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Steven D. Mercatante, *Why Germany Nearly Won: A New History of the Second World War in Europe*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012. Pp. xviii, 408. ISBN 978-0-313-39592-5.

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This book does not quite live up to its title, but it is worth reading nevertheless. Steven Mercatante is not a professional historian but a tax attorney, who knows that the devil is in the details. To his credit, even those familiar with World War II scholarship will find here analyses of economic and technological matters that historians have often glossed over or mentioned only in passing. To cite just one example, when Adolf Hitler authorized Admiral Erich Raeder's grandiose program to build a large blue-water fleet, great quantities of steel had to be diverted from the production of badly needed land armaments, in particular, armored vehicles. Such mismanagement of wartime resources in the Third Reich deserves more attention than it usually gets. Mercatante also points out that German Tiger tanks destroyed Allied tanks at a ratio exceeding twelve to one, and still greater than five to one even after factoring in noncombat losses due to breakdowns, etc. He insightfully comments that, in light of such a combat advantage for their enemy, the Allies' five to one lead in armored fighting vehicle production over the Axis powers "becomes less than impressive and more a matter of necessity" (236).

While Mercatante has done relatively little original research in archives of the major powers, he is fully conversant with the vast array of secondary sources on the great European War.¹ However, certain gaps in research lead him to sweeping generalizations and misjudgments about Germany's military tradition prior to the Third Reich. He writes, for example, that "Ludendorff's and Hindenburg's primary contribution to the still evolving German method of war was to inject ideology into the mix" (6). This, of course, ignores the tactical revolution that Ludendorff introduced into the Reichsheer during the winter of 1917-18, based on lessons learned on the Eastern Front, reforms which brought dramatic operational successes on the Western Front during the Great War and that remain the basis of much modern infantry combat.

Neither Mercatante nor any other proponent of counterfactual history is likely to shake the firm scholarly consensus that Germany lost the war the moment the United States joined the Allies. Certainly, we may wonder "what if" Hitler had not declared war on the United States right after Pearl Harbor—a move born of a reckless disregard for economic realities, an ill-advised overestimation of Japan's military prowess, and an unjustified confidence that the imminent 1942 offensive on the Eastern Front (operation Case Blue) would complete the destruction of the Soviet Union. Even if the Führer had refrained from declaring war in December 1941 (which, given Japan's unprovoked attack, he was not obligated to do under the Axis Pact), President Roosevelt would ultimately have found a way to bring the United States into the European War.

In his long narrative of the war in Europe and Asia, Mercatante seldom actually advances his primary thesis—that Germany could have won the war. He believes Hitler's decision to invade the USSR in 1941 was strategically correct; had Germany secured and intelligently exploited the economic resources of the Soviet Union, it might have overcome the vast material advantages enjoyed by the Allies. This interesting theoretical argument departs from Mercatante's usual practice of attending to vital details: there is no reasoned analysis of just how the Nazis might have capitalized on Russian resources, given the oppressive brutality inflicted on the occupied territories in the wake of Operation Barbarossa.

Mercatante frequently gets bogged down in operational and tactical bypaths and close criticism of German decision-making. His narrative is cluttered with superfluous information about unit strengths and casualty counts: it is not enough for the reader to know, for instance, that the Soviet 41st Army in Operation

1. Including John Erickson, *Stalin's War with Germany*, vol. 1: *The Road to Stalingrad*, vol. 2: *The Road to Berlin* (1975/1983; rpt. New Haven: Yale U Pr, 1999), and the voluminous work of David M. Glantz. One notable omission is Earl F. Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East* (Washington: US Army Office of the Chief of Military History, 1968; rpt. 2011).

Mars (November 1942) “ripped a breach in the German lines 12 miles wide and 18 miles deep.” We must also read that it was “spearheaded by the 15,200 men and 223 tanks from the 1st Mechanized Corps” (170). The sheer profusion of numbers has a numbing effect.

