



Panzer Commander: The Memoirs of Colonel Hans von Luck

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A stunning look at World War II from the other side...

From the turret of a German tank, Colonel Hans von Luck commanded Rommel's 7th and then 21st Panzer Division. El Alamein, Kasserine Pass, Poland, Belgium, Normandy on D-Day, the disastrous Russian front--von Luck fought there with some of the best soldiers in the world. German soldiers.

Awarded the German Cross in Gold and the Knight's Cross, von Luck writes as an officer and a gentleman. Told with the vivid detail of an impassioned eyewitness, his rare and moving memoir has become a classic in the literature of World War II, a first-person chronicle of the glory--and the inevitable tragedy--of a superb soldier fighting Hitler's war.

Panzer Commander: The Memoirs of Colonel Hans von Luck Details

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Dhiraj Sharma says

Col. Hans Von Luck served under all theatres of WW-II be it France, Africa or the ill fated Operation Barbarossa in Russia.

If you want to read a book from the German Army's perspective this is the book for you.

The author writes in a crisp and precise manner and gives an insight into the German's soldier's mind and the reader comes to know how a professional army officer should behave. The book also touches upon the charismatic personality of one of the greatest german Field Marshalls 'Erwin Rommel" under whom Col Luck mostly served during the War.

The book ends up with Col Luck getting released from Russian Prison camp after spending harrowing 5 years as POW and trying to start a new life in post war Germany.

Highly recommended for military history buffs and for anyone aspiring to be an officer in the armed forces.

Leigh says

I always find it hard to write a review about Memoirs because it's an individual's story but I will say this, it was interesting and I felt an honest detail of Hans von Luck's experience during WWII. I might write more after I have time to think about it!

Née says

This book had me hooked from the first page. And maybe that was all a clever trick on von Luck's part because by the time I got to the point in the book where the military jargon and the (sometimes) dry descriptions of various missions was annoying me - I was too hooked to give up.

I'm glad I stuck with it. Hans von Luck's story is worth reading if you're a WWII history buff because it gives a unique perspective I had yet to encounter: a story from the other side.

So much of what I've read about WWII - and I realize that I haven't even begun to touch the surface of what is out there - has been based on the Allies, the British and/or the Americans, with the Germans being the bad guys. When you do read about the German 'side' of things, it's predominantly to understand why the good side reacted the way they did.

This is why I loved this book so much. Hans von Luck was a mid-ranking military official from the pre-war years right through to the end when he was captured by the Russians and kept prisoner for five years. And he writes as though he is both staunchly proud of being German and having fought in this war, but then also very sympathetic to the other side.

While I've since read criticisms that von Luck's position in this book makes it appear as though he distances himself from Hitler and the Nazi's partly to save face, I do believe after having read his story that he was simply a good man doing his job, and was not a war criminal like so many of his counterparts.

I could go on about this book for quite some time given its astonishing depth and ability to convey a great deal of emotion, but I will leave my review at this: if you don't read any other WWII book, read this one.

I like that it made me think about the Germans on a different level, and despite my obvious allegiance to those who were oppressed by Nazi Germany for so many years (including my Dutch grandparents), I was glad to have the chance to try and understand another perspective.

Dorin says

It's always hard to see memoirs as objective stories - Hans von Luck's memoirs make no exception. His evolution in the German army to the rank of colonel is interesting - he fought in France under Rommel, on the Russian front, almost reaching Moscow, in Africa under Rommel again - at his request, becoming quite intimate with the Desert Fox, then defended in France during Operation Goodwood, escaping the Falaise pocket, and defended against the Russians while commanding one of the combat units trying to escape the Halbe pocket. He surrendered to the Russians and was held as prisoner in GULAG camp for 5 years, then released back to West Germany.

