

# H-Net Reviews

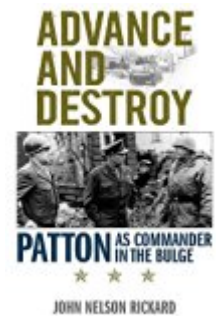
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Nelson Rickard. *Advance and Destroy: Patton as Commander in the Bulge*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011. Illustrations, maps. xxii + 490 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-3455-0.

Reviewed by Tal Tovy (Bar Ilan University)

Published on H-War (May, 2012)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



On December 16, 1944, Germany conducted a wide-ranging counteroffensive on the western front with the aim of destabilizing the Anglo-American front lines, splitting the military forces of the Western Allies, and eventually reaching the port of Antwerp and destroying it. Adolf Hitler hoped that the results of this attack would induce England the United States to begin negotiations with Germany to end the war. He could then once again focus all his efforts in the East against the advance of the Red Army. Many studies have been written about this last German counteroffensive, which the Germans called *Wacht am Rhein* and the Americans referred to as the Battle of the Bulge. For the Americans, this was the largest land battle that its army had ever conducted in its military history. It was an American epic, as testified by the historian Max Hastings in his book *Armageddon: The Battle for Germany, 1944-45* (2004), in a chapter devoted to the Battle of the Bulge. This depiction indicates the importance of this battle not only in the military history of the western front in the Second World War, but also and especially in the military history of the American army.

It was not an easy challenge that John Nelson Rickard undertook to write a fresh study that would combine a discussion of this battle with an analysis of the activities of George S. Patton as the commander of the U.S. Third Army, whose personality and actions as a commander, from the invasion to North Africa to the invasion of Germany, have been given extensive literary coverage. Rickard, however, notes that “many aspects of his [Patton’s] generalship have not received critical treatment” (p. 5). There is no doubt that the controversial personality of General Patton and his actions during the Second World War (not only in the American counteroffensive

in the Ardennes) could supply an abundance of further studies that may illuminate other aspects of his multi-varied personality.

Rickard begins his book with a military analysis of the first stages of the German counteroffensive and the retreat-and-stand battles of the Americans, as well as the series of strategic decisions made by General Dwight D. Eisenhower when he realized the extent of the German offensive. This discussion is of great importance. These chapters provide the historical framework for understanding Patton’s generalship. Also, those who are familiar with the battle in the Ardennes will find the first chapters, even if they do not break new ground, vital for the continuation of the discussion.

The battle in the Ardennes can be crudely divided into three main stages. The first is the German offensive and the collapse of the American positions. The second is the American resistant stand with emphasis in research literature on the heroic battle of the Screaming Eagles around the Belgian town of Bastogne, although other American units participated in this battle and fought with no less bravery. The third stage is the American counteroffensive, the beginning of which can be determined, among other things, by the arrival of the rescue units of the Third Army to relieve the American troops besieged in Bastogne, until its ending with the retreat of the German forces.

Rickard places the third stage and the activities of the Third Army under the command of General Patton at the center of his discussion. This is the main innovation of his book and its importance for the study of the Battle of the Bulge. The American counteroffensive

and the repulse of the German forces eastward restored the offensive initiative to the Western Allies that led to their crossing of the Rhine in the spring of 1945. However, Allied plans were postponed and a series of new decisions were made in the High Command in order to find ways to defeat the German forces that had invaded Belgium and Luxembourg. This systematic strategic deliberation merits a discussion based on rich archival material and provides the reader with a comprehensive and in-depth deliberation on Patton's overall effectiveness in terms of mission accomplished and his ability to gain and hold ground. Rickard also examines the system of relations between Patton and his superiors in command, Omar Bradley and Eisenhower.

