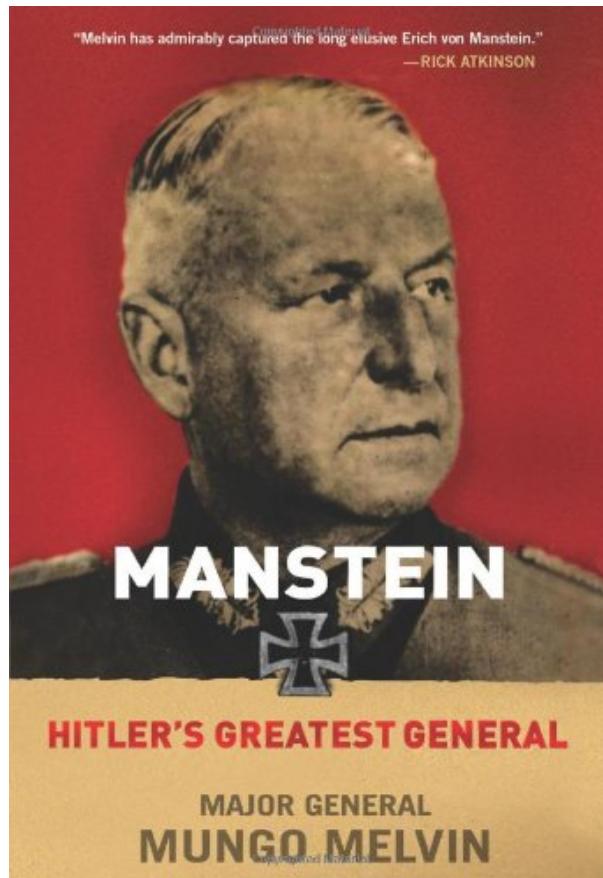


# MANSTEIN: HITLER'S GREATEST GENERAL BY MUNGO MELVIN



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"Melvin has admirably captured the long elusive Erich von Manstein."

—RICK ATKINSON



# MANSTEIN



**HITLER'S GREATEST GENERAL**

MAJOR GENERAL  
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#### About the Author

MAJOR GENERAL MUNGO MELVIN is Senior Directing Staff (Army), Royal College of Defence Studies, London. He has directed the British Army's Strategic and Combat Studies Institute, managed the Higher Command and Staff Course at the Joint Services Command and Staff College, and served as Director of Operational Capability in the Ministry of Defence.

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Among students of military history, the genius of Field Marshal Erich von Manstein (1887–1973) is respected perhaps more than that of any other World War II soldier. He displayed his strategic brilliance in such campaigns as the invasion of Poland, the Blitzkrieg of France, the sieges of Sevastopol, Leningrad, and Stalingrad, and the battles of Kharkov and Kursk.

Manstein also stands as one of the war's most enigmatic and controversial figures. To some, he was a leading proponent of the Nazi regime and a symbol of the moral corruption of the Wehrmacht. Yet he also disobeyed Hitler, who dismissed his leading Field Marshal over this incident, and has been suspected by some of conspiring against the Führer. Sentenced to eighteen years by a British war tribunal at Hamburg in 1949, Manstein was released in 1953 and went on to advise the West German government in founding its new army within NATO.

Military historian and strategist Mungo Melvin combines his research in German military archives and battlefield records with unprecedented access to family archives to get to the truth of Manstein's life and deliver this definitive biography of the man and his career.

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#### Most helpful customer reviews

56 of 60 people found the following review helpful.

Field Marshal Manstein

By B. S. Condell

Manstein: Hitler's Greatest General.

This new biography by Major General Melvin is long overdue and it is likely that it will remain the definitive work on Manstein for a considerable time to come. Significantly, although the book is clearly written with the military specialist in mind, there is a great deal which will be of serious interest to a wide general readership.

Until now, Manstein's reputation as a military genius has been based on his own memoir 'Lost Victories' which described his role in designing and planning Fall Gelb (case yellow) the Ardennes campaign in 1940 and on the Eastern Front until his dismissal by Hitler in 1944. Now, for the first time, a General Staff Officer is providing an in-depth appraisal of Manstein's overall career, his campaigns, his subsequent trial before a British military court in 1948 and his later contributions to the present-day Heer, the modern German Federal Armed Forces.

General Melvin's research and analysis is of a high order. The more so, as a War College graduate he has extensive experience of the military operational environment and is the first historian to be granted unlimited access to the Manstein family archives. As a German linguist, he was able to use such access to full advantage. Additionally, (having walked the ground) he provides a General Staff Officer's skilled appraisal of Manstein's major campaign successes such as the Crimea, where he was able to identify and visit the site of the German 11th Army headquarters. There are also rare insights into the Field Marshal's later brilliant defensive operations in the Donets River Basin, both on forehand and backhand maneuvers, at Army Group level.

