



Alamein by Simon J. Ball.

New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016. Pp. xxiv, 250. ISBN 978-0-19-968203-4.

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This book is a major disappointment. Its author, prominent historian Simon Ball (Univ. of Leeds),¹ hardly touches on the actual battle of El Alamein. Rather, he is preoccupied with multiple narratives of that battle, some existing solely in his imagination. In his foreword to the book, Hew Strachan notes that Carl von Clausewitz defined a major battle as “concentrated war” and often the “center of gravity of the entire campaign”; he adds that “Winston Churchill saw the importance of battles in different terms, not for their place within war but for their impact on historical and national narratives” (vii). It is quickly evident that Ball adopts a Churchillian perspective on *Alamein*. Omitting details of the battle itself,² he concentrates instead on its “cultural afterlife” in the various narratives of the British 8th Army’s great victory.

Chapter 1, “Names,” explores the inconsequential wrangling over the battle’s name, more specifically which of the four engagements that occurred west of a formerly obscure railroad station deserved the designation “Alamein” or “El Alamein.” In the first engagement (July 1942), the exhausted Axis spearheads encountered an equally exhausted 8th Army in hastily strengthened defensive positions west of Alamein. A month later, the 8th, under new leadership, made a halfhearted counterattack. Then, in September, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel attempted a flanking attack with a depleted *Panzerarmee*, a failed effort known as the Battle of Alam Halfa Ridge. After this setback, Rommel spent a month bringing up reinforcements, digging in, and emplacing hundreds of thousands of antipersonnel and antitank mines in preparation for the British counteroffensive, which started in late October and is universally regarded as the battle of El Alamein that signaled the beginning of the end of the war in the Western