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Stephen Harding, *The Last Battle: When U.S. and German Soldiers Joined Forces in the Waning Hours of World War II in Europe*. Boston: Da Capo, 2013. Pp. 223. ISBN 978-0-306-82208-7.

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Schloss Itter, a medieval fortress, stands high on a rocky promontory separated by a ravine and a narrow bridge from its village in the Austrian Tyrol, east of Innsbruck. Local powers fortified it before the thirteenth century, long before it became a tony, fifty-room tourist hotel and then a prison, where, in early May 1945, German forces still held fourteen once prominent French politicians, former generals, and their consorts (arriving from 1943 to 1945). The deluxe prison (by Nazi standards) was one of 197 satellite facilities nominally under the regional concentration-command at Dachau (13). After Hitler's death on 30 April, the big-name, once front-page French politicians could have become valuable bargaining chips for surviving Nazi bigwigs and smaller fry or been slaughtered like so many other innocents in the last hours of the crumbling Thousand-Year Reich. American forces advancing through the nearby Inn Valley were unaware of their existence, until a clever Croat prisoner/electrician/handyman, "Zvonko" Čučković,¹ successfully passed through the German lines, no-man's land, and the forward column of US troops to inform the 103rd Infantry Division of the plight of the distinguished prisoners.

One small unit of Americans rushed toward, reached, and secured the Schloss. The ensuing heroic defense of this undermanned Austrian Alamo is heart-warming rather than important, because the war was already effectively over. The prisoners themselves were symbols of France's past, not war participants. Several of them, including the boldest and bravest, the "Bounding Basque" Jean Borotra, were tried as German collaborators by postwar French governments.

"Defense journalist" Stephen Harding² chose to chronicle this very late moment in World War II perhaps because it was, as American commander Capt. Jack Lee put it, "just the damndest thing" (173). We encounter a cliffhanging Alpine castle and a near-death experience for three groups: querulous, strange-bedfellow French prisoners; outgunned American rescuers; and, most intriguingly, a few German soldiers who, for self-redemptive or self-preservationist motives, joined the defense of the castle against their fellow German troops.³ These SS and Wehrmacht soldiers assisted the GIs in keeping safe the mostly elderly French captives: among them, Édouard Daladier (a signer of the Munich pact, then sixty-one), a son of Georges Clemenceau (then seventy-one), and the sister of General Charles de Gaulle.

The volume's twenty-eight photographs show the French VIPs looking dapper despite their circumstances. The book's maps, one of western Austria and one of the Schloss, are unfortunately insufficient to clarify troop movements, approach routes to the castle, and the topography of the village of Itter in relation to the Schloss's western mountain spur. Tactical movements are, however, described in detail.

No American wanted to be the last soldier to die in "Krautland" (119), when retreating German forces (numbers unclear) fiercely attacked the defenders of the Schloss, which the Germans could easily have bypassed. Had someone given an order to execute the French hostages (called "honor prisoners")? Heinrich

1. Čučković, a resistance fighter arrested by the Gestapo in December 1941, had narrowly escaped liquidation at Dachau. I thank Ulysses S.K. Lateiner, former Wehrmacht aircraft model builder and present *Current Biology* production and copy editor, for skills that allow me to print this name correctly.

2. Editor of *Military History* and author of seven other books, including accounts of World War II aircraft and ships: e.g., *Gray Ghost: The R.M.S. Queen Mary at War* (Missoula, MT: Pictorial Histories, 1982), and *Voyage to Oblivion: A Sunken Ship, a Vanished Crew and the Final Mystery of Pearl Harbor* (Stroud, UK: Amberley, 2010), about a tub that became the first American warship sunk in the Pacific, as well as a student of more recent US wars.

3. I have not seen John P. Moore's rare volume *Signal Officers of the Waffen-SS* (Portland, OR, 1995); Moore had earlier researched the incident and Hauptsturmführer Kurt-Siegfried Schrader's role (see below).

Himmler, still alive, was quite capable of that or any other barbarity, but no evidence shows that this side-show was his concern.

The strength of the book lies in its suspenseful tale of the one-day engagement fought by once important, brave, and spiteful Frenchmen, plucky and ingenious American GIs, and German soldiers acting very much out of character. Bit players, too, like the Czech cook Andreas Krobot, showed remarkable cunning and daring. The ten Americans had to cooperate with the fourteen German troops (“castle Krauts”), shooting side by side with them to defend the Schloss. Harding does not explain how they managed to communicate with each other before and during the battle. He employs a cliffhanger chapter-ending style: at the close of chapter 6, “Tankers on the March,” for example, we read that “[Lee’s] foresight would soon be validated, for it would be a very short night” (133). Cut! Print!

A serious weakness of the book is its lack of investigation into or even speculation about the psychology of the various parties, ethnic groups, and individuals. The “contentious,” “argumentative” French politicians are constantly bickering (several later wrote self-justifying memoirs). The German officers remain inscrutable, both the “textbook sociopath” Totenkopfverbände-SS Capt. Sebastian “Wastl” Wimmer (a homicidal veteran of Majdanek and Dachau) and such “good-guy” highly decorated officers as Wehrmacht Maj. Josef Gangl and Waffen-SS Capt. Kurt-Siegfried Schrader. The Americans, led by the laconic but effective former footballer Capt. Jack Lee, are not shown to have much personality. The Austrians are either anti-Nazi partisans or youngsters impressed into German service; that is, Harding plays down their enthusiastic collaboration with their invading brothers. We learn little of the orders or intentions of the German units that attacked the castle. The publicity attached to the book misleads by luridly describing them as “two hundred angry, liquored-up Waffen-SS soldiers with orders to kill everyone ... so that no one could testify at war crimes trials”—Harding offers no such characterization (205n15 is poor hearsay).

