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Ralf Georg Reuth, *Rommel: The End of a Legend*. Trans. Debra S. Marmor and Herbert A. Danner. London: Haus Books, 2005 [orig. Munich: Piper, 2004]. Pp. v, 249. ISBN 978-1-904950-20-2.

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Does the world need another biography of Erwin Rommel? Is any new interpretation possible for a man whom, of Third Reich figures, only Hitler surpasses in the number of biographies and studies. Surprisingly, the answer is “yes.” Reuth’s introduction establishes that his book is not a typical biography, a mere chronological recounting of Rommel’s life and exploits. Rather, each of its five chapters provides a new perspective on a particular aspect of one of Germany’s most famous soldiers.

In the first chapter, “Hitler’s General,” Reuth focuses on Rommel’s relationship with Hitler, opening with a vignette of Rommel’s first meeting with der Führer in 1934. To all appearances, they seem to have nothing in common, but Reuth draws parallels by stressing how the experience of World War I shaped both men. Managing to survive two of the most dangerous roles of the war (junior infantry officer and courier) when so many others had died “gave them an aura of invincibility among their comrades” (16). On a more fundamental personal level, they developed “the self delusion that, in the end, one’s own will is always the determining factor” (16). For both, the war was their life and the army their home.

Reuth presents Rommel and the Reichswehr as largely apolitical during the Weimar period. With Hitler’s rise to power, the military once again began to be a factor in domestic political circles. As senior Wehrmacht officers were cleared out to make room for more capable, politically reliable or pliable commanders, Rommel’s fortunes began to improve rapidly, owing to the publication of his book *Infantry Attacks*<sup>1</sup> and especially the support of regime insiders, like Rudolph Schmundt, who brought him to Hitler’s attention (33).

Rommel’s eventual assignment as commander of Hitler’s escort battalion ensured he spent a lot of time with the Führer, who saw in Rommel a capable officer of proven personal courage and, perhaps most importantly, one who had not been tainted by General Staff service (33). Rommel, for his part, was impressed by the nationalistic aspects of Hitler’s rule and enthusiastically supported his measures toward rearmament and wiping away the humiliation of Versailles. Rommel said of Hitler, “isn’t it wonderful that we have this man”; “he was called upon by God”; “[he speaks] like a prophet” (36-7). Such language is shocking coming from someone seen for so long in the English-speaking world as a simple professional soldier. Hitler repaid Rommel’s loyalty with a series of rapid promotions and choice assignments; for the invasion of France, he was given command of a panzer division, one of only ten such in the army at the time, this over the objections of the personnel chief.

Chapter Two, “The Army Commander,” assesses Rommel’s strategic, operational, and

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<sup>1</sup> *Infanterie greift an: Erlebnis u. Erfahrung* (Potsdam: Vögenreiter, 1937).

tactical thinking as well as his leadership style. Strategy was Rommel's weak point and he was kept in the dark about Hitler's strategic aims, such as forcing Great Britain to terms so Germany could focus its efforts on the Soviet Union. The political leadership made many strategic decisions based on ideological rather than military considerations. Senior military leaders around Hitler proved incapable of guiding strategy in any meaningful way and "were often simply stooges who could be replaced" (83). Field commanders like Rommel were often completely ignorant of the strategic directions planned by High Command of the Armed Forces (OKW), which of course directly affected war at the operational level.

In North Africa, Rommel had much more freedom of action on the operational level than did other senior German commanders. Initially this was due to Hitler's personal favor and the unusual command structure that subordinated the Germans to Italian supreme command. By the time the balance of command shifted back to German control, the Eastern Front was the main event and North Africa only a secondary theater. The long leash given Rommel was especially evident when Army Chief of Staff Halder sent General Paulus to North Africa to curtail his operations and bring some sense to this "insane" soldier (86). Although jealousies on the part of other officers certainly played a part in criticisms of Rommel in contemporary military circles, Reuth misses the point that he acted as other German officers in his position would have, though certainly more aggressively. Rommel was focused (at least in Africa) on offensive maneuver and drove his units to or even beyond the culmination point of an operation—a pattern repeated time and again by any number of German commanders.

Reuth gives Rommel perhaps too much credit for tactical innovation as well: "Rommel was more inventive than any other general in the Second World War when it came to making more from less" (107). This overlooks men like Manstein, Guderian, and Model, all of whom excelled in the innovative use of resources. If one were to include Allied generals, the records of Slim and Stilwell in Burma against the Japanese spring immediately to mind. All were as adept as Rommel at integrating tactical level innovations within their operational plans.

