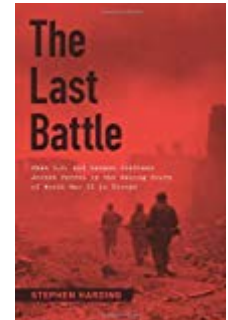


Stephen Harding. *The Last Battle: When U.S. and German Soldiers Joined Forces in the Waning Hours of World War II in Europe.* Boston: Da Capo Press, 2013. 223 pp. Illustrations. \$25.99, cloth, ISBN 978-0-306-82208-7.



Reviewed by Cameron Zinsou

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

The Last Battle might be mistaken for a Hollywood screenplay. So grand are the characters, so dramatic is the plot, so engaging is the prose that the reader can visualize Gerard Depardieu as Maurice Gamelin ducking behind a burning Sherman tank as SS soldiers ping bullets from their rifles against the burning hulk of metal against the backdrop of a centuries-old castle. Stephen Harding, a respected military historian and senior editor of *Military History* magazine, now tells this incredible tale in English. He combines meticulous research from archives, interviews, primary source materials, and a plethora of secondary sources. The footnotes are detailed and very informative, often giving additional background to otherwise foreign and confusing names to the average reader who has yet to travel through Austria.

In short, *The Last Battle* is the story of German and American soldiers fighting together in the waning hours of World War II. The Third Reich's most valuable prisoners, some of the highest ranking members of the French government, shared a luxurious castle where they were kept

for the last two years of the war. The 7th US Army advanced into Austria, and once aware of the captives in the pristine location, launched a mission to rescue them. Along the way, the contingent sent to rescue these captives recruited some very unlikely Allies, in the form of former Wehrmacht and SS soldiers, in a desperate attempt to ward off an attack from roaming SS bands that disbanded into Germany and Austria when effective resistance collapsed.

Harding begins his narrative by recounting the history of the location of the remarkable story at Schloss Itter or the Itter Castle. The author emphasizes the complete devolution of Austrian identity after the *Anschluss* in the microcosm of Itter Castle, and the gradual transformation of that castle into a sub-camp of the Dachau concentration camp). Harding, however, is sure to emphasize that not all Austrians welcomed their new Reich identity.

The author's main purpose is not to give a lesson in relations between the Nazis and their con-

glomeration of new territory. Harding aims to tell a story. The story is a spectacular event in a war that contains thousands of them. Beyond the history of the castle, Harding delves into character development which makes the climax all the more compelling. The querulous French leadership failed to act competently and decisively when the country needed those most. These lingering feelings of distrust, loathing, and contempt for one another transferred into Itter. Edouard Daladier was put on trial for his part in the French fiasco during Case Yellow. One of Daladier's biggest political enemies, Paul Reynaud, joined him just ten days after his own arrival. In addition, several of these men's elderly secretaries, and in some case lovers, joined them in Itter.

Though Itter was a prison, these VIP prisoners lived under relative luxury. Itter's occupants traversed the grounds of the castle at will. Alcohol was present with every meal, and the kitchen contained its own talented chef. It is hard to imagine that these prisoners were captives of war, but they remembered their status as prisoners every time they stepped out into the yard and viewed German soldiers man the towers with machine guns.

At the core of this improbable tale is the plight of the layman. Two central auxiliary characters in the tale were originally Dachau inmates, who proved their valuable skills and received re-assignment to Itter. The saving grace of their skills put them in ideal positions in the castle to be in contact with the French prisoners. The VIP prisoners used them to great effect, running messages in and out of the prison while the hour of battle approached. Zvonimir Cuckovic's (an electrician) nonchalant existence at Itter saved him from returning to Dachau for liquidation.

Harding tells the small unit action at Itter well through Captain Lee, the company commander who led a contingent of his troops to break through at Itter Castle. Likewise, Kurt-Siegfried

Schrader, an SS member grew to become vehemently anti-Nazi and supported the Americans, and became Lee's acting second-in-command during the Itter battle.

As great as *The Last Battle* is presented, at times the writing leaves the reader yearning for more. "To put it simply, SS-Captain Sebastian 'Wastl' Wimmer was a nasty piece of work" (p. 18). Another underwhelming sentence reads, "Crude Wimmer might have been, but he most obviously was not stupid (p. 21). The beginning of the book features these types of sentences prominently, where Harding fleshes out the situation. However, Harding provides concise definitions of terms the layman may not be familiar with, like "kapos." He hits his stride during the battle narrative. It flows seamlessly and engrosses the reader immediately.

While *The Last Battle* occasionally stumbles at the onset, it is a terrific story about a larger-than-life situation with larger than life characters. With a scenic backdrop hosting an unlikely event, it is surely one of those instances that only occurs in war. It is also a story about which most Hollywood writers could only dream.

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