Rickard claims that it was under Patton's ruthless aggression that the Third Army led the Allies to victory in the Battle of the Bulge. Since he focuses on the Third Army and its commander, quite naturally the activities of the other two American armies (the First and the Ninth) are given a secondary place in this discussion. These two armies, especially the Ninth Army, absorbed the full force of the German offensive. Although both armies were transferred, despite the protest of Bradley, to the 21st Army Group under the command of Bernard Montgomery, there is no doubt that its soldiers and officers also made an important contribution to the victory. The First and Ninth Armies managed to recuperate and constituted an inseparable part of the resistance and offensive battle engagements. Historical research on the resistance battles should undoubtedly require a comparative discussion between the activities of all the American armies that participated in the war. This was not Rickard's intention, but he has laid the groundwork for future comparative research on the activities of the three armies at the American counteroffensive stage, and has thus made an additional research contribution.

From a historiographical point of view, the book finds its place within three contexts. The first is in providing further research on the battle in the Ardennes, especially regarding the American reaction and counteroffensive. No doubt the last word has yet to be written on this issue. The second is an additional study of Patton's military prowess and activities in the most important battle of his life. "Perhaps God saved me for this effort," wrote Patton to his wife Beatrice.[1] The third historiographical context is even more important. Historians have extensively debated the tactical efficiency of the American army during the Second World War, especially vis-à-vis the German army. On the one hand, one approach claims that the United States was victorious in

the Second World War in general and in the Battle of the Bulge in particular, thanks to its military might; in other words, it was its absolute material advantage against both Germany and Japan that gave it the decisive victory. One of the pioneers of this approach is historian Martin van Creveld, who describes this perspective in his book *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939-1945* (1982). On the other hand, some researchers challenge this thesis of material potency as the sole factor in the American victory. For example, John Toland in his popular book on the Battle of the Bulge wrote at the end of the 1950s that "a terrible weapon was forged in the Ardennes: the American fighting man." [2]

Later researchers have disproved the idea of the tactical inferiority of the American army and its fighters in the Second World War as compared with the superiority of Germany. These historians, such as Michael D. Doubler (*Closing with the Enemy: How GIs Fought the War in Europe, 1944-45* [1994]) and Peter R. Mansoor (*The GI Offensive in Europe: The Triumph of American Infantry Divisions, 1941-1945* [1999]), do not overlook the material strength of the American army but discount it as the main reason.[3] To these studies we should add the resolute position of Stephen E. Ambrose as presented in a series of books, including *Band of Brothers: The 101st Airborne Division from D-Day to V-E Day* (1992); *D Day, June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II* (1994); and *Citizen Soldiers: The U.S. Army from the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany, June 7, 1944-May 7, 1945* (1998).[4] In my opinion, we can ascribe Rickard's study to this school of thought. In the analysis of Patton's military capabilities in the Battle of the Bulge, there is evidence not only of the material power that enabled the Third Army to block the advance of the German army and push them back eastward, but also of the battle efficiency of ordinary soldiers and junior officers. Rickard's book opens up another field of research within this school of thought, which is a comparison between the battle and command efficiency of the American field officers and their German counterparts.

It is not easy to follow the course of battles described in the book, but the maps and especially the appendices of the order of the battles make it a little easier. If the reader who is sitting comfortably and reading this book finds it difficult sometimes to understand a given unit's mission or activity, just imagine the confusion that prevailed in the Ardennes in the winter of 1944-45. We are here presented with an informative historical study that creates a fascinating encounter between an event of great importance and a magnetic personality. Rickard's claims

are well based due to the variety of primary sources and especially of the archival material that he used. It is an important book that makes an additional contribution to our understanding of the Battle of the Bulge and of General Patton, and any future research either on the battle (especially the counteroffensive stage) or on the man will be obliged to take this research into account.

#### Notes

[1]. Quoted in Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War*

(New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 682.

[2]. John Toland, *Battle: The Story of the Bulge* (1959; repr., New York: Random House, 1999), 377.

[3]. Both authors discuss extensively the function of the American fighter in the battle in the Ardennes.

[4]. See also Stephen E. Ambrose, introduction to *The Bitter Woods: The Battle of the Bulge*, by John S. D. Eisenhower (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), 5-8.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** Tal Tovy. Review of Rickard, John Nelson, *Advance and Destroy: Patton as Commander in the Bulge*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. May, 2012.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35012>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.