Reuth's view of Rommel's leadership style is more compelling. There is little doubt that he showed personal courage under fire and felt his place was at the front looking for and exploiting tactical opportunities. He viewed himself as a modern Seydlitz or Zieten and believed one had to "see war from a cavalry perspective" and command "from a moving tank as one used to from the saddle" (109). But this style of leadership resulted in serious lapses in operational command and control. Rommel was often too far forward "directing individual tanks and raiding parties instead of with his staff making decisions that the overall situation required" (110). The trait of leading from the front distinguished him from most other German generals as did his contempt for many staff officers and "superfluous theoretical stuff." He could be abrasive and "bloody rough" to subordinates and superiors alike "when things did not go as anticipated" but, at the same time, his men were "impressed by his untiring drive and enormous physical capability" (117). His leadership by personal example and affection for the common soldier fostered a "spirit of solidarity" among the troops (117). In short, he was a soldier's soldier, but neglected the demands of command and control typical of maneuver warfare. Reuth's appraisal of von Rundstedt's view that "Rommel was at best a good divisional commander, but 'nothing more'" is more astute

than many acclimated to the Rommel legend want to admit (188).

The third chapter's focus on propaganda provides interesting new views of Rommel. Reuth shows that Rommel cultivated his image even to the extent of having cameramen re-shoot photos or motion picture shots not to his liking. One cannot help recalling the media circus surrounding Douglas MacArthur. The Propaganda Ministry began carefully crafting the image of Rommel as a modern general as early as the campaign in France in 1940. Hitler himself took a direct interest in shaping the propaganda surrounding "his 'favourite general'" (122). The propaganda coverage was magnified by the fact that from February to April 1941, Rommel was the only German commander with an army in action. His successes also served as distractions from reverses suffered in Russia, especially from late 1941 to early 1942. The British also played a huge role in creating the Rommel legend as a means of excusing their mistakes and defeats in Africa.

Rommel's reputation was carefully managed and even kept intact when he was pulled out of Tunisia well before the final Axis collapse there. In Occupied France, he was promoted as the general best suited to handle the British and Americans due to his previous experience fighting them. His presence and reputation alone were considered worth several divisions. He had become so important as a propaganda tool that his wounding in an air attack a week and a half after D-Day was concealed until news leaked to the British, ending of his remarkable propaganda career—"a wounded and depressed Field Marshall was no longer useful as a symbol of German perseverance and confidence in victory" (161). After a final press conference in Paris on 1 August to prove to the world that he was still alive, Rommel he was dropped by the propaganda machine.

Rommel as "The Victim" is the theme of Chapter Four and centers on the failed 20 July Plot against Hitler. Rommel's popularity in propaganda circles, according to Reuth, led senior officers at OKW to resent him and criticize his abilities, blaming him, for example, for the collapse in France. As a result, he quickly fell out of favor with Hitler. In the aftermath of the 20 July Plot, his enemies, both military and political, planted enough doubts in Hitler's mind that when Rommel was finally (falsely) implicated, his fate was sealed. Rommel is presented as intensely loyal to Hitler and deeply troubled by the fact that soldiers held to an oath were responsible for the assassination attempt. Though the conspirators on his own staff were quite open among themselves, attempts to involve Rommel were oblique at most. Supposedly naïve regarding the conspiracy, only when he later reflected on conversations with his staff members did he realize what they were talking about. The surprise of his implication in the Plot was so complete that not until the day of his forced suicide did he learn what had happened. General Burgdorf's "answer made it clear that Hitler had been deceived and there would be no reprieve" (199).

In a short closing chapter, "The Legend," Reuth describes how Rommel was initially dissociated from 20 July conspirators, whom most Germans believed "were traitors and outcasts" (211), a separation Rommel's widow, Lucie, was careful to promote. But during the Cold War, as a rehabilitated Wehrmacht became critical to facing the growing communist threat from the East, its commander, General Speidel, Rommel's former Chief of Staff in France and the one who supposedly implicated him in the Plot, turned to Rommel as the perfect model for rebuilding the Wehrmacht's reputation. Speidel made him the epitome of a gifted, non-political, professional soldier untainted by the excesses of Nazism, who

tried to save the nation by joining the conspirators to overthrow the man responsible for Germany's destruction. The British again built up Rommel as they had during the war. General Young's biography<sup>2</sup> and B.H. Liddell Hart's *The Rommel Papers*<sup>3</sup> both made a lasting impact. Movies too, especially *The Desert Fox*,<sup>4</sup> have left an indelible mark on popular memory. Times change, however, and Reuth recounts how the *Historikerstreit* of the 1980s and debates on war guilt in the 1990s have changed Germans' image of Rommel into both a "hero of the resistance" and "a convinced National Socialist" (222). Reuth believes "Rommel was neither one nor the other. He had understood neither National Socialism, nor the resistance to it .... Like millions of Germans he followed Hitler into disaster and whilst doing so he believed he was only doing his duty" (222).

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<sup>2</sup> Desmond Young, *Rommel: The Desert Fox* (NY: Harper, 1950).

<sup>3</sup> 1953; rpt. NY: Da Capo Pr, 1982.

<sup>4</sup> Dir. Henry Hathaway (20th Century Fox, 1951).