The memoirs are not really a collection of technical details - it's more about human interactions, about things he personally did or felt. That's why I think the memoirs become more interesting when he reaches the prison camps in Georgia, where he has a lot of interesting insights on his Russian captors. His draws a positive picture for Rommel (which is contested nowadays) and some of his account of the Goodwood operation is contested; however, it makes sense as you read it, but, as always with memoirs, you have to take it with a grain of salt.

It's a well written memoir, though, it focuses on the essentials, and it makes up a good read - and obviously makes you want to read more on the WW2, as if you needed an incentive for that.

Jesse Kraai says

This is a fucking great war memoir and belongs alongside Ernst Juenger's *In Stahlgewittern*. I'm going to just make a couple personal points.

-Like with Juenger I kept coming back to now and thinking: You think you have problems? You don't have problems. And also, as Americans, we didn't really suffer in WWI or II. The Civil War was our drama.

-As a young person reading about WWII Germany I thought, like many others, that I would have done something if I had been there. Burned some shit down, I don't know. But now with Trump I have done basically fuck-all.

-Luck highlights what a disaster it is when someone like Trump or Hitler thinks they know better than the generals.

-Dude went through true shit, Hitler and five years Stalin. He never gave up and he never lost his humanity.

-The Prussian Oath is a hellofadrug.

-The father-in-law story makes me cry every time

We need a new edition with better maps, action sometimes hard to follow.

David says

Hans Von Luck (pronounced like the English name "Luke" not the English word "luck") was a "good German," which makes his memoir an interesting story that has certain elephants constantly lurking in the back of the room. Luck addresses them a few times, though perhaps not to the satisfaction of those who really want to know about the moral calculus of serving as a willing officer in Hitler's army.

I found his account compelling and sometimes riveting for his first-hand accounts of war and all its accompanying terror, as well as the years he spent as a prisoner in Russian camps at the end of the war, before he was finally released back to Germany.

However, his war stories, while detailed, meticulous, and sometimes dreadful, were somewhat lacking in the technical and tactical details that made Japanese Destroyer Captain a much better read. If you want to know all about tank warfare and what it was like to drive Panzers, Luck talks surprisingly little about the machines and the maneuvers themselves. He covers the battles he was involved in as if giving an AAR (After Action Report), narrating his campaigns from the Eastern Front to North Africa, where he served under Rommel, and finally, to the bitter end defense of Berlin, which led to his being captured by the Russians and spending the next five years as a POW.

In the foreword, he issues a plea for tolerance and peace in the hope of "never again" repeating the mistakes his country made, and throughout the book he gives the impression of being a conscientious man who always had his doubts about Hitler, but was just being a loyal soldier. He certainly wasn't anti-Semitic, as his girlfriend throughout the war was 1/8 Jewish, and they were told by the High Command that for that reason, he could not marry her. (He observes indignantly that reserve officers were allowed to marry a 1/8 Jew, but active army officers could not.) Actually, his romance with Dagmar became an ongoing "subplot" in the story, as he would frequently manage to speak to her briefly even while he was in the field and she was back in Germany (in areas being bombed), and at one point she basically hitchhiked through a war zone to meet him! Spunky woman. I won't "spoil" the ending by telling you whether or not they wind up marrying.

All that being said - I experienced some skepticism about Luck's studious disavowals that he or his fellow officers really knew what was going on with the Jews. Dagmar's own father was locked up in a camp (just a prison camp; they hadn't become death camps yet) and Luck tried to exercise his influence to free him. There are also an awful lot of stories about how noble and generous he and his men were to local civilians, and how grateful they were, and it was only in *other* places where less honorable German soldiers treated non-combatants with less humanity. Not that I doubt Luck's personal conduct — I'm sure he was a conscientious commander who followed the Geneva Convention. But still, he never seems to encounter anyone who actually dislikes Germans, or has reason to.

