so. Hardly the stuff of military genius or an independent imagination.

Although effective in Russia, Kesselring clearly had not distinguished himself in the Battle of Britain. Nor did he particularly impress in North Africa, although admittedly he had to deal with a stubborn and difficult rival in Erwin Rommel, placate the Italians (who could be even more obstructive), and prosecute a campaign on limited resources. For all his success through 1942, however, his stubborn refusal to see the obvious in North Africa and recommend to Hitler, with whom he had considerable influence, a timely withdrawal from the Tunisian pocket led to the destruction and capture of some of the finest

troops in the German army. Moreover, one is left with the impression that he chose to hang on in Tunisia only because Rommel, his great rival, was urging withdrawal. Again, as in the Battle of Britain, his one failure of judgment outweighed his tactical successes. Finally, even in the Italian campaign, from which his reputation largely springs, his undeniable success at improvising a strategy that perfectly negated Allied aims, as well as his ability to control the explosive political situation, begin to seem less illustrious when one realizes that for most of that campaign German forces actually were equal to or larger than Allied forces (in a region perfectly suited to defensive warfare), and that by Spring 1944 at the latest Italy had largely been written off by the Allied high command as a dead end.

Macksey's glowing assessment of Kesselring thus seems strangely at odds with his own evidence. Nor does he deal in any substantive way with key issues of Kesselring's personality. Here was a man who prided himself on his active intelligence, yet who never seemed to ques-

tion the direction of the war; a man who was staunchly loyal to Hitler to the end, but who dallied at the edges of the July 20 plot; a man who evidently realized as early as late 1943 that the war was lost, but refused to countenance any talk of surrender until after Hitler was dead; a man concerned about his troops but whose stubborn actions in prosecuting the war needlessly cost lives. Furthermore, there are in Kesselring's statements and actions tantalizing hints that he might have had more than a personal oath of loyalty to Hitler, that he saw in the Fuehrer the man who could and was building the new Germany, of which he evidently approved. In summary, then, this is a frustrating book, one that is interesting for many aspects of Kesselring's career and activities, yet curiously lacking in analytical substance.

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