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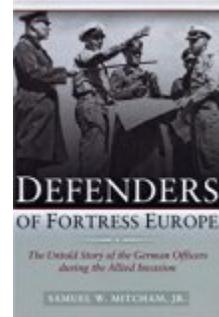
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Samuel W. Mitcham. *Defenders of Fortress Europe: The Untold Story of the German Officers during the Allied Invasion*. Washington D.C.: Potomac, 2008. 258 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59797-274-1.

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Outstanding Officers, SS Fanatics, and Nazi Generals

This study by the prolific Samuel W. Mitcham Jr. examines the western front of the Second World War in 1944-45 from the perspective of German military officers. In a combination of operational military history and extended prosopography, Mitcham presents a compelling narrative of the dramatic clash between Allied and Axis forces in France, from the Normandy landings to the surrender of the last pockets of German resistance in fortress towns on the French coast. However, the work also suffers from methodological problems and a misleading portrayal of the Wehrmacht that will grate on scholars of the Third Reich as well as proponents of war and society studies—though probably not a mass readership of military history buffs. The book’s subtitle itself is deceptive. After all, the campaign in France is one of the most heavily covered topics within the historiography on World War Two. Nevertheless, among studies of the western front, there is certainly no book like *Defenders of Fortress Europe*. Mitcham’s use of some two hundred previously undisclosed personnel files—a bequest of the late Theodor-Friedrich von Stauffenberg—conveys the social and political complexity of the German officer class in a unique and innovative manner. The work shows how figures like the Old World, aristocratic Gerd von Rundstedt meshed with working-class upstarts like Josef “Sepp” Dietrich; how salty, old Prussian anti-Nazis like Erwin von Witzleben worked alongside fervent National Socialist generals like Walter Model, as well as ideological warriors of the SS (*Schutzstaffel*) like Heinz Lammerding and Kurt “Panzer” Meyer.

Between opposite ends of the spectrum lay officers from a variety of social backgrounds, most of them with mixed views towards the political messages of Nazism. Mitcham illustrates these intricate shadings by touching on the religious persuasions of the men involved as well, something commonly overlooked in studies of the German military and SS. Rundstedt, for example, was a devout Catholic who did not let his religious principles stand in the way of cooperating with the Nazis, while Baron Friedrich von der Heydte was so well known for his piety and charity that his comrades referred to him as “the Rosary Paratrooper” (p. 50). Protestant affiliations were equally complicated, even within the SS, contrary to the common depiction of that institution as relatively homogeneous in terms of ideology and spiritual outlook. Whereas SS general Paul Hausser renounced Protestantism to become *Gottgläubig* (“believer in God”: the politically correct and dubious version of Christianity adopted by some Nazis), Werner Ostendorff refused to renounce his faith as expected, and Willi Bittrich even allowed the observance of church services under his command in direct contravention of SS policy. German officers stationed on the western front were, indeed, a motley collection of soldiers.

Mitcham does an excellent job relating the internal divisions and conflicting motivations of the officer class, many of them extremely self-serving in nature, to the ultimate collapse of the German presence in France. These men already faced the overwhelming disparity of human

and material resources that existed between the two sides in June 1944. This situation proved critical above all in the air war, and many German generals either met death or very narrowly avoided it while fleeing British and American fighters in their staff cars. Compounding the reality of Allied aerial superiority was the simple fact that the Germans could not replace their losses; the Allies could. Several of the divisions charged with repulsing the invasion were made up of Poles, Ukrainians, and ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutsche*), a source of military manpower from eastern Europe primarily dragooned into fighting for the Reich, their German-language skills and loyalty to the regime highly questionable. Most of the German units in the west were already under-strength, poorly supplied, ill-equipped, and non-motorized when the Allies landed.

Personal and political differences within the command structure made a dire material and strategic situation even worse. As Mitcham points out, networks of authority in the west did not conform to an established chain of command. This argument applies, of course, to Adolf Hitler and his well-known, direct, and usually disastrous interference in military operations, though the practice of sacking subordinates for political reasons was an accepted commonality amongst the General Staff and divisional commanders as well. Model, for example, issued court-martial proceedings against General Dietrich von Choltitz for ignoring Hitler's order to burn Paris to the ground. By the same token, Hitler's stubborn refusal to accept strategic withdrawals led to the wholesale destruction of one German unit after another, while the firing or demotion of officers who did try to retreat occurred throughout the upper and middle ranks of the *Westheer*. Disagreements over general strategy and specific tactics fundamentally weakened the German response, and took on personal as well as class dimensions. German officers differed not only on where they believed the Allies would strike, but on how the attack should be met. As overall commander in the west, Rundstedt wanted to retain the now-dwindled tank reserves for a decisive battle in the interior of France. Erwin Rommel, the informal source of authority in Normandy, realized that the only way to stop the invasion was to meet it at the beaches with armored support. Hans von Salmuth sided with Rundstedt against Rommel, his nominal superior, expressing displeasure with the "Desert Fox" by referring to him as a "Swabian commoner" (p. 20) who owed his position to good fortune. This strategic debate ended only when American and British forces broke out of Normandy and raced towards Germany. At this point, defeatism be-