Later, Luck relates the increasing desperation of the German army as they realize (from about 1943 onward) that the war is lost and they are fighting for survival and increasingly diminishing chances of being allowed something more than unconditional surrender. As this happens, he talks about how Hitler and the High Command were increasingly detached from the reality at the front, how Hitler was trying to micromanage divisions (which often no longer existed except on paper), and how the Nazi police state even affected officers at the front. At one point, one of Luck's platoon sergeants is summarily executed by one of the infamous "flying drumhead" judges who were going around shooting soldiers for any reason they could drum up. Luck is furious, but even a highly decorated colonel can't do anything about it.

This was a good book for its look into the mind of a Wehrmacht officer, but I found the anecdotes like those

above more interesting than the actual war, which Luck describes in dry detail. The chapters about life in a Russian labor camp were interesting too.

Kris says

I pick this up as an addition to my WWII library as I had already read the books about the more famous generals of the Germans and I am starting to read about some of the lesser known leaders. This is a well written account of Colonel Luck's experiences in WWII and I did get to read some of the first accounts of what it was like for German POW's post WWII held by the Russians which I had never read before. The book as a whole though seemed to lack an awareness of the human cost of the war or it might have been that Colonel Luck had such a relentless positive outlook on the future he didn't allow anything that was emotionally troubling to enter his narrative. Whatever it is though I found the book a polished recounting of his experiences but I had no real awareness of how the author was impacted by the war. Interesting but not really riveting reading for a first person account.

Pithy Review - Luck is good at war

Jeff Clay says

"What madness to fight to the knife and then become good friends!"

This is a deceptively simple book, written in a matter-of-fact voice, as almost a travelogue of Colonel von Luck's experiences and travails in war and imprisonment. I wondered, more than once whilst reading, if the dispassionate distance of 40 years -- the approximate length of time from events to writing -- might have allowed a bit of a selective memory patina to colour his discourse. The Ukrainians welcomed the invading Germans, the Georgians embraced them, even many French took a "c'est la vie" attitude towards the 'sauf Boche.' Of course, even though it is hard to know the exact truth, it is well-known that many denizens of the various SSRs (Soviet Socialist Republics), for a multitude of reasons, had no lack of antipathy for Russians, Stalinists, or both. As well, the French are survivors. But in von Luck's account the Russians are not the villains either. Merely soulful children under the cynical boot of Stalin and his corrupt and inept functionaries. Perhaps a bit too simple of a caricature.

Regardless, this is neither a deep political thesis nor a memoir of military strategies and tactics. In the end it is a experiential personal story of survival, reconciliation and renewal. And as such, it shines.

"As a professional soldier I cannot escape my share of the collective guilt; but as a human being I feel none. I hope that nowhere in the world will young people ever again allow themselves to be so misused."

Would that it were so.

Karl Lazanski says

What can I say about this book that hasn't already been said by others! This memoir is really easy and

enjoyable to read. Whether it is intentional or just plain honesty it is hard not to like and respect, not just the officer but the man that was colonel hans von luck!

He describes in depth every theatre of the Second World War he was involved in, not just briefly but I believe in a very easily understandable way. His experiences were and still are relevant for today's people, of not just the brutality but the human side of war, of being himself able to understand and forgive harsh treatment in the gulags of Russia!

This is a book that could be read quickly like a novel, but in doing so one will miss the opportunity to ponder on things that are said by a very human individual that has experienced war at its worst!

Bill says

One of the best war memoirs I've read. The author is balanced and realistic about war, about the nazis, about his own point of view, about his opponents. He was present in virtually every theatre of war from the first day until almost the final day, and often involved in the crucial battles, so the account is full of interest from a historical point of view -- not to mention his close connection to Rommel. Von Luck was clearly an outstanding soldier and his battle accounts are fascinating, but the outstanding feature of the book is the maturity and compassion of Von Luck's writing, especially in describing his relationships with the many people who fill out the story.

Frank says

No spoilers.

In all my reading of World War 2, this is my first reading of memoirs of a German soldier. With that I must say that the writing was smooth, and was more of a character study than dates, facts numbers which was a departure.

