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Raymond Bagdonas, *The Devil's General: The Life of Hyazinth von Strachwitz, "The Panzer Graf."* Philadelphia: Casemate, 2013. Pp. 357. ISBN 978-1-61200-222-4.

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During both world wars, Germany set a very high standard for tactical leadership. This was especially true in the Soviet-German conflict, where German commanders used maneuver and coordination skills to defeat more numerous opponents. Most accounts of such victories focus on the achievements of senior leaders such as Heinz Guderian or Erich von Manstein. Except for a number of divisional histories, however, this literature is short on details about how Germans operated at tactical levels from company through regiment.

Raymond Bagdonas, a self-taught Australian historian, helps fill this gap with a biography of Lt. Gen. Hyazinth, Graf von Strachwitz, the subject of at least two previous studies in German. A junior officer in the Garde du Corps of Kaiser Wilhelm II, Strachwitz spent most of the First World War as a French prisoner. This and his service in a paramilitary organization in postwar Silesia were insufficient to earn him a place in the interwar Reichswehr, and he did not return to active duty until the 1935 expansion of the German Army, when he wangled a job as a supply officer in the First Panzer Division.

Strachwitz's big opportunity came in 1940, when his division transferred a tank regiment to the re-designated Sixteenth Panzer Division. There, he commanded a tank battalion in the Balkan, Barbarossa, and Stalingrad campaigns of 1941-42. A combat wound—one of fourteen he suffered during the war—saved him from the Stalingrad encirclement. In spring 1943, then Colonel von Strachwitz became commander of the panzer regiment for the elite Grossdeutschland Division. In that post, he fought at Kursk until sidelined by an injury all tankers can identify with, when he was struck by the recoil of his own main gun in the cramped space of a tank turret. For the remainder of the war, Strachwitz commanded a series of ad hoc, brigade-size mechanized groups that fought desperately to blunt the armored forces of the Red Army.

As Bagdonas observes, his protagonist was an excellent tactical commander, but so independent of thought and impatient with logistical problems that he was repeatedly passed over for command of division or larger formations. As a result, Strachwitz spent the entire war as a very effective tactical commander: his personal score of 150+ enemy tanks knocked out made him the highest-ranked recipient of the gold panzer assault badge. He was also one of only twenty-seven men to receive Nazi Germany's highest award, the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves, Swords, and Diamonds. At the same time, he became so disenchanted with the Nazi regime that he actively conspired to overthrow Adolf Hitler; only his early (1932) membership in the party and in the Allgemeine SS—which he apparently joined because of his love of horses—shielded him from investigation after the 20 July plot.

The author is at his best when describing Strachwitz in battle, as in this account of a 1942 ambush:

The Panzer Graf's gunner and loader worked feverishly, responding to his firing instructions, or firing on sight, loading shell after shell. The tanks reeked of gunpowder and sweat. As all the Russian [*sic*; read "Soviet"] tanks in his immediate vicinity were burning or destroyed the Graf ordered his tank out of concealment. He moved to the rear of the column and began taking out one Russian tank after another. In all of the chaos he was easily mistaken for a Russian and so had no trouble attacking tanks at very close range with deadly effect. A number of Russians were firing, but aimlessly, more from panic than at any identifiable threat. After half an hour of murderous mayhem the surviving Russians fled, leaving close to 50 burning or disabled tanks littering the battlefield. Not content with this victory von Strachwitz pressed on, pursuing the fleeing Russians relentlessly. Over the next three days his battalion brought their total of Russian tanks destroyed to 105 .... (162)

Bagdonas also describes the practical problems of panzer commanders, such as repairing and resupplying their vehicles while still advancing.

Unfortunately, the author's sources contribute to flaws in an otherwise fascinating study. Since little is known about General von Strachwitz's early life, Bagdonas is reduced to a "life and times" approach, describing typical attitudes and activities of German officers and then observing that Strachwitz "would have been expected" to do likewise. He can only conjecture about his protagonist's motives in joining the Nazi Party.<sup>1</sup>

