

**Melvin, Mungo, *Manstein: Hitler's Greatest General***

**London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2010. Hardcover; 647 pages: 32 plates;  
RRP \$69.99; ISBN 978-0-2978-4561-4**

Erich von Manstein was one of the leading figures of the German army in the Second World War, serving in the Polish campaign (1939), the French campaign (1940), and in the war against Russia from 1941 until his dismissal by Hitler in 1944. Tried after the war, he was found guilty of war crimes and sentenced for eighteen years imprisonment. Released in 1953, he published his memoirs in 1955, and died in 1973.

Despite the fact that he was one of Hitler's most brilliant generals and a war criminal, the first biography of Manstein did not appear until 2006. This was Oliver von Wrochem's *Erich von Manstein: Vernichtungskrieg und Geschichtspolitik* (the second edition appeared in 2009), which focused primarily on Manstein's post-war career, his self-rehabilitation, and his defence of the reputation of the German army. Marcel Stein's *Field Marshal von Manstein, a Portrait: The Janus Head*, following closely in 2007, was thematic rather than chronological. Stein placed considerable emphasis on Manstein's war crimes, including ill-treatment of Russian prisoners of war and cooperation with the killing squads which were responsible for rounding up Jews on the eastern front. Before these two books appeared, many military histories of the Second World War emphasised Manstein's military brilliance. Manstein, himself, was responsible for the perception that he was a professional soldier uninvolved in criminality: his memoirs foregrounded military operations and conflict (rather than agreement) with Hitler.

Mungo Melvin's biography is a successful attempt to blend these two aspects of Manstein's character (Manstein the military genius and Manstein the war criminal) within the one study. Melvin, a British military officer, has produced a remarkably scholarly piece of writing. He had access to the Manstein family papers, made use of archives in Britain and Germany, and visited former battlefields in the Ukraine. The resulting book is a rare breed, as it is a detailed

military history which closely explores Manstein as an individual. It resists the tendency of many military histories to worship its subject or to enthuse about a mythical, honourable German military.

Melvin's balanced assessment of Manstein as a military commander is best highlighted with the discussion of the Stalingrad debacle, wherein the German Sixth Army (under General Paulus) was surrounded in that city and eventually destroyed by the Russians in the winter of 1942-3. Controversy has surrounded Manstein's role in the Stalingrad debacle ever since its occurrence. Manstein commanded German forces closest to the besieged Sixth Army. He was therefore in a position to link up with the Sixth Army had it attempted to break out. Manstein, in his memoirs, lays the blame for the destruction of the Sixth Army with Paulus, who did not attempt to break out, and with Hitler, who had ordered Paulus to hold on to Stalingrad at all costs. Manstein's critics blame him, as Paulus' immediate commander, for not ordering the Sixth Army to break out against Hitler's orders. Melvin, although naming Manstein as 'Hitler's Greatest General', does not gloss over the field-marshal's shortcomings in the military sphere. Melvin argues that Hitler was responsible for putting the Sixth Army in its perilous position in the first place, and that Manstein, who was only put in charge of the southern sector of the eastern front thereafter, could not have initially known better than anyone else how disastrous the situation would become. Nevertheless, Melvin points out Manstein's failure to visit the besieged Sixth Army to meet with Paulus and familiarise himself with the situation, and his failure to order a last-minute attempt to break out.

Melvin does not ignore Manstein's moral shortcomings either. In his discussion of the Crimean campaign of 1941-2, Melvin points out that, while there is no evidence that Manstein explicitly ordered the murder of Jews, it is impossible that he could not have been aware that the German occupying force in the Crimea killed 90,000 Jews. Melvin acknowledges Wrochem's research, which demonstrates that Manstein's headquarters worked closely with the killing squads of the SS on planning the liquidation of Jews and partisans in the Crimean area. Manstein's failure, argues Melvin, lies in the fact that he did not have the moral courage to stop or mitigate crimes against Jews in the Crimea.

Furthermore, Manstein's denial of knowledge of the murder of Jews in his post-war trial, and his decision to ignore these murders in his memoirs, is indicative not only of his desire to protect his own reputation, but also that of the German army.

In his conclusion, Melvin argues that there is a lot to learn from Manstein. His military achievements were unsurpassed by any other of his generation, and the military profession in many countries continues to study these achievements to this day. But at the same time he served without question a criminal regime. He failed to recognise Germany's flawed strategy, particularly with regard to waging a war against Stalin's Russia, but more importantly he was complicit in war crimes. He did not oppose Hitler's leadership simply on the grounds that Prussian generals ought not to mutiny. This reveals that Manstein's priorities lay not with serving his people but rather a leadership regardless of the extent of its criminality. A well-written work, Melvin's biography of Manstein captures how a German general was morally compromised by benefitting professionally from a criminal regime.

Linden Lyons

Monash University