Mercatante is also too quick to dismiss Hindenburg. While Ludendorff may have been “the brains of the outfit,” the old Field Marshal had more influence on the Weimar-era German Army than is ordinarily recognized. His three leadership principles—expressed often in Army circles during the 1920s—bear repeating: always have a main focus of effort; issue orders only insofar as necessary; never forget to take care of your subordinates. So long as Hitler did not interfere, Wehrmacht officers followed these imperatives with laudable consistency. Their ensuing operational and tactical successes have encouraged generations of soldiers (particularly in America) to study their campaigns, and terms like *Auftragstaktik* (mission-type tactics) are now commonplace within the military. In short, Mercatante has a thing or two to learn from Hindenburg. He fails to stick to his “main focus of effort,” instead producing another workmanlike but rather choppy account of the war that ultimately fails to make his case.

Chapter 5, “An Inconvenient Decision Confronts Germany’s Masters of War,” asks what the strategic objective of the Russian campaign should have been as German armies approached Moscow in fall 1941. Mercatante finally seems ready to concentrate on his main point: “Germany’s failure to seize Moscow is widely regarded by today’s conventional wisdom as a critical turning point in Germany’s war. In reality, how Germany wrapped up Operation Barbarossa would end up mattering far more to the Third Reich’s chances for establishing a continental empire than whether Moscow fell in 1941” (109). He argues further that Hitler and his generals should have declared Barbarossa a success before wasting so much of their rapidly shrinking combat strength on a Moscow assault. Instead, they should have consolidated and rebuilt their depleted military forces and begun to exploit systematically the resources of the newly occupied territories. Indeed, he writes, in late 1941 “the OKH [Army High Command] ... and Hitler began planning to revamp the campaign within the Soviet Union from one driven by classic Prussian military goals seeking a single determinative battle of annihilation to a new focus. The objective would be creating the necessary economic base to wage warfare across continents, to be accomplished via seizing the critical economic resources in the Ukraine and southern Russia” (110). These statements lack footnotes documenting that such economic planning did take place; this is unfortunate, since capturing the oil fields of the Caucasus region had become a major objective of Case Blue. We are left wondering whether there was any serious discussion about the feasibility of economic exploitation of the Ukraine and southern Russia, given the massive suffering that Operation Barbarossa had inflicted on civilian populations. Instead of refining and supporting his main point, Mercatante reverts to his combat narrative, from late 1941 through the epic and bloody campaign on the Eastern Front, with side trips to other theaters—the Mediterranean and, eventually, northwest Europe. These are intrinsically interesting (and much written about) subjects, but they are not evidence that Germany “almost won.”

Again, later in chapter 5, Mercatante seems to be getting to the point:

Without the poor planning and unrealistic assumptions that undergirded Barbarossa as an operational concept, the Red Army of 1941 could not have prevented any number of catastrophes, including possibly both Leningrad’s and Moscow’s loss during the summer and fall of 1941.... [T]he hard earned victory enjoyed by the significantly weakening German armies east of Kiev was diminished when the 2nd Panzer Army was ordered to march on Moscow in lieu of having Guderian’s men strike for economic objectives in the southern half of Germany’s eastern front. These resources not only represented the heart of the Soviet economy and agricultural base, but also once put to work for the German economy would have allowed Hitler to wage global war and cement his hold on Europe. (125–26)

So, for lack of more intelligent operational planning, the Reich lost the chance to gain invaluable industrial and economic resources. But Mercatante cites no primary or authoritative secondary sources to support the case that Hitler might ever have seen the value of radically changing the Nazis’ racist ideology and harsh occupation policies—necessary preconditions for exploiting the resources of Russia and the Ukraine. Despite this book’s title, the Third Reich, with its xenophobic Führer and strategically deluded high command, never came close to winning.