Such historically vexed questions as Hitler's disastrous policy regarding the 6th Army at Stalingrad receive

welcome clarification and the planning for the last, much delayed, German offensive operation 'Citadel' at Kursk are covered with good attention to detail.

Manstein's turbulent relations with Hitler are described (with various sources being employed) as is Hitler's intellectual weakness in the Strategic Art where he had difficulty in deciding between Economic and Military priorities. The clash of wills in the War Room at Berchtesgarten in early 1944, made Hitler acutely aware that his abilities in the areas of Strategy and the Operational Art were overshadowed and he would not accept such a rival. Soon afterwards, Manstein was sent into retirement.

General Melvin's significant success with this book is that he has placed Manstein in the historical context of the period. All the major questions regarding his genius as a planner, his relevance as a strategist, his profound and intuitive expertise in the Operational Art as an Army and later as an Army Group commander, the accusations of war crimes, his attitude to the Jews, together with his later trial and subsequent sentencing are all dealt with both in detail and with a refreshing objectivity. This is supported by a wealth of quoted source material, extensive notations and an impressive and fascinating bibliography of published and unpublished material. Also well worthy of note are the re-designed situation maps.

As a person, Manstein is shown to be a product of the traditional Prussian aristocracy, a dedicated career officer presenting the traditional values of his social class such as loyalty, professionalism, decency, courage and moral rectitude; all of which were by no means exceptional in his time. Perhaps ironically, it is these same values which earned him the venomous distrust of Hitler and the Nazi party. Manstein's early service in the First World War, and later in the Reichswehr was much above average and it was clear that the TruppenAmt was, even then, considering him for an important career. The author assigns an important section of the book to this period which also covers the murderous in-fighting between the SA and the Nazi party machine.

General Melvin has created a highly researched and well balanced account of the life of, perhaps, the most skilled commander of any of the armed forces involved in the Second World War and I highly recommend the book to serving military personnel and to the general reader who has an interest in the military history of the period.

Bruce Condell,

Editor/Co-Author: 'On the German Art of War, Truppenfuhrung'

30 of 33 people found the following review helpful.

Brilliant work that is long overdue!

By The Squire

When I first read that biography of General-Field Marshal Erich von Manstein was about to be published I was elated. When I learnt the said work was to be written by a senior British military analyst and historian I literally couldnt wait to get the book.

I was not to be disappointed.

This book is an indepth and articulate historical study of the man who in the humble opinion of this reviewer was the last great tactical genius of conventional warfare, and was long overdue for a serious study and biography.

Western historians and military figures have traditionally swallowed German wartime propoganda(mostly

Goebbels work) and assumed that the likes of Rommel and Model were german military geniuses, while the standout German military leader was in fact Erich von Manstein. Hitler admired Manstein ability but loathed his attitude and aristocratic background, and saw von Manstein as a threat. Hence his promotion of individuals such as Rommel.

Although von Mansteins name is well known to serious students of military history it is less known to historians and the public at large. This book quite rightly seeks to address that lack of knowledge about this talented and complicated individual.

From the conception of the successful invasion of France to the capture of the Crimea, and holding the Red Army at bay - as much as was possible - as the German Army retreated after Stalingrad, Manstein was the man behind all these successful military ventures, in both the planning or operational levels.

The author has not attempted to gloss either the good or bad parts of the Field Marshals character or experiences.

This is not a journalistic piece with an 'axe to grind' or an ideology to expound. Rather it is a study of man whose profession was war, and one in which he excelled at a level that few of his contemporaries - Allied or Axis - could match.

Issues such as his lack of support for the German Military Resistance to Hitler, and why he never resigned in the face of National Socialisms destructive effect on Germany(and Europe) are explored by the author, and he successfully and clearly explains von Mansteins thinking.

One of the pleasures is the ease with which one can read the military maps, which is something civilians such as myself often have trouble understanding the intricacies of. Obvious attention to details and patience was taken to provide maps of great clarity which can be understood easily.

The author writes with ease, and draws the reader very effectively into Manstein and his world. And whilst the grand military and tactical skills of the man are made clear so are the details of his life: domestic, political and cultural.

If history - especially of controversial and bloody periods - is to be studied objectively, correctly and most important of all truthfully, then it needs more books of this calibre.

18 of 21 people found the following review helpful.