As the battle began, an anti-tank round demolished the sole American tank, although none of the three soldiers present died. Ammunition quickly ran low. Unexpectedly, no one had destroyed the phone line from Schloss Itter to nearby Wörgl, so the Americans could still urgently request reinforcements (153), without which the Germans would have breached the walls with their one small but lethal cannon. One Frenchman, Jean Borotra, offered to go on a “suicide mission” and got through porous enemy lines. A winner of the Croix de Guerre in World War I and a competitive Wimbledon tennis player, he was still in excellent physical shape. Comically disguised as an Austrian peasant, he led the relieving American detachment back to the castle cross-country to evade German roadblocks. At that moment, the besieged were losing more and more castle crenellations to Wehrmacht artillery, and the fortified door was threatened. When a second tank, named “Boche Buster,” and personnel from the US 753rd Tank Battalion rolled up to assist the hard-pressed first responders, the SS abandoned their six-hour battle and merged into the landscape.

More than one of the two hundred-plus “reviews” of *The Last Battle* mounted at Amazon.com deem the subject and cast of characters fascinating, but the book-length treatment a “dull trudge.” Most, however, call it a “good read” and award it four (of five) stars on average, though some offer penetrating criticisms. Despite its title, most of the book (130 of 165 pages) concerns the cast’s backgrounds and pre-battle arrangements. As an historian of antiquity, I was neither surprised nor put off by the focus on antecedents. After all, Herodotus devotes much greater attention to, for instance, what happened before and after Thermopylae than to the battle itself. His terse recounting of the last-stand combat of Greeks against Persians is one of the most powerful combat narratives in the history of historiography, and the battle had major effects on Hellenic morale and strategy. By contrast, when the smoke clears over Schloss Itter, we observe that this “last battle” and its consequences were hardly momentous.

Harding has already optioned his book and helped adapt it for a possible film, which could potentially better convey the locations of the defenders (and defended)—men and women barricaded in the Schloss by a single thirty-five-ton M4 Sherman tank (the “Besotten Jenny”). The film would likely not report details like American tank and infantry unit numbers, desirable in a serious history but tedious for those seeking merely a brisk narrative with “our guys” emerging triumphant.

As a classicist, I envy Harding his access to so rich an array of sources—official documents, unpublished manuscripts (including the very detailed, but long hidden notes of the quick-thinking Čučković), interviews with survivors (3), newspaper and magazine articles,⁴ and previous secondary accounts of the larger Tyrolian campaign. He describes (175) frustrations that even a historian writing one generation later (like Herodotus) faces in chasing down disappearing or disappeared sources; he consulted archives in six countries. The endnotes helpfully explain military equipment, allied and Reich combat units, and German weapons terminology.

In no other World War II battle did German soldiers join Americans in fighting against units of their own army. One Wehrmacht infantry soldier, disobeying his traitorous commander at the castle but honoring his oath to the dead Führer, jumped the wall and fled to the besiegers. This “dire development” (143) surely alerted the besiegers (including Panzer armor) to the parlous state of the besieged, but they failed to punch quickly enough through the castle’s fortified door.

The US Army awarded Captain Lee the Distinguished Service Cross, second only to the Congressional Medal of Honor, for extreme gallantry and risk of life (207n12). On 7 May, Germany surrendered unconditionally. In Wörgl, the Austrians subsequently named a street for the Bavarian officer Josef Gangl, recognizing his efforts to shield its residents and rescue the French prisoners. He had been shot dead fighting against his countrymen in the day’s struggle. Captain Lee, upon discharge, ran for office in upstate New York, was defeated, bought a hotel in New Berlin, NY, and lost it in another kind of battle, legal bankruptcy, an irony not noted. Sadly, the war hero died early, at the age of fifty-four—probably of alcoholism.

I append some minor criticisms. Harding’s style is often drab and clichéd: “thugs” are “brutal,” bad guys have “minions,” and so on. One wonders, too, what another popular World War II author, Cornelius Ryan, historian of the Battle for Berlin,⁵ would have thought of Harding’s identical title?⁶ Da Capo’s dust-jacket photograph would better suit Ryan’s classic, since the flat lay of the pictured land is irrelevant to Harding’s book. Compared with the decisive Battle for Berlin, this parochial “last battle” merits a quirky asterisk at best, however tasty and bizarre the anecdote.

4. E.g., eyewitness reporter Meyer Levin’s story, “We Liberated ‘Who’s Who,’” *Saturday Evening Post* 218.3 (21 Jul 1945) 17.

5. *The Last Battle* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1966). Ryan, in the book’s epigraph, quotes the Athenian Thucydides about proper historical method for recording a war, a method based first on autopsy and interrogation of participants on all sides; he lists in twenty small-print pages his American, German (addresses omitted), Soviet, British, and other informants, both high and low.

6. It is, admittedly, a popular one: C.S. Lewis and David Irving also used it for different struggles.