gan to consume more and more commanders, reflected in Rundstedt's reply to inquiries from Hitler and Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel immediately following the breakout: "Make peace you fools!" (p. 89). Rundstedt was promptly removed from command.

Given such military deficiencies and political infighting, it is not difficult to see why the Allies advanced, albeit at great cost and in the face of tenacious German resistance. Nor is it hard to understand why a group of German officers attempted to assassinate Hitler on July 20, 1944. Far more interesting than Mitcham's account of this now well-explored episode is his coverage of the period following the attempted coup, when many officers took an active role in purging their own ranks. Model, for example, volunteered to serve on the so-called Court of Honor designed to expel suspect officers from the army and thus leave them open to detainment and execution by the Gestapo. One anecdote in particular reveals the way in which the purge expressed internal divisions and their impact on the military situation. On the night of July 20, Günther "Hans" von Kluge, who replaced Rundstedt as commander on the western front, summoned several colleagues to a dinner party at his residence in Paris. Kluge was hardly sympathetic to the Nazis, but while a sometime member of the anti-Hitler conspiracy, he remained ambivalent towards its numerous attempts to kill the *Führer*. His dinner guests, including the military governor of France, Carl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel, were directly implicated in the coup. Aware of this fact, Kluge cheerfully informed the conspirators of the plot's failure, relishing his meal as the rest of the officers sat in silence; as one recalled, it was "like dining in the house of the dead" (p. 97). But Kluge himself fell speechless when Stülpnagel informed him that the entire SS and police apparatus in Paris was under arrest, suggesting to Hitler the involvement of the new overall commander himself. Fearing implication in the conspiracy, Kluge thereafter sought to appear as loyal to the regime as possible, which meant he did not challenge Hitler's increasingly unrealistic orders even though he knew they would have catastrophic effects for German troops on the ground.

Yet despite constructing a nuanced overview of the German officers fighting in France in the later war years, this image of complexity is undercut by depictions and omissions which reinforce a false, binary distinction between Nazi war criminals and an allegedly more benign, professional army that by and large did not commit atrocities. Mitcham appropriates this separation to the level of military performance, contrasting "outstanding officers" on the one hand with "SS fanatics" (p. 49) and a

few “Nazi generals” (p. 161) on the other. In almost all cases, he describes SS officers as poor leaders, inept in the tasks of maintaining a successful military defense. “Nazi generals” receive similar scorn and dismissal, their very placement as commanding officers attributed to contacts within the upper echelons of the Nazi Party. One example of this tendency appears in the case of Friedrich Dollmann, commander of the Seventh Army, who allowed “politically non-biased National Socialist officers” to give speeches to his troops, “made several major mistakes” (p. 27), and “performed poorly” (p. 30). Another example is Wolfgang Pickert, who attained his rank through being “backed by [Hermann] Göring” (p. 44) and mistakenly spread out his flak batteries too extensively on the eve of D-Day, negating their effect. Yet in sharp contrast, Erich Marks—whom Hitler suspected for his association with murdered former chancellor and Nazi political opponent Kurt von Schleicher—allegedly “made no mistakes” (p. 48) during the entire campaign. Throughout the book, the efforts of Nazified individuals are described as “uninspiring or mediocre at best” (p. 27) and in other similar terms. Even the rare exceptions—like Kurt Mayer and Walter Model—are presented to prove the rule. In another instance, the author defines Fritz Krämer as “[o]ne of the few really capable General Staff officers in the SS” (p. 88). The point is not that some SS officials and “Nazi” officers could operate just as effectively as their “non-Nazi” counterparts, but rather that Mitcham’s interpretation locates German military prowess as the province of the latter in order to overly differentiate them from the former. In a familiar way, the Wehrmacht comes across as the “real”, professional soldiers whose conquests continue to dazzle military historians; not the merciless and genocidal force of domination that ravaged the continent.

