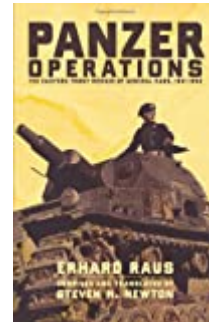
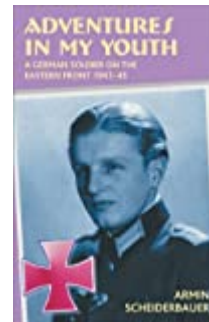


Erhard Raus. *Panzer Operations: The Eastern Front Memoir of General Raus, 1941-1945.* Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2003. xi + 353 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-306-81247-7.



Armin Scheiderbauer. *Adventures in My Youth: A German Soldier on the Eastern Front, 1941-1945.* Solihull: Helion Press, 2003. xi + 208 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-874622-06-2.



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Memoirs of the Eastern Front

The generation that fought World War II is rapidly aging and soon no one will survive who fought on the eastern front or landed on the beaches in Normandy. Fortunately, many veterans from both sides of the conflict have left memoirs of their experiences, and a large number were published around the fiftieth anniversary of the war's end.[1] The two examples reviewed here were written by Armin Scheiderbauer and Erhard Raus, former officers in the German army. Scheiderbauer was not a high ranking or well-known officer; his most important responsibility was as company commander on the eastern

front. Raus is well-known to students of the war, but most general readers will be unfamiliar with him, except for perhaps one or two of the more famous episodes frequently excerpted from his memoirs. His most important responsibility was that of panzer army commander on the eastern front, and for a while he was allegedly one of Hitler's favorite generals. Memoirs allow us to peer over the shoulder of witnesses as they recall their experiences and, hopefully, provide historians with the raw material from which to extract meaning. Memoirs from German soldiers are especially important because they

allow us to examine the functioning of the Wehrmacht under stress; they may help historians derive explanations for the course (and loss) of the war in the east. The two men occupied very different positions in the military hierarchy and produced very different memoirs. Scheiderbauer's is really a family history, or at least it was originally written for his family, and is a documentation of his personal experiences during the war. Raus, on the other hand, wrote a series of after-action reports in order to explain what the units under his command did and why. It is therefore an entirely impersonal document until the last few pages. The two books are complementary, however, and could be used together in an exercise which explores the utility and pitfalls of memoirs as historical sources. Using them together is appropriate as, coincidentally, the two men shared a brief connection when Raus took over command of 3 Panzer Army in August, 1944; one of the units under his command was Scheiderbauer's infantry division.

Scheiderbauer was drafted in August 1941 into 252 Infantry Division, which belonged to Army Group Center. He remained in this division until the end of the war in increasingly more responsible positions (from squad leader to company commander). He was captured in a hospital in Danzig when it fell to the Russians in March, 1945 (he had suffered serious shrapnel wounds), and held prisoner until September, 1947. It is unclear exactly when he wrote this memoir, but a comment indicates it was probably composed sometime around 1986 or 1987. It was not originally intended for publication but for his daughter, and therefore reads, at times, like an unpublished family history written by an elderly family member. It is organized chronologically and chapter titles provide not only the date but a synopsis of the major events. It is an expensive book and one might expect to find photographs and maps, but none appear; nor was an index included. The lack of maps will be problematic for most general readers (and even specialists) and it is a much less personal document without photographs. These shortcomings combined with its high cost make it unclear for whom the book is intended, but despite these flaws it is an enjoyable and useful book.

252 I.D. participated in some of the most dramatic battles fought by the German center, including Minsk, Smolensk, Viasma, Moscow, Belorussia during *Operation Bagration*, and the final battles along the Vistula River during the spring 1945. Scheiderbauer did not join the unit until July, 1942, long after the Moscow debacle, and his account is therefore mostly one of defensive actions and withdrawals (Army Group Center launched no ma-

