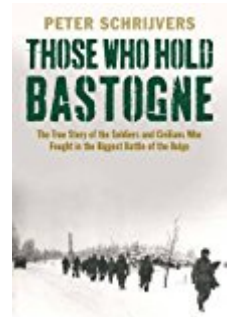


**Peter Schrijvers.** *Those Who Hold Bastogne: The True Story of the Soldiers and Civilians Who Fought in the Biggest Battle of the Bulge.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014. 328 pp. \$17.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-300-21614-1.



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**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

With the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II upon us, there has been a raft of studies of the campaigns and leaders that brought so much destruction to Europe between 1939 and 1945. There is no shortage of good monographs on events like the Battle of the Bulge. So, what room is there for books like this new volume from the prolific historian Peter Schrijvers?

The answer, happily, appears to be “quite a bit.” The history of the Allied campaign in Western Europe calls, at least in part, for the kind of “internationalization” that many in the discipline of history increasingly demand. The United States fought its way across a devastated and polyglot continent that entered the Second World War with a range of regional, religious, and cultural identities. These divisions strongly influenced how groups and individuals responded to the challenges of war. Schrijvers, educated in Belgium and the United States and now teaching in Australia, is one of a comparatively small number of historians with the linguistic and cultural background to tell the story of an event like the fight

for Bastogne with the kind of depth that seems required. He has published extensively on the American military in World War II in Europe and the Pacific, the Battle of Bulge, and Belgium’s experience at war. As he notes, this book has been thirty years in the making.

This is not a book that breaks much new historiographical ground. Schrijvers focuses here on the battle for the Belgian crossroads town of Bastogne, a hamlet of about four thousand people, during the siege and subsequent efforts to cut off the German Ardennes offensive in December 1944 and January 1945. Schrijvers examines the experience of American military personnel, Belgian civilians, and the German military machine bent on overrunning the town. As he describes it, this is the story of “Bastogne’s long winter of war” (p. 7).

This is a story of war from the ground up. There is little discussion of operational or strategic planning, though he is careful to give the reader a sense of the broader context. Discussion of

the German operation Wacht am Rhein begins on page 3 and the book concludes almost three hundred pages later with the last desultory shelling of the town on January 16, 1945. In between, readers get a gripping, day-by-day account of the fighting at the tactical level. Characters are introduced, both military and civilian, then often suffer violent death or serious injury pages or paragraphs later. Schrijvers's account is visceral and generally effective. The Americans are represented not just by the 101st Airborne, but by a range of support personnel and other formations who helped to hold the town during the desperate days of late December. The Germans, particularly the 26th Volksgrenadier Division under Generalmajor Heinz Kokott, may have been on the offensive but were rapidly deteriorating themselves. Schrijvers tells the story of Americans later finding hand-made bird traps that hungry Germans employed to supplement declining rations.

For Belgian civilians, the war was an unmitigated disaster. Schrijvers evokes the terrifying experience of locals hiding in barns and cellars, praying that shells and aerial bombardment would pass them by. Those found above ground faced both the crossfire of war and the sometimes unhinged brutality of Wehrmacht and Waffen SS units. About four hundred civilians in this sparsely populated patch of northwest Europe died violently during the campaign (p. 252).

I have a few quibbles with the book. The Germans do not receive nearly the level of attention that Americans and Belgian civilians do. It is clear from his list of sources that much of what Schrijvers writes about the Germans comes from American records. It would also be useful to know more about the communities in this area during the German occupation after 1940, particularly since the Germans appear to have been determined to take their revenge on "resisters" (the atrocity in Noville described on page 78, for example). Finally, there are moments when the writing is needlessly opaque. This is particularly frustrat-

ing given Schrijvers's admirable focus on individual experiences. The fates of several compelling figures, like the American Lieutenant Paul Yearout (last mentioned on page 82), are unclear.

Schrijvers has written an engaging and engrossing narrative of two armies and a rural crossroads town at war. Even those who have spent a great deal of time understanding the dynamics of the last year of the war in Europe will profit from the perspective offered here.

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