The author does not argue that the officers’ political relationships to Nazism were black and white, but he does seem to presume some kind of correlation between political affiliation, combat effectiveness, and participation (or lack thereof) in violence against civilians. The vast majority of SS and army personnel in the west came from the eastern front—a factor relatively underexamined in the existing literature—and few of them could have escaped the decidedly brutal nature of the war against the Soviet Union. Yet while replete with the murderous exploits of SS officers on both fronts, Mitcham’s sources apparently contain a significant lacuna when it comes to the experiences of military officers in the east. Instead, we have Wehrmacht officers like Fritz Bayerlein, who protected Russian civilians and prisoners of war from sadistic SS killers, juxtaposed with the very same kind of killer

in a man like Christian Tychsen, who reported an obstructive and disliked SS superior for raping a “racially inferior” Ukrainian woman in order to assume his title. In a similar vein, Mitcham counterposes Andreas von Auluck, who did “everything he could to prevent suffering among the French civilians trapped in the city [of St.-Malo]” (p. 180), with Heinz Lammerding (“a poor to mediocre divisional commander,” p. 65), head of the SS panzer division *Das Reich*, the perpetrators of the infamous massacre at Oradour-sur-Glande. To be fair, the overwhelming bulk of Nazi atrocities took place in eastern Europe, not France, and Mitcham did not intend to produce a study of German atrocities in this theater. On display here is an analysis of biographies and battles. A more complete inclusion of war crimes on the western front—less common than in the east but definitely not absent—would be beyond the work’s scope. Nevertheless, one comes away from this book with the impression that the German army was a “normal” fighting force, uninvolved for the most part in mass murder, and that such participation in atrocities that did occur—including political sympathy with Nazism—roughly translated into poor battlefield performance. Neither view is sustainable. Mitcham does not directly argue these points, but the implication is clear. When referring to Kluge as one of the few German generals who supported the launching of Operation Barbarossa, he betrays adherence to a central plank of the postwar myth of the “unblemished” Wehrmacht: that the genocidal war of annihilation waged in the east, and indeed throughout Europe as a whole, was not primarily the responsibility of the German military. The work of Manfred Messerschmidt, Omer Bartov, Hannes Heer, Klaus Naumann, and Geoffrey Megargee, to name a few, emphatically belies this notion.[1] There were definitely far more than a few German generals who supported the war against the Soviet Union.

Defenders of Fortress Europe is also problematic at the methodological level. The work shifts from individual profiles to descriptions of battle and back again, often with little to no introductory context or logic to their sequence. The biographical summaries themselves, while certainly the most noteworthy aspect of the book, are in many places monotonous recitations of each officer’s birthplace, spouse, and politics, his promotions and the units he served with, and above all, his military performance according to Mitcham. In fact, as hinted at above, the work rather quickly falls into the trap of judging “good general vs. bad general” through ex post facto criteria employed to distill the “lessons” to learn from a campaign—a long-standing trend within operational mil-

itary history.[2] Mitcham does not climb out of this trap even in the second portion of the book, where he traces the lives of the surviving “defenders” after the war, again usually in peremptory fashion. Many historians may disagree with Mitcham’s maxim that “to understand history, one must read biography—especially the biography of leaders,” an attitude that is both dismissive of the ordinary *Landsers* at the front lines, and uncomfortably reminiscent of an earlier, narrower version of historical scholarship. *Defenders of Fortress Europe* is nonetheless a fascinating and insightful work of military history on the German officer class of the Second World War. However, while the work does an excellent job describing battles and establishing links between the social, political, and religious background of German officers and their actions in combat, many of its implications for the study of the Third Reich must be read with a critical eye.

Notes

[1]. See the many works by Manfred Messerschmidt—

most recently *Die Wehrmachtjustiz, 1933-1945* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2008); Omer Bartov has also written extensively on this subject, see *Germany’s War and the Holocaust: Disputed Histories* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), and *Hitler’s Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); also see Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann, eds., *War of Extermination: The German Military in World War II, 1941-1944* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), particularly Naumann’s essay in this collection, “The ‘Unblemished’ Wehrmacht: The Social History of a Myth,” as well as Geoffrey P. Megargee, *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2006).

[2]. Robert M. Citino discusses this trend in his excellent article “Military Histories Old and New: A Reintroduction,” *The American Historical Review*, October 2007, <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/112.4/citino.html> (accessed June 16, 2010).

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