jor offensives after its failure to take Moscow in 1941—except for its southern wing, which made an abortive contribution to the battles at Kursk in 1943). The book is thus useful for delineating the slow and painful decay of the once powerful German army and how low-level officers functioned within a disintegrating organization. Scheiderbauer reported, for example, that when he assumed command of a company in September, 1943 that he had only 28 men (he should have had about 150). One of the more valuable aspects of this book is his discussion of the various expedients he and his men adopted in order to survive both enemy attacks and the weather. He does not describe the wide-ranging maneuvers and tactics of battle, but rather the assaults and enemy incursions which marked his daily life. His experiences on the eastern front, however, make this book unique, particularly since such experiences have been relatively neglected in other memoirs. The *Bagration* offensive by the Soviets during the summer of 1944, which effectively destroyed Army Group Center, has been neglected in the memoirs of the average soldier (perhaps because a good proportion of those who experienced it did not survive). Scheiderbauer, the adjutant to a battalion headquarters when the offensive began, does an excellent job conveying the chaos and desperation that engulfed the Army Group as it disintegrated (including an incredibly desperate attempt to cross a river without bridges or boats while under fire). The chapter on the fall of Danzig and his own capture vividly evokes the near-total collapse of the Wehrmacht in the east. The account of his imprisonment after the war is also unique because he did not have a particularly harrowing experience. These are important contributions to the literature and should be read by anyone working on these topics, and these chapters alone make the book worthwhile.

As a memoir, however, the book has several shortcomings. The most significant is the lack of any acknowledgment of the racially brutal nature of the war in the east. The only hint of brutality was the casual mention that men from his unit were required to visit the site of the Katyn Massacre, a crime committed by the Russians, not the Germans. A casual reader would be left with the impression that nothing at all happened behind the front lines, despite the fact that the Germans conducted major operations against Jews and partisans in areas just behind the front (areas Scheiderbauer admits he crossed several times). While it is perhaps not surprising that he did not see roundups of the Jewish population (a sight few front-line soldiers reported seeing), it is surprising that he makes absolutely no mention of the treatment

of partisans since Army Group Center's area (where he spent the entire war) was the most active partisan area on the entire eastern front. That a front-line soldier did not see much of this might not be unusual, but we are left guessing what he witnessed and must assume that he saw nothing. The alternative is to assume that he left things out because he did not want to include such horrible experiences in a memoir intended for his daughter. For a family history such an omission may be understandable, but as a testament to historical events it is a serious flaw. We are left wondering what else he may have delicately omitted. For example, was his imprisonment by the Russians really as benign as he would have us believe, or was he unwilling to subject his daughter to tales of brutality and suffering? We will never know.

After the war the U.S. Army hired scores of German generals to write about their experiences. Their reports are available at the National Archives and several have been collected, collated, and published. Steven Newton, for example, has collected and published an excellent volume on the battles at Kursk.^[2] His newest contribution is an edition of General Erhard Raus's memoirs. This is a very different type of memoir than Scheiderbauer's. As a commander of large combat units, his vantage point is somewhere between Scheiderbauer's worm's eye view and the bird's eye view of higher commanders like Manstein or Guderian. This alone makes it a valuable contribution to the literature. Raus, a career soldier who began the war as a colonel, occupied increasingly more responsible posts as his skill in military arts became apparent. He commanded a brigade during June, 1941 as the Germans invaded the USSR, but by mid-1942 commanded the 6 Panzer Division. Over the following three years he was promoted to corps and finally army commander (4 Panzer Army, 1 Panzer Army, and 3 Panzer Army). Hitler dismissed him in March, 1945 for unknown reasons, although his "defeatism" may have played a large role. He died in 1956.

I have to admit right away that Raus is my favorite among the generals who wrote their memoirs after the war. It is remarkable that he is relatively unknown, even among non-specialists, as he has an engaging style and flair lacking in most military histories. This is the first time his memoir has appeared as a whole, but parts of it have appeared in various forms and venues over the years (apparently he wrote it during the late 1940s). Some of his stories are, therefore, well known, even if the author is not. For example, I have read in several places his story about how a single Russian KV-1 heavy tank blocked his brigade's advance during the first few

days of the invasion of Russia; his unit had no weapons capable of dealing with the armored monster. His remarkable conversation with Heinrich Himmler in March, 1945 (Himmler had been appointed commander of Army Group Vistula and was thus Raus's superior) can similarly be found in just about any history of the battles in Prussia and eastern Germany during the final months of the war. I have also read in several places (usually in reference to Hitler's misplaced obsession with statistics and figures) the scene at Hitler's headquarters in March, 1945 when Raus personally reported on the Pomeranian battles to Hitler (this conference may have been the cause of dismissal). Raus reported that at one particular battle the Russians had employed 1,600 tanks, but was curtly corrected by Hitler that they could not have had more than 1,400 (a figure roughly equal, at that point, to the total number of tanks the Germans possessed in all theaters of the war). It is a pleasure to finally be able to read all of these stories, and several others, in their proper context.