Other historians have made the case that some German officers saw the strategic value of economic exploitation within Barbarossa. Mercatante cites, for example, Geoffrey Megargee, who notes that, in late 1940, the General Staff's chief planner for Barbarossa, Maj. Gen. Erich Marcks, followed up the first draft of his plan with an assessment written for the Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Maj. Gen. Kurt Tippelskirch, forecasting that a German attack on the USSR would precipitate a prolonged global war that would eventually include the Americans. Marcks thought that only the occupation and exploitation of the industrial and agricultural resources of European Russia would enable Germany to prevail against the resulting allied coalition.² At the outset of the war against the Soviet Union, such thinking was marginalized within the Nazi high command, but, by spring 1942, economic exigencies were beginning to emerge. As Mercatante notes, an explicit objective of Case Blue was the Caucasus oil fields, which would immeasurably improve Germany's chances in a war with the Allied coalition. Seizing them would also hamstring the Soviet war effort and perhaps pave the way for a reprise of the Brest-Litovsk armistice of World War I.

But, as Mercatante makes clear in his subsequent narrative of the 1942 campaign, the German high command miscalculated what it could accomplish and diverted far too much strength to secondary and even trivial objectives. Securing the Caucasus oil fields—eight hundred miles from the front lines in spring 1942—required sensible adjustments elsewhere along the Eastern Front. Salients would have to be abandoned, suitable defense terrain exploited, and Army Groups North and Center reduced in strength to reinforce the principal axis in the south. This is what Hindenburg, of sacred memory, had done in the First World War: following his appointment as Chief of the General Staff in 1916, he and Ludendorff promptly evacuated divisions from a major Western Front salient to bolster the push in the east that ultimately knocked Russia out of the war. Hitler, however, was unwilling to surrender captured territory or give up major objectives (Leningrad in particular, and—subsequently and fatally—Stalingrad); no senior general in the Wehrmacht offered his resignation in protest. Delusion and spineless subservience prevailed and disaster resulted. Germany never came close to winning. A self-deluded Hitler and a strategically myopic Wehrmacht high command saw to that.

There is, nevertheless, much sound analysis scattered through this book. Chapter 12, “How the Third Reich Staved Off Total Defeat during the Summer of 1944,” is a fine extended example. It features, among other things, an astute critique of the legendary M-4 Sherman tank, backbone of the US and British armored divisions. Amid a glut of statistics, table 13.1 (340) is particularly sobering, revealing that Soviet wartime production of more than ninety-eight thousand tanks and self-propelled guns exceeded battlefield losses by a mere two thousand. But Mercatante misses opportunities for compelling counterfactual analysis as he works ponderously toward the conclusion. It remains an open question whether—if Hitler had radically changed his thinking in 1941 and become the “liberator” of the USSR that so many Russians and Ukrainians hoped for—an eventual German victory or, more likely, an acceptable negotiated peace settlement might have been realized. Even if the Anglo-American alliance had failed to gain a foothold in northwest Europe, by early 1945 the vast Allied air forces had destroyed the Luftwaffe while inexorably reducing Germany's industrial resources to rubble. German production surges late in the war were possible only through the emergency relocation of manufacturing facilities manned by legions of slave laborers working under horrific conditions. Such temporary gains could not be sustained indefinitely. Finally, we should recall that the Manhattan Project was initially intended to develop an atomic bomb for use against Germany—a threat that Hitler's Reich could not counter. Even if Hitler had refrained from micromanagement and intelligent defensive strategies had been implemented on all fronts to preserve the Wehrmacht's battlefield capabilities and keep the Allied forces far from the heartland of the Reich, it is hard to see a plausible alternative to the eventual triumph of American power.

Why Germany Nearly Won has one more notable flaw: its long combat narratives suffer from the perennial shortcoming of most works of military history—a dearth of clear maps showing only significant infrastructure and terrain features during major deployments and planned or executed operational phases of campaigns. The production of such could drive a flourishing niche industry.

2. *Inside Hitler's High Command* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2000) 115.