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Joachim Ludewig, *Rückzug: The German Retreat from France, 1944*. Ed. David T. Zabecki. Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2012. Pp. xviii, 435. ISBN 978-0-8131-4079-7.

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Rückzug is a history of the German retreat from France in August and September 1944. When the German edition appeared,¹ Joachim Ludewig was a German army reserve officer working for the German Defense Ministry. The book is based on his doctoral dissertation (Cologne 1990) and accordingly makes extensive use of archival sources. The basic thesis is that the Germans were able to form a stable front in September 1944 because Field Marshal Walter Model and General Johannes Blaskowitz stripped non-threatened sectors to reinforce crisis spots, circumventing Hitler's orders, which were often obsolete when received. Furthermore, lower-level officers acted swiftly and resolutely on their own initiative. Had the Allies established what Ludewig terms a "main-effort offensive" in late August or early September, the Germans could not have stopped them from reaching the Rhine. But the Allies' dispersal of effort and transition to a Broad Front both delayed them and weakened their combat power, giving the Germans a much-needed respite and time to stabilize the front.

The book betrays its origin as a dissertation by its rather dry style of presentation. The perspective is strictly "top down" and operational—examining events principally from the standpoint of Army and Army Group commanders—with no attention to the experiences of soldiers at the front. There is a good deal of combat chronology of the "this division went here on this day" type, but the approach is mainly analytical, not merely descriptive. Ludewig examines the situations in northern and southern France separately and divides the book into three parts: the initial situation; the retreat to the West Wall; and, finally, the stabilization of the front and the transition to positional warfare.

The assessment here of Germany's initial situation is far too terse. The Germans' global military position from 1941 to May 1944 gets a mere five pages, and their situation in France from June 1944 to August 1944 only fifteen. Ludewig foregoes examining Germany's defensive effort in June and July in more detail, believing this has already been done exhaustively. But he really should have analyzed more fully the defensive fighting in Normandy. The last word on the subject had certainly not been written when he finished his dissertation in 1990.²

The German situation was quite desperate when Model took command in August. Of fifty-four major units, seven were isolated in coastal fortresses, fourteen were in the Falaise pocket, eleven were badly attrited, and ten were defending the Channel coast, leaving only twelve combat-effective units in the front line to face some thirty-seven Allied divisions. Hitler was prepared to provide major reinforcements within one or two months, but until then Model would have to fend for himself. He withdrew units from the British sector and the Falaise pocket to shore up his left wing, facing the Americans, but both the British and the Americans failed to push forward energetically enough to destroy their weak German opponents. Ludewig observes that General Dietrich von Choltitz, despite claiming in his memoirs that he opposed on moral grounds Hitler's order to destroy Paris, simply lacked the capability to carry out the order. On the other hand, Choltitz in fact refused to carry out such destruction when he could have done so. Similarly, Luftwaffe commander General Otto Desselach made a show of following the Führer's instruction to destroy Paris, but directed his bombers to attack military targets south of the city rather than the city center.

The Germans could only watch helplessly as the British seized Antwerp, breaking their front in two. Worse, Model lacked the reserves to hinder a further advance:

1. *Der deutsche Rückzug aus Frankreich 1944* (Freiburg: Rombach Verlag, 1994).

2. E.g., Niklas Zetterling's excellent *Normandy 1944: German Military Organization, Combat Power and Organizational Effectiveness* (Winnipeg, MB: Fedorowicz Publ, 2000) was published a decade later.

The situation was such that Model believed it was possible that the enemy armored spearheads might at any moment punch through to the east and out of the Seventh Army sector. It therefore was urgently necessary to man the West Wall defenses immediately. But the commitment of the Replacement Army units that had been mobilized just the day before could only be a stopgap measure. The Army Group B chief of staff even doubted that the outposts along the border would be strong enough to stop a push by the British into the industrial region of the Ruhr.... Model had to have at least ten infantry divisions and five Panzer divisions. He concluded, "otherwise, the gateway to Northwest Germany is wide open." It was an accurate description of the desperate situation. Model's assessment remained valid for at least the next several decisive days because the forces he requested were simply not available—and Model most likely knew that." (194–95)

British errors saved the Germans. General Bernard Montgomery neither exploited the "open door" leading into the Rhineland, nor gained control of the mouth of the Scheldt, as the Germans expected him to do. Instead, the Canadians attacked the Channel ports, while another British corps pushed the Germans against the south bank of the Scheldt. Lack of British offensive action north of the Albert Canal permitted the Germans to evacuate the Fifteenth Army via Vlissingen and the Woensdrecht isthmus.

