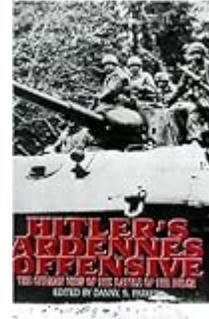


H-Net Reviews

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Danny S. Parker, ed. *Hitler's Ardennes Offensive: The German View of the Battle of the Bulge*. Mechanicsburg, Penn: Stackpole Books, 1997. 264 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85367-272-9.



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Hitler's Ardennes Offensive claims to be “a unique work giving unparalleled insight into the German view” of the German western counteroffensive in December 1944 (dust jacket). In an attempt to accomplish this, Danny S. Parker (who has also authored *The Battle of the Bulge* and *To Win the Winter Sky: Air War over the Ardennes, 1944-1945*) publishes six items on this campaign taken from the vast collection of Foreign Military Studies material gathered by the U.S. Army's European Theater of Operations Historical Section. In the years following the end of World War Two, this agency dedicated itself to recording the recollections of hundreds of top-ranking German officers. Today these reports, interview transcripts, and questionnaires are housed in Record Group 338 of the National Archives and indeed form a useful historical source.

From this rather large collection, Parker has selected four formal reports, one questionnaire, and one interview transcript for inclusion in his book. Of these items, the most detailed and useful are those by Fifth Panzer Army commander General Hasso von Manteuffel and Seventh Army commander General Erich Brandenburger. Sixth SS Panzer Army chief of staff General Fritz Kraemer's report is similar and useful, though less detailed, extensive, and frank. These reports provide considerable insight into preparations for the offensive, particularly the elab-

orate and generally successful measures to mask from the Americans the coming assault (an item in which the U.S. Army had considerable interest). They also reveal much about the precise movement of German troop formations and the problems they encountered in carrying out the offensive. Typically, Manteuffel, Brandenburger and Kraemer are balanced, judicious and rational in their assessments of German and Allied performance, equally faulting German shortcomings and crediting Allied successes. Their tone is generally detached and professional, almost clinical, in their factual narrative of tactical matters. If one seeks this type of information on the Bulge, this book would make a useful and convenient research tool.

The other three items clearly exhibit a different tone. The interview transcript of SS Oberstgruppenfuehrer Sepp Dietrich, commander of Sixth SS Panzer Army, is, as one should expect, more vague and less detailed. Dietrich seems closed-lipped, evasive, and reluctant to provide much information. He pointedly distances himself from Hitler, Nazi ideology, and the planning of the offensive. In fact, he lies about the latter point as he claims he only learned of the offensive on 12 December, yet his chief of staff Kraemer points out that detailed planning had begun by 20 November. Given that when the interview occurred (1945), the SS was labeled a criminal orga-

nization, that one of the Nuremberg war crimes charges would be prolonging the war in part through this very offensive, and that one of Dietrich's units (1. SS Panzer Division) had committed a significant war crime (the Malmédy Massacre), it is small wonder that Dietrich adopted this less-than-cooperative tone. Unfortunately, Parker does not fully alert his readers to these facts. On the other hand, Parker does note that the transparent justification by Generals Alfred Jodl and Wilhelm Keitel (the top men at OKW) of their roles in planning the Ardennes Offensive sprang from the fact that both men had been charged with war crimes including unnecessarily prolonging the war. Such is the uneven character of the editing of this book.

The final piece is General Guenther Blumentritt's purely military critique of the offensive. It concludes that Germany lacked the forces required for success and therefore should never have undertaken the ambitious goal of trying to drive through the heavily wooded Ardennes during winter in a vain attempt to capture Antwerp. As such it serves as a counterweight to the Jodl-Keitel selection, but also to state the book's overall thesis: this was Hitler's offensive, and he and his assistants (not the German officers who led the attack) must bear the blame for its failure.

Such a view is hardly new. Far from being "unique" or "unparalleled" in the literature, this attitude is widespread in the memoirs of Germany's generals and the works of their apologists. Further detracting from the claims to uniqueness is the fact that these very reports have been heavily used by the wide range of historians who have written the many books on the Battle of the Bulge. Thus, serious scholars will find little need to purchase this volume unless they desire to own these particular studies. The general public, Parker's stated audience, will find the book difficult to use because of his uneven editing. His introductions are brief and assume a fairly detailed knowledge of this campaign, and he provides no

overall conclusion and precious little analysis. Additionally, he often fails to put the studies in proper context, most significantly neglecting to inform readers about the question of bias or self-interest inherent in the generals' views. While Parker dutifully corrects some errors, he attributes them to lapses of memory. In addition, the errors he notes often relate to very specific details while other glaring errors remain uncorrected. For example, Parker's provides the precise designation for a fortress machine gun battalion, but fails to note that Sepp Dietrich plainly lied concerning when he learned of the plans for the Ardennes Offensive. Meanwhile, Parker neither corrects nor identifies numerous translation problems in the original copies, his citations in the notes are inconsistent and often incomplete, and—perhaps most annoying given the constant referral by the generals to specific locations—there are but three maps, none of which is detailed enough to enable a reader to follow the narrative fully. For all of these reasons, Parker's book would be difficult for the general reader to utilize; at the same time it is not profitable for the specialist.

Parker might have done well to avoid the familiar strategic issues of this well-studied battle. The best reports suggest the potential for interesting investigations at the tactical level. Problems generated by inadequately trained vehicle drivers, the lack of engineers or bridging equipment, or the impact of air attacks on railnets behind the German lines are raised repeatedly by the generals. Perhaps inclusion of reports from officers at the corps or divisional level would have been worthwhile on issues such as these. As it stands, however, Parker's book, though interesting and providing more general access to some commonly consulted primary sources, simply fills no clear need and addresses no clearly defined audience.

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