More significantly, the author uncritically accepts the German Army's claims that it was a professional force that took no part in genocide or violations of the law of war—what has become known as the myth of the "Clean Wehrmacht."<sup>2</sup> Although Bagdonas commendably uses recent re-examinations of Operation Barbarossa<sup>3</sup> and the Battle of Prokhorovka,<sup>4</sup> in general his book reflects the views presented by German writers during the first decades after the war. Thus he solemnly repeats the assurances of German generals that they neither circulated nor enforced the criminal orders issued prior to the invasion of the Soviet Union (102–3). While that may be true for a few officers, Felix Römer has calculated that reports of the execution of political officers—one of the crimes authorized by the 1941 orders—exist for all thirteen German field armies, all forty-four army corps, and over 90 percent of frontline divisions.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, having portrayed the Wehrmacht as compliant with the law of war, Bagdonas offers no context for the equally barbaric actions of the Red Army (112). Similarly, while he credits the gallantry and expertise of German soldiers, he readily accepts German stereotypes of their opponents, who were supposedly motivated by fanaticism, deliberate inebriation (113), or fear of execution (130). In fairness, he does identify practical reasons for Soviet defeats and cites instances of Germans being forced to retreat in the face of far tougher resistance than early accounts admitted.

The author makes other debatable assertions concerning the operational conduct of the war in 1942, writing that "The Caucasus operation was only revealed by Hitler to his generals" (153) at some time after the issuance of the 1942 operations directive. Some junior leaders may have been unaware of the goal of seizing the oil fields, but German units began running short of fuel already in 1941. A ten-thousand-man special brigade, dedicated to restoring petroleum production, had been deployed on the southern wing of the German advance since 1941.<sup>6</sup>

Bagdonas also dismisses as Soviet propaganda the idea that Gen. V.I. Chuikov was feeding in a minimum of troops and supplies to maintain the defenses of Stalingrad and thereby tie down the German invaders. Instead, he claims Chuikov was constrained by both limited space for maneuver and "what he could get across the river without it being destroyed" (176). There are two responses to this. First, Chuikov commanded Sixty-Second Army and his higher headquarters, the Stalingrad Front, provided troops and supplies to that army; Chuikov usually committed resources as soon as he received control of them. Second, and more generally, German interdiction of the river was less effective than they believed at the time. Operating at night, the Volga River Flotilla was usually able to pass individual divisions across the river within two nights after the Stalingrad Front released them. The principal limitation was that large objects, such as medium tanks, did not fit onto the available vessels and had to be left behind with the artillery, which fired

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1. Several of his references lack page numbers that would permit the reader to verify assertions.

2. See, e.g., the excellent historiographic study by Ronald Smelser and Edward J. Davies II, *The Myth of the Eastern Front: The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2007).

3. E.g., David Stahel, *Kiev 1941: Hitler's Battle for Supremacy in the East* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2012).

4. E.g., Valeriy Zamulin, *Demolishing the Myth: The Tank Battle at Prokhorovka, Kursk, July 1943: An Operational Narrative*, trans. Stuart Britton (Solihull, UK: Helion, 2011).

5. "The Wehrmacht in the War of Ideologies: The Army and Hitler's Criminal Orders on the Eastern Front," in Alex J. Kay, Jeff Rutherford, and David Stahel, eds., *Nazi Policy on the Eastern Front, 1941: Total War, Genocide, and Radicalization* (Rochester, NY: U Rochester Pr, 2012) 85–88. This source may have been published after *The Devil's General* went to press.

6. For a translation of the directive for Operation Blue, see Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, ed., *Blitzkrieg to Defeat: Hitler's War Directives 1939–1945* (NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964) 117–20. See also Wilhelm Tieke, *The Caucasus and the Oil: The German-Soviet War in the Caucasus 1942/43*, trans. Joseph G. Walsh (Winnipeg: Fedorowicz Publishing, 1995) 4–16.

in support from positions on the eastern bank. Not only do the journals of Sixty-Second Army and its subordinate units confirm this process, but post-Soviet archivists have published thousands of documents relating to these troop movements.<sup>7</sup> Between 14 September and 26 October 1942, nine divisions and five separate brigades crossed the Volga to reinforce Chuikov.<sup>8</sup>

Overall, *The Devil's General* provides a well written, interesting account of German tank combat against the Soviets. General readers will find its author's account of tactical combat enthralling, but, where he departs from this basic topic, they should treat his observations with skepticism.

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7. See, V.A. Zolotarev, ed., "Stavka VGK: Dokumenty i materialy 1942" [The Stavka VGK: Documents and Materials, 1942] in *Russkii arkhiv: Velikaia Otechestvennaia* [The Russian Archives: The Great Patriotic (War)], 16 (5-2) (Moscow: "TERRA," 1996).

8. See table 15 in David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House, *Armageddon in Stalingrad, September-November 1942* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2009) 137.