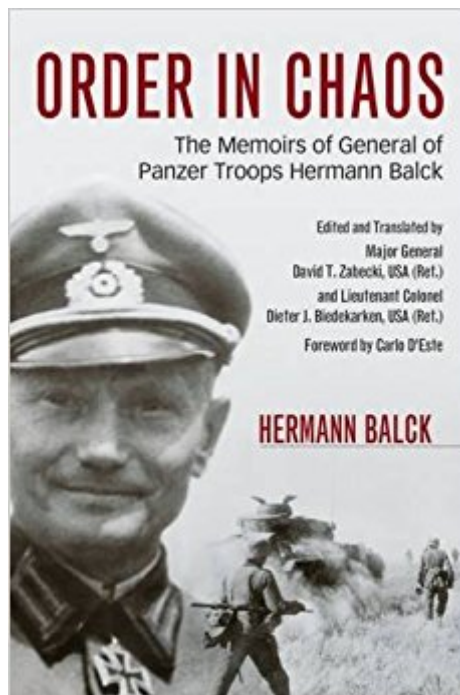




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Order In Chaos: The Memoirs Of General Of Panzer Troops Hermann Balck



Synopsis

German general Hermann Balck (1897–1982) was considered to be one of World War II's greatest battlefield commanders. His brilliantly fought battles were masterpieces of tactical agility, mobile counterattack, and the technique of Auftragstaktik, or "mission command." However, because he declined to participate in the U.S. Army's military history debriefing program, today he is known only to serious students of the war. Drawing heavily on his meticulously kept wartime journals, Balck discusses his childhood and his career through the First and Second World Wars. His memoir details the command decision-making process as well as operations on the ground during crucial battles, including the Battle of the Marne in World War I and his incredible victories against a larger and better-equipped Soviet army at the Chir River in World War II. Balck also offers observations on Germany's greatest generals, such as Erich Ludendorff and Heinz Guderian, and shares his thoughts on international relations, domestic politics, and Germany's place in history. Available in English for the first time in an expertly edited and annotated edition, this important book provides essential information about the German military during a critical era in modern history.

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Customer Reviews

I haven't read a German general's memoirs in quite a while--after a while all of them started to sound the same--but Balck has always been one of my favorites, so I was eager to read this book. Briefly, this book is very interesting on some topics, less so on others, as described below. As the other review notes, a good portion of the book deals with Balck's experiences during WWI and

during the interwar years--according to my Kindle, this was a third of the book. The portions of the book dealing with WWI are relatively interesting, but not, for instance, as interesting as Rommel's "Infantry Attacks". Balck also describes what was going on during the interwar years, when Germany (and the German military) were in turmoil, with communists, fascists, socialists, trade unionists, vying for power/influence, with the military caught in the middle--very interesting (to me...). Most readers will probably have bought the book to read about Balck's experiences in WWII, where he served on several fronts, although primarily in Russia. These parts of the book are indeed interesting, but I thought it would be helpful to point out what in particular was interesting: 1) Balck spends a lot of time describing his command philosophy/techniques. He was a strong believer in spending most of his time out with his units, while his Chief of Staff coordinated from a command post a bit further to the rear. Balck also gave almost all of his orders orally, and gave contingency plans which could be set in motion with a code word via radio. 2) Balck also spends a lot of time discussing relationships between the various German generals and between the generals (including himself), and Hitler. I was surprised to learn that Balck had an excellent relationship with Hitler (and had a generally positive view of him), and claims to almost never have had restrictions imposed on him about withdrawals, etc., which is the standard complaint from German generals in Russia. 3) Balck also describes some of the failures of the German troops at various points in the war, usually ascribed to poor leadership. 4) His characterizations and comparisons of the various enemies--including Russian, French, British, and American, are also interesting. 5) Balck kept a journal during both wars, and quotes from it liberally, even when it turns out that his views at the time were 100% wrong--this is very refreshing, because most memoirs are written with the advantage of 20/20 hindsight and it can be difficult to determine what the author thought at the time. 6) Finally, the editor does a fine job of providing additional detail, clarifications, and corrections via footnotes. In general, a highly recommended read for anyone interested in the Russian Front or in German operational-level leadership.