Probably for me, the passages regarding Rommel were the best. To see the human side of a historical figure portrayed is always illuminating.

The flip side of this memoir, has been argued why this soldier didn't quit if he knew what Hitler and the Nazi's were doing. There are two sides to this argument which I will not get into at this point.

For the students of the War, they each have their own opinions.

Cerisaye says

I am about a quarter of the way through the audio version (for some reason the voice actor puts on an obviously fake German accent and reads with a downbeat tone, which take a bit of getting used to) of this Second World War memoir. Von Luck has reached Smolensk, on the road to Moscow, and I want to jot down a few thoughts on the book so far.

It certainly makes an interesting, total contrast with my previous wartime read/listen, Guy Sajer's *Forgotten Soldier*. Hans von Luck- the 'von' is key here- was a professional career soldier in an elite motorised unit, from an old Prussian military family, educated, cultured and multi-lingual. Before the war he hobnobbed within an international elite 'set', so he later encounters opponents on the field whom he'd last seen in an English gentleman's club. Unlike Guy Sajer, whose wartime experience was limited to the Eastern Front, mostly during its retreat phase, von Luck saw action in Poland, France, North Africa, Italy, Normandy, and

Russia. He was there for the invasion of Poland in 1939, and for Belgium and France in 1940. It all sounds rather jolly seen through his eyes, war as a gentlemanly, chivalrous affair. Welcoming locals, minimum of bloodshed, good behaviour, honourable intentions. In France he takes the opportunity to build up his wine collection, making clear he pays for the fine bottles he is able to collect and send back to Germany for safe-keeping. All the while, von Luck is at great pains to point out he was never a Nazi nor had any sympathies with Hitler or National Socialism. He makes disparaging comments about Party functionaries, shows distaste for Himmler and the SS including the Waffen SS, set up, he says, to make sure the Wehrmacht could be kept under control.

The memoir begins with a brief account of von Luck's postwar captivity in a Soviet work camp for German POWs, where he was kept for 5 years before his release and return to civilian life. Von Luck seems surprisingly forgiving of his Russian captors and displays no bitterness or anger. He wrote these memoirs nearly forty years later, and time is a great healer, but he seems truthful and honest. Von Luck comes across as fundamentally decent, a gentleman, the kind of man who would make convivial company.

Von Luck represents the ideal German officer from a generation that grew up during the Weimar years before Nazi propaganda took control of hearts and minds. He supports with the regime's initial moves to win back German pride and control of territories lost by the punitive retribution of the Treaty of Versailles. Yet he makes sure to distance himself, and the Wehrmacht, from politics and ideology. It's the old line, "We were soldiers merely doing our duty in fulfilment of a binding oath". I suspect there's a bit of a gloss going on in von Luck's account, but the fact he appears to have become friends with some old adversaries signifies the respect this German officer had from those in a position to judge fairly. I will update.

At the halfway point, I must call attention to the way von Luck's service in the desert marks the stark contrast between the experience of war by the men of the Afrika Korps and those sent to the Eastern Front. For e.g., von Luck describes the 'Gentleman's agreement' between his battalion and a nearby British unit, whereby at 5 o'clock each day hostilities ceased and information exchanged as to their respective captured prisoners, with messages of respect and goodwill, and taking of tea. Unimaginable on the Russian Front, where at the same time the Sixth Army suffered appallingly in Stalingrad from a combination of ruthless winter, starvation, and merciless savagery (understandable given what was done to Soviet prisoners by the advancing Germans). Of course von Luck's anecdotes are selective, and there was undoubtedly savagery in the Africa campaign, too, but it was a different experience, nonetheless, with Bedouin locals lending hospitality and assistance to both sides, as recalled by von Luck in glowing terms, not at all like Partisan attrition in Russia. In Africa and Russia alike German forces were bedevilled by chronic lack of supplies, materiel and poor decision making in Berlin.