Manstein: the good, the bad, and the gray

By Wilburn Sprayberry

This is a major contribution to World War II historiography. It is fair minded, heavily researched and lucidly written. It will be of interest to students of World War II and the history of the German Army, as well as serving military officers. Melvin, a British major general who is fluent in German and has received German staff training, proves to be a capable scholar, producing a fascinating narrative of Manstein's life, his military career, his campaigns, his struggles with Hitler, and his post-imprisonment career as an author and consultant to the new West German Bundeswehr. Melvin also devotes considerable attention to Manstein's war crimes - both proved and unproved - about which there is still great controversy today.

Melvin does his best to present his subject as an integrated whole: Manstein's family background, childhood, education, personality, early army career, marriage and children are addressed in some detail, with useful comments by the author to explain to the English speaking reader several unfamiliar Prussian traditions which shaped Manstein's character and outlook.

While no phase of his career is short-changed, the meat of the book is, of course, Manstein's service to the Third Reich. Melvin gives careful attention to Manstein's famous "big idea" to win the campaign against France, the "sichelschnitt" attack through the Ardennes forest to the channel coast. The story of how this idea developed, the challenges within the German high command it faced, how Manstein's version differed from Hitler's, how Manstein sold it to both Hitler and Halder (chief of the German general staff) and even how Manstein took too much credit for it in his memoirs, is told with skill and verve.

So too is Melvin's account of Manstein's exploits as a corps commander in France and Russia. But he really hits his stride in describing Manstein's command of the 11th Army, its up and down battle for the Crimea, followed by his emergency appointment as commander of Army Group Don (later re-named, South) and his role in the incredibly bloody and dramatic battles beginning with Stalingrad in November, 1942 and ending with the encirclement of the 1st Panzer Army in March of 1944 (when he was sacked by Hitler). It was during the period immediately after the Stalingrad disaster that Manstein reached the pinnacle of military achievement, conceiving and orchestrating the brilliant counter-offensive that defeated the Soviet attempt to annihilate the entire German army in southern Russia, and restored the German front to roughly where it had been prior to the ill-fated summer campaign of 1942.

While Melvin clearly admires Manstein in many ways - especially his generalship and in some respects as a man - this is no hagiography. Though accepting Guderian's judgement that Manstein was Germany's "finest operational brain," the author criticizes him for mistakes which helped to seal the fate of the 6th Army inside Stalingrad as well as his handling of the Kursk offensive months later. He also faults Manstein in particular and German generals in general for failing to understand or acknowledge that the Red Army defeated the Wehrmacht not through numbers alone, and not only because Hitler was an incompetent generalissimo, but also (and perhaps largely) because - as the war went on - Red Army leaders like Zhukov, Rokossovsky, Vatutin, and others came to match and then outclass the Germans in their own strong suit, operational expertise. Melvin also believes that Manstein and his admirers are mistaken in claiming that Manstein could have stopped the Russians and achieved a stalemate in 1943 or '44 if only he had been appointed commander and chief of the entire Eastern Front or become Hitler's sole military advisor. The tide of war - in Melvin's view - had turned too strongly against Germany by this time for Manstein to do more than slow the Red juggernaut down.

Earlier I said Melvin admires Manstein. At the same time, he doesn't gloss over the damning evidence that Manstein was guilty of war crimes. Melvin strongly endorses modern scholarship proving that the German Army (and not just the Nazi SS & SD, as Wehrmacht apologists claimed for years) was guilty of countless atrocities, especially on the Eastern Front, including the murder of thousands of Jews and the savage treatment of millions of other Russian civilians which led to untold suffering and death. Nevertheless, Melvin takes a nuanced approach to Manstein's culpability in these events. After a detailed review of the charges against him and the evidence, pro and con, it's clear Melvin believes Manstein obfuscated and possibly lied outright to escape punishment. He seems to agree with the verdict of the British war crimes court which found Manstein guilty of some charges but not others (including the worst, such as ordering the murder of Jews in the Crimea). In essence, Manstein was convicted of failing to prevent atrocities, but not of causing or directing them himself. Even so, he was probably lucky to escape with an 18 year sentence, quickly reduced to 12, and finally to 8 to give the British (anxious, as the Cold War intensified, to conciliate West German opinion and gain support for a new German army) an excuse to release him in 1953, since he had been in some form of custody since 1945. (Of course, Manstein was even luckier not to be extradited to the Soviet Union, where he would have been executed or spent the rest of his life in prison.) In the end, though highly critical of Manstein's involvement in war crimes, Melvin simply tells what happened, eschewing a long, strident condemnation of his subject, and leaves it to the reader to decide the extent of Manstein's guilt and the appropriateness of his punishment. (A decision which, in this age of politically

correct posturing and moralizing about these crimes, terrible though they were, this reader appreciates.)

Again, this is a fine book, a valuable contribution to our understanding of a man who - no matter what we think about his crimes and punishment - was one of the greatest generals of World War II.

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