"Order In Chaos" by German Panzer General Herman Balck (May 2015). First quick note: there is no usual paper "book cover" or "dust jacket" to this book; essentially, the "book cover" has been printed onto the hard covers of this book -- a very fine high-quality book from the University Press of Kentucky (although the photos are murky, not sharp glossy). At the time of this review, no "Look Inside" feature was available to show its Table of Contents -- I'm sure that feature will soon appear. Until then: A much condensed "Table of Contents": WWI: chapters 1-6 (18%) Between the wars: chapters 7-10 (8%) WWII: chapters 11-19 (55%) notes, biblio, index, etc. (19%) As noted in this

book's subtitle, this book contains the edited memoirs of German General of Panzer Troops Hermann Balck. At the end of WWII, as he did not participate in the "U.S. Army European Command" post-war interviews, Gen. Balck is not well known. However, he should be studied as German Maj.Gen. F.W. von Mellenthin (who served under Gen. Balck), wrote of him: "If Manstein was Germany's greatest strategist during World War II, I think Balck has strong claims to be regarded as our finest field commander" (p. ix). [Back in 1967, at my request, von Mellenthin kindly sent me an autographed photograph of himself.] For unexplained reasons, Balck wasn't interested in publishing his WWII experiences -- until after 1979 when he began participating in a number of history seminars. Fortunately, during his entire career, Balck maintained a journal -- which he edited and finally published in 1981: "Ordnung im Chaos" -- which became this book. This book's translators, MG D. Zabecki and LTC D. Biedekarken, provide an informative analysis both of Balck's merits as a military commander and why he fought to the bitter end in supporting the German war effort -- I'm not going to summarize all of their thoughts here, just to mention that their "preface" ponders these concerns. What motivated Gen. Balck anyway? His son, Friedrich-Wilhelm Balck, was killed in battle, as was his son-in-law: Hans Schlenther. Balck wasn't a member of the NAZI party. Pertaining to the attempted assassination of Hitler in July 1944, Gen. Balck wrote: "As far as I could tell at the time, there was hardly anybody in the responsible military leadership who would have sympathized with -- let alone supported -- those who attempted the assassination" (p. 358). Balck noted: "Jodl was right when he said that Hitler was our fate and that we would be victorious or go down with him. Hitler just was not replaceable" (p. 434). This book is Balck's autobiography, his memoir. I won't review his early youthful upbringing here, nor his exploits during WWI. During WWII, he spent most of his service on the Eastern Front: the Russian campaign. [By the time that I was a young U.S. Army 2LT back in 1974, I had written to a number of German generals who had fought during WWII, and I asked them about their war experiences. I was interested in learning why they had fought until the end -- why hadn't they tried to end the war sooner? I received replies back from about 25 of them, including Manstein, Manteuffel, and others.] Balck apparently continued to soldier along to the bitter end as that was his profession: soldiering. Jews: Gen. Balck wrote that while he had been informed that some Jews were being exterminated at Galicia and Auschwitz, he had also been informed that the Jews were being sent to resettlement areas. Balck wrote: "they illustrate how little we knew and how devilishly clever the cloak of deception had been. None of what was happening was supposed to filter through to the Wehrmacht (Army)" (p. 328) -- one is left wondering how ignorant Balck really was as to what was happening to the Jews. There is a German school of thought that they were the innocent victim of WWI, and Balck seems to support the view that

Germany should not be held accountable for starting WWII either: "Personally, I am not certain that it really was not English politics that forced Hitler into the war" (p. 443). In the concluding chapter, "Looking Back", Balck evaluates the shortcomings of the Axis allies, the shortcomings of Hitler, and the "ignoramuses" Goring & Himmler (p. 449), and the superior coordination of the Allied countries. Balck also discusses the shortcomings as to how operational plans failed to properly address the correct supply of German units. Balck discusses many topics regarding political, economic, armament technology, & military themes that are too numerous and detailed to review here -- but well worth the read. I'll let other armchair generals muse whether or not Gen. Balck should have tacked left verses having tacked right at some river crossing. Balck finally concedes that "The solution to this problem [instigation of wars] is a free but firmly led democracy that makes human life worth living" (p. 453). Sadly he hadn't developed that belief before the outbreak of WWII, as he assigned the German military's steadfastness in following Hitler's orders until his demise as: "We had to fight until the [Allied] enemy conceded the impossibility of forcing us to our knees. That we were unsuccessful was not the fault of the soldier, who at all levels of rank from recruit to field marshal accomplished all that was humanly possible" (p. 454). Sadly, Balck seems to believe that the destruction of Germany at the end of WWII was the best "humanly possible" effort of the war-era German general command. [Not to provide any "cover" for Gen. Balck's opinions, but even highly trained American generals today still make "moral" versus "combat" mistakes: during early 2015 alone look at the number of American generals/admirals who have been relieved of command for drunkenness, fund misappropriations, sloppy accountability of nukes or nuke training, failure to secure classified documents, etc.] Gen. Balck offers many opinions of many battles and personalities -- far too many for me to recount, review and critique here. Nonetheless, the main question is: "For \$45 is this a worthwhile book in obtaining for understanding and analyzing the thoughts of an influential WWII Panzer General?" My answer is: "unquestionably, definitely, YES!" My 5-star rating isn't for the "politically correctness" of Gen. Balck's views [or the lack thereof], but for his candor and detailed 500+ pages of informative memoirs.

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