Von Luck makes very clear, too, that Rommel by late 1942 told him the war was lost and the best course for Germany was to sue for peace with the Western Allies, getting rid of Hitler, to unite against their true enemy, Stalin. Would the Field Marshall really have been so frank with a junior officer, even one who was a special favourite with longtime service under Rommel? It seems unlikely. I do get the impression von Luck's memoir bears more than a tint of rose-coloured hindsight, charming as he is in the telling of his story. In this he is perhaps more like Guy Sajer than it might at first appear. Sajer wanted to shine light on the appalling suffering of the ordinary German soldier in the East, whereas von Luck's (worthy) agenda is to bring together former enemies in an embrace of mutual respect, forgiveness, tolerance and understanding, unity to make sure the conflict that engulfed the world 1939-45 is never allowed to happen again.

Finished. I enjoyed this memoir very much. I don't know how typical Hans von Luck was of the German officer class. He comes across as being quite special despite what seem genuine natural modesty and reticence. Interestingly, during the section covering his time in the *gulag* he gives his account in third person, *we* not *I*, shared suffering and endurance. He learns to knit and churns out socks to replace inadequate cotton foot coverings, even has guards buying them! As he says early in the book, *what the Germans had that their enemies never matched, was unit cohesion and as a consequence, a strong sense of comradeship...They will fight and die for their units and for their comrades. It comes down to this: no one wants to look the coward before friends, or to let them down at critical moments.* Very Prussian.

Von Luck was resilient, resourceful, held himself to a very high standard and expected the same from fellow officers and soldiers. He observes during the early days in Poland how *the stalwart and robust-seeming men often lost their nerve under combat conditions, while the supposedly weak proved to be strong and kept their heads.* He has emotional reunions with old fighting comrades and fellow POW camp survivors who share a common feeling of solidarity. Luck never appears to waver, no matter what came at him. He also had a fair degree of the luck his name implies (pronounced *Look*, I know). In later years, von Luck gave talks to British, Swedish and American audiences and military groups, and attended commemoration ceremonies with former enemies: *What madness to fight to the knife and then become good friends.* As an aside, it amused me greatly when von Luck in Hamburg after his release finds a job in an international hotel as *Night Manager*...I now can't help picturing him as Tom Hiddleston.

I'm not sure what to make of his claim not to have known anything about the camps before learning of the fate of his prospective father-in-law in Sachsenhausen. Perhaps a case of not wanting to know? Or a busy, preoccupied, fully engaged professional soldier seldom exposed to the realities of the home front? He never mentions atrocities. Feels sympathy for officers he knows forced from the Wehrmacht into SS service without choice or possibility of refusal. In any case, von Luck did his time for five years as a Russian POW, without any suggestion he had been anything other than a 'good' German officer and commander.

I have often felt that in the first half of my life I was, in a double sense, a prisoner of my time, trapped on the one hand in the Prussian tradition and bound by the oath of allegiance, which made it easy for the Nazi regime to misuse the military leadership; then forced to pay my country's tribute, along with so many thousand others, with five years of captivity on Russian soil. Some might see this as self-serving apologia, that the Wehrmacht and cultured, educated men like von Luck were quite happy to go along with the Nazis, until the tide of war turned so disastrously against the *Reich*. On the basis of his memoir, I am prepared to give him the benefit of doubt. He accepted his share of collective guilt as a professional soldier, *but as a human being I feel none*, and dedicated the remainder of his life to making sure it could never happen again. I can't help thinking he would be disappointed by the direction things have taken in Europe today, that lessons have not been learned, or, forgotten, as the Second World War recedes from popular memory.

Brendan Monroe says

Your feelings about this book are almost certain to be determined by your willingness to believe that there were "good Germans" serving in Germany's armies in WWII. The only way these Germans may have existed, you may think, is for them to have had no idea of what went on in the German concentration camps.