So too, American errors gave the Germans time to occupy the West Wall in strength. German forces were extremely weak after the retreat, but, Ludewig writes, the Americans "continued to push the attacks on a broad front, but with relatively little penetration force" (261). On the southern end of the front, Blaskowitz retreated to the Dijon area, which saved 185,000 German troops. "The Germans, in fact, had expected the worst as soon as the Operation Dragoon forces began their campaign of maneuver in Provence. It was primarily to Blaskowitz's credit that the worst-case scenario did not occur" (268). Nevertheless, Hitler was aggrieved at this retreat and replaced Blaskowitz with General Hermann Balck.

The author is generally dismissive of the French resistance, which, ironically, may actually have helped the Germans by disrupting telecommunications between Hitler's and Blaskowitz's headquarters. As a result, Blaskowitz was free to withdraw up the Rhône without interference from Hitler. The resistance did not significantly hinder the German retreat, even in the south, where its forces were relatively strong.

Since German fortunes depended largely on Allied decisions, Ludewig examines their actions as well, using American and British official histories very effectively. His principal criticism is that Eisenhower lacked the operational experience to appreciate the magnitude of the opportunity open to him after the breakout. Further, he was too committed to consensus-building to choose a point of main effort, for fear of antagonizing his subordinates as well as political leaders and public opinion in Britain and America. Ludewig also diagnoses the Allies with a "victory disease"—they thought they could advance wherever they liked along the whole front. Eisenhower's allowing both Montgomery and General Omar Bradley to advance, rather than concentrating forces under one of them, deprived both of the power to achieve complete success. Neither made concerted efforts to reach decisive objectives: Montgomery tried to clear the Channel ports while seizing Antwerp and a bridge over the Rhine; Bradley attacked both north and south of the Ardennes. Consequently, the Germans were able to use limited forces to frustrate these relatively weak, dispersed Allied efforts.

Halting either the British or the Americans to establish a single main-effort offensive focused in one sector seemed almost impossible. Eisenhower, therefore, decided to return to the basic operational concept [of] a broad-front advance running along two main offensive axes. But because the supply problems continued to exist, the return to and rigid adherence to that concept could only result in an overall slowdown of the Allied advance. The exact moment at which the Broad Front strategy was re-implemented was very important to the German stabilization efforts.... The overall slowdown of the advance toward the Reich gave the Germans valuable time to further strengthen the defenses of the Western Position. (290–91)

The book's poorly executed maps³ are inconveniently gathered toward the end, requiring the reader to flip back and forth. The English translation⁴ is generally well done, apart from a few minor irritants: for ex-

3. Some are so lacking in detail that readers unfamiliar with French geography will not easily understand where the action is taking place. Also, it is not immediately clear that the labels "First Army Situation" and "Seventh Army Situation" actually refer to *German* rather than American Armies.

ample, lower-case “führer” (always capitalized in German) and Germanized place names in place of more familiar equivalents (Lüttich for Liège, etc.).⁵

Rückzug certainly delivers its promised detailed examination of the Germans’ retreat from France and stabilization of their front in August and September 1944. Anglophone readers familiar with the Allied “breakout and pursuit” will find the German perspective adopted throughout extremely valuable. The only major drawback is the book’s limited scope: readers must look elsewhere for analysis of the German defensive campaign in Normandy and of the preparation and conduct of the Ardennes Offensive.

4. By the Bundessprachenamt (German federal government’s translation service), then edited by David T. Zabecki with a final review by the author.

5. Certain German terms well known to English readers of military history should have been retained: for example, “Schwerpunkt” instead of the hideously wordy “single main-effort offensive focused in one sector.”