What makes this book important is what Raus has to say about why Germany lost the war. Many of the memoirs and memoranda written by the German generals after the war tend to place the lion's share of blame for their defeat squarely upon Hitler, especially his tendency to meddle in the smallest affairs. Raus agrees with this view, but with some subtle nuances. His book, if read carefully, is a litany of the expedients that he was forced to adopt in order to overcome inferior equipment (in 1941, for example, the Germans had no anti-tank weapons capable of defeating the KV-1 and had to resort to an anti-aircraft weapon, the famous 88 mm) and inadequate manpower resources. In order to prevail despite these obstacles, German commanders had to adopt a wide variety of improvised tactics and weapons systems. Raus, for example, developed what he called "zone defense tactics," which sound remarkably like the elastic defense adopted by the Germans in 1918. According to Raus, Russian success after 1942 depended upon the Germans adopting rigid defensive modes and suffering enormous casualties and the loss of valuable (and irreplaceable) materiel; his "zone defense" method was designed to thwart Russian goals and preserve German power for subsequent local victories despite overwhelming odds. But after 1942 his system, which required temporarily surrendering ground, was frowned upon by higher commanders, especially Hitler. Raus believes that the insistence on holding ground regardless of cost or its strategic value was a mistake which squandered skilled soldiers and commanders, and wasted equipment. Raus argues that until Hitler realized that his abandonment of flexible

defensive tactics would result in the destruction of the German army and the loss of the war, local commanders, like him, had to prevent a total collapse using whatever expedients they could find. Hitler's worst mistake was "not to have recognized the impending disaster in time," and to insist that the German army achieve objectives no longer commensurate with its capabilities: "German potential should have been brought into proper relationship with the elements of time and space to compensate for the Soviet superiority in manpower and equipment" (p. 346). What cost Germany victory was Hitler's reliance upon a defensive strategy which caused enormous and irreplaceable losses in men and materiel, and an offensive strategy which was unrealistic given the disparity of resources between the Red Army and the Wehrmacht.

The book is therefore a valuable analysis, from the viewpoint of a German commander, of why Germany lost the war. He makes, in essence, the same arguments made over and over again by other commanders, but his is particularly well argued and therefore much more compelling. This book will not, of course, fundamentally alter the debate about Hitler's role in the defeat of Nazi Germany, but it is a cogent spokesman for a particular view. As such it is important that it has finally been published in its entirety for the first time.

The maps appear to be placed at appropriate points in the narrative, but I cannot tell how functional they are as the review copy was an uncorrected page proof which placed blank pages where the maps should be located. There are, unfortunately, no photographs in this book either; I still do not know what Raus looks like. As in Scheiderbauer's book, there is no index. Raus, like Scheiderbauer, also utterly fails to mention anything about

reprisals against partisans (although he does discuss several actions against them and the precautions taken to prevent their attacks) or Jews. As in Scheiderbauer's book these are flaws, but not fatal ones.

These books, therefore, offer different but valuable insights into how the German army functioned during its twilight. They have their individual flaws and omissions, but are nonetheless important enough for historians of the period to read and analyze.

Notes

[1]. To name just three fine examples from the long list: Gunter K. Koschorrek, *Blood Red Snow: The Memoirs of a German Soldier on the Eastern Front* (London: Greenhill Books, 1998); Siegfried Knappe, *Soldat: Reflections of a German Soldier, 1936-1949* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1992); and Rick Holz, *Too Young to be a Hero* (New York: Flamingo, 2000).

[2]. See, for example, Steven H. Newton, *German Battle Tactics on the Russian Front, 1941-1945* (Atglen: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 1994), *Retreat from Leningrad: Army Group North, 1944-1945* (Atglen: Schiffer Publishing, Ltd., 1995), and his excellent collection of German reports and commentary on the battle at Kursk: *Kursk: The German View: Eyewitness Reports of Operation Citadel by the German Commanders* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002). Donald S. Detwiler and Jürgen Rohwer published a large selection of these reports in *World War II German Military Studies: A Collection of 213 Special Reports on the Second World War Prepared by Former Officers of the Wehrmacht for the United States Army* (New York: Garland, 1979-), 26 volumes.

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