German Colonel Hans von Luck claims that he and his men had no idea of what went on "behind the barbed

wire" of the concentration camps, which then raises another question - is it possible for a German who served in such a high position in the military during that time to have remained ignorant of Nazi atrocities in the camps?

Luck only brings up the Nazi position on the Jews at a couple of points during this recounting of his wartime experiences. Once when retelling how various Muslim tribes encountered in Africa praised the official German position and then later when reporting how he tried to get his fiancée's Jewish father out of Sachsenhausen, the Nazi prison and concentration camp outside of Berlin. Luck does, however, make his disdain for Hitler and other high-ranking Nazi officials like Himmler and Goebbels clear at numerous points.

Luck also references a conversation he had in Africa in 1942 with legendary German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel in which Rommel declared that Germany's best hope was to sue for peace with the Allies as it was even then clear that Germany no longer had any realistic chance to win the war.

Regardless of whether Colonel Hans von Luck knew of the atrocities happening in the concentration camps or not - and I am inclined to believe him when he said he did not - I think a strong case could be made that Luck and many men like him weren't fighting for Hitler and the spread of Nazi ideology but for the survival of their own friends and family.

"Panzer Commander" is, I am pleased to say, a riveting, fascinating book by a man who remarkably fought on all the main German fronts in the war. He was part of the initial invasion into Poland, then fought with Rommel in France and North Africa, then was back to France where he was present in Normandy for the D-Day invasion, and then finally back to the Eastern Front where he was captured by the Russians in the war's final days. He then spent nearly five years in various Russian prison camps.

Somehow, throughout, Hans von Luck maintains his unshakeable optimism and sense of purpose. Military enthusiasts may be disappointed that Luck doesn't get into the tactical details of tank warfare, but I found his more anecdotal account of his experiences and fateful encounters with former rivals far more compelling. For that reason and others, this memoir of Colonel Hans von Luck is a deeply personal one and, at many points, particularly during the many reunions at the end, I found myself deeply moved.

"I have often felt", Luck writes, "that in the first half of my life I was, in a double sense, a prisoner of my time: trapped on the one hand in the Prussian tradition and bound by the oath of allegiance, which made it all too easy for the Nazi regime to misuse the military leadership; then forced to pay my country's tribute, along with so many thousands of others, with five years of captivity in Russian camps. As a professional soldier I cannot escape my share of the collective guilt; but as a human being I feel none. I hope that nowhere in the world will young people ever again allow themselves to be so misused."

Like the man himself, "Panzer Commander" is a deeply human account that never wavers in its sense of what is good and just in a world that is too often neither.

Ravi Singh says

One of the most readable German accounts of WWII. This book has been written with a wide audience in mind and will appeal to the whole range of readers, military, non military, allied, axis , young and old. The writing is simple with the content being king. The author participated in an impressive list of significant theaters and battles of WW II from Poland to Russia to Africa and Normandy. He even survived five years in

captivity in Russian camps.

Forget the criticism and some of the negative reviews, this is the kind of story which underlines "fact is stranger than fiction". This is a great first hand account of a German officer doing the best job he possibly could. He doesn't get into too much tactical details some military men would prefer but that makes it very readable for the wider audience. His personal acquaintance with some of the well known personalities like Rommel that gives the reader some interesting insight, is an added bonus.

Guy Sajer's "Forgotten Soldier" is hands down the best and most raw German account I have read and still ranks on top. However this is a more rounded, higher level account. It's pointless to focus on the author's political correctness and "balanced views" as a flaw. He was there, he fought and survived and has written a great account of it. That's what makes this makes this a great read.

James says

An officer of great character and ability, though his army was serving an evil cause, tells his story with clarity and humanity. Von Luck was the kind of officer under whom soldiers want to serve, because he cares deeply about them and puts their welfare above his own. A solid study in leadership under extreme hardship.
