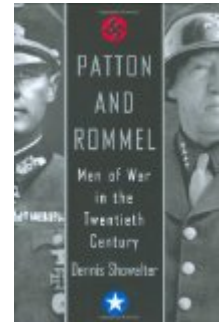


Dennis Showalter. *Patton and Rommel: Men of War in the Twentieth Century.* New York: Berkley Caliber, 2005. 441 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-425-19346-4.



Reviewed by Mark B. Cole

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Dennis Showalter is an excellent military historian and as this, his latest work, makes clear, a wordsmith *par excellence*. His list of publications, ably moving from such subjects as Frederick the Great, to America and Japan in Second World War, is long enough to make even the most seasoned and diligent scholar green with envy. So it is hardly surprising that Showalter is right at home with a joint study of Erwin Rommel and George Patton, certainly two of the most familiar figures in popular and scholarly literature on World War II. Indeed, each has gained near-cult status, depicted in films, immortalized as collectibles, and even pitted against one another in a computer war game. Of course the latter never happened in real life, but it no doubt remains a favored topic of debate among military buffs in the blogosphere.

Not only have Rommel and Patton figured prominently in numerous works of military history, each has been the subject of two major biographies.[1] This state of affairs may lead readers to question the need for another book on either figure, especially from the same genre. Showalter's

volume is, however, the first book-length parallel biography of these "men of war." His comparative approach does not simply cast the masters of mobile combat in a new light, but also their respective military institutions and cultures as well as methods of warfare. This fresh scholarly line of attack, while not adding significantly to what we already know about the men individually, enables the author to demonstrate the similarities and differences that made both the Desert Fox and Patton admirable leaders and respected foes. Interestingly, Showalter makes the case that both soldiers, so far as military prowess is concerned, were more revered from across the Atlantic than in their home countries.

Rommel, while viewed as the archetypal "good German" in the Federal Republic because of his ambiguous links to the July 20, 1944, attempt on Hitler's life, is given even higher praise by Americans for his operational genius and masterful improvisation on the battlefield. The Desert Fox has even become "an iconic figure at West Point, where cadets are more likely to do term papers and research projects on him than anyone

except Robert E. Lee" (p. 419). German scholars are usually more critical. They focus on Rommel's unwillingness to accept blame for losses and argue that his tactical blinders often weakened overall strategy. Patton's legacy is similar. Though he was a respected war hero among most Americans, Patton's rude, crude demeanor, pomposity and lack of self-discipline have given him an uneasy place in American historical memory. German professionals, however, extol Patton for his aggressive style of warfare and ability to command the battlefield. "Had he been given a free hand by your Eisenhowers and Bradleys," one commentator mused, "Shermans would have been rolling down Unter den Linden before the Russians ever saw the Oder" (p.3).

The book is written with general readers in mind and so Showalter has chosen to forego the standard "academic apparatus" of footnotes and bibliography for the sake of narrative. And what a story he tells! The seven thematic chapters, framed by a prologue and a "coda," trace the lives of both men from their childhood, climbing through the ranks and cutting their teeth in the Great War, to the ends of their careers. Differences seem to outstrip similarities. Patton, of southern aristocratic stock with a long pedigree of Confederate warriors behind him, was a cavalryman whose career might be described best as "a prince asserting his heritage" in an army and society that increasingly admired the less affluent who pulled themselves up by the boot straps (p. 25). With the help of family connections, "Georgie" made his way through Virginia Military Institute and finally West Point. During World War One, he served in the U.S. Army Tank Corps in France and was wounded in battle. The inter-war years were a time of disillusionment as peacetime did not suit Patton's martial character nor advance his dream of military greatness. World War Two provided an opportunity, which Patton seized, and his successes in northern France in 1944 were his claim to fame.

Rommel, by contrast, was the son of a secondary schoolmaster in Württemberg. A middle-class Swabian at a time when Prussian nobility dominated the German army's commissioned appointments, Rommel "ma[de] a new place in a new society" in a manner befitting the "muddy boots" infantryman (p. 25). Rommel did not enter the military because of patriotism or heritage like Patton; rather, his father influenced his decision as the military offered a solid career to the practically-minded young man. In any case, he went from being a cadet in the 124th Infantry Regiment in 1910, to the War School in Danzig, becoming a platoon commander in 1914. By 1915, Rommel was making a name for himself in the elite Württemberg Mountain Battalion with a series of impressive victories against the Romanians and Italians. Peacetime was especially disconcerting for Rommel as the reduction of the German army under the Versailles Treaty threatened the only way of life he knew. His credentials, however, eventually landed him a permanent Reichswehr position as commander of a rifle company in the 13th Regiment, 5th Division. The Second World War also afforded the workaday warrior the prospect of military distinction, something he relished, but never obsessively sought. Whereas Patton had access to the materiel of the world's industrial and military superpower, Rommel fought his war with limited resources, even making use of plundered tanks with fuel gauges that seemed always to be on empty.

While many differences may have separated these two tank riders, Showalter homes in on an important characteristic that they shared, namely a "situational awareness" that steered much of their lives and careers. This "situational awareness" was instinctual, a gut feeling that allowed Patton and Rommel, usually, to make the right decisions both on and off the battlefield. Of course their instincts failed them on occasion, as evidenced by Patton's infamous soldier-slapping debacle and his racist and antisemitic comments. Likewise, Rommel's liaison with Walburga Stem-

mer was clearly a misstep. His *Kavaliersdelikt* engendered a daughter in 1913, but because he was an officer and she the daughter of a seamstress, their relationship came to naught, although Rommel supported paramour and daughter financially.

The volume is chock-a-block with witty turns of phrase and nuggets of information which will make it a joy for casual readers and scholars alike. To use a phrase adopted by British soldiers when describing "anything executed competently and with flair," with this book Showalter has undoubtedly "done a Rommel." He should be congratulated for producing both an entertaining and informative book. It is a pity, however, that his exceptional writing is marred by shoddy copyediting that has left the book riddled with typographical errors. Then again, this will not likely be his last word on the subject. As research that has become available since the publication of *Patton and Rommel* suggests, we will likely need to rethink our conception of the Desert Fox as a clean-fighting, non-ideological German soldier who was totally detached from the heinous crimes of the Nazi regime.[2] One can only hope that Showalter joins this debate.

Notes

[1]. For Rommel, Showalter cites David Irving, *Trail of the Fox* (New York: Dutton, 1977) and David Fraser, *Knight's Cross: A Life of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994). Showalter mistakenly refers to Fraser's book as "Iron Cross" (p. 2). For Patton, see Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995) and Stanley P. Hirshson, *General Patton: A Soldier's Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002).

[2]. See especially Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Martin Cüppers, *Halbmond und Hakenkreuz. Das "Dritte Reich", die Araber und Palästina* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006).

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