

Derek S. Zumbro. *Battle for the Ruhr: The German Army's Defeat in the West.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006. viii + 447 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1490-5.



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A Better Way to Write Military History?

This volume is an important contribution to our understanding of the end of the Second World War and provides a more complete picture of the battle for the Ruhr than has previously been offered. Military historians must analyze two very separate and different levels of agency: that of the political and military leadership, its goals, and the plans by which they hope to achieve them; and the goals and plans of the everyday people assigned to carry out the plans of those in command. This book embodies the best traditions of relatively recent trends in military history which examine conflict from *below*, rather than using older methods, which have tended to focus on the political, social, and economic aspects of warfare only at the highest levels of government and military decision-making. Very fine studies have been published on the macro-historical level, but the goals and actions of the people at the lower level have, in many ways, been ignored or downplayed except in unit histories and the obscure works of antiquarians. No one doubts that the work of political and military leaders is crucial in an armed struggle, but what about the soldiers who march regardless of the weather, eat barely edible food, sleep only in fits and starts, and perhaps

suffer grievous wounds or even death? What role does the struggle of men in combat play in fulfilling the carefully made plans of their superiors? Do the lower ranks play any role at all except as mere cogs in the machinery? More recent histories of armed conflict include the experiences of average soldiers and their impact on the achievement of larger goals.

In this case the author looks at the battle of the Ruhr pocket, which took place in March and April 1945 and destroyed the last major German army group remaining in the western European theater. Traditional histories of major campaigns, which focus on large-scale unit movements and strategic viewpoints as opposed to tactical or local ones, allow historians not to mention any of the actors except high-ranking military or political officials. They also omit more than general discussion of the dozens of smaller engagements which together form the larger battle. The human element is erased from combat; generals make plans and units either carry them out or fail to do so. Derek S. Zumbro's book, in contrast, effectively blends decisions made at the highest levels with their execution at the lowest levels. We see what Adolf

Hitler, for example, desired from operations by the Ruhr army group and then see how the lower ranks fulfilled, or failed to fulfill, his wishes. The result is to reinsert human contingency into battle, to remind us that battle plans do not succeed, or fail, on the map table but in the field, and to show that the most fruitful task of military historians is to analyze how and why failure happens by utilizing evidence from all sources, including the testimony of soldiers actually present.

The western Allies envisioned the battle for the Ruhr as a double envelopment. Armored pincers were ordered to cross the Rhine above and below Army Group B and advance to a common position far behind the German lines, thus encircling the Army Group, led by Field Marshal Walter Model. One pincer started from the south in the general area of Remagen, while that in the north was launched somewhat later from the area around Wesel. The two pincers drove east until they linked up around Lippstadt and Paderborn, about one hundred miles behind German lines. Traditional histories recount how the armies carried out their tasks and the difficulties they faced, but these accounts omit information about the travails of the platoons, companies, squads, and individuals whose job it was to carry out the operation. Only in special cases, such as the famous seizure of the Remagen bridge, has analysis dropped its gaze to the level of fighting men.

Zumbro begins by examining high-level decision-making, but then looks at units charged with executing them. As the planning proceeds he looks further down the chain to the command units responsible for carrying out the missions until he eventually comes to the individual combatants. We therefore see not only Hitler and the supreme command formulating plans, but also Model and the corps commanders interpreting them, and finally privates and sergeants carrying them out to the best of their ability. The result of this multi-level approach is a very complete picture of the action discussed. The best known engagement of this battle is probably that for Ludendorff Bridge at Remagen. This railroad bridge crossed the Rhine at a convenient spot for the Americans. Hitler demanded that all such bridges be destroyed once their usefulness to the German army had passed; to accomplish this task, Army Group B assigned the defense of the Rhine bridges to a general whose staff apportioned the various bridges to defense groups. The men responsible for Ludendorff Bridge ran into difficulties from the very

beginning, not least because the defense force, led by a captain, consisted of a small number of convalescent soldiers. From the German point of view, Remagen is a fascinating story of missed opportunities, lack of resources, and the personal stories of the men, whose rather simple job was to prevent the American forces from crossing the river by blowing up the bridge. The German captain ended the defense of the bridge when his men, who had made a serious tactical blunder by retreating into the railroad tunnel that connected the bridge to the east side of the river, found themselves under intense pressure from the Americans. The capture of the bridge highlights the disintegration of the German army by examining its efforts from the highest to the lowest level. This book shows the reader in graphic terms that the major factor in the disintegration of the German army in the west was an almost complete lack of resources necessary for the creation of an effective barrier to the approaching Allies, a problem compounded as the Germans recognized the situation and abandoned the fight.

Despite the strengths of the narrative, the volume does reveal a serious problem in its maps: the two included fail to serve as guides to the engagements described in the text. The flow of the battles fought for the myriad of small towns and villages mentioned throughout the text, which is the essence of the book, is thus lost in the shuffle. The function of maps that fail to pinpoint unfamiliar locations described in the text is unclear.

The bulk of the book consists of explanations of small actions and encounters between German troops, citizens, and American soldiers. While Zumbro's account succeeds admirably in meeting its goals of presenting the German defeat from the perspective of the defeated, just as importantly, it serves as a model for reconstructing a major battle through examination of its smaller engagements. Heroism, cowardice, brilliance, and stupidity on the part of individual men determined, in conjunction with the resources allocated to them, the success or failure of missions deemed important by those higher up the ladder. Zumbro does a wonderful job of putting all these isolated events into a broader context. The book would be very useful in a graduate seminar on military history as a model, but its wealth of information might prove too distracting for most undergraduates. In sum, anyone interested in understanding how large battles unfold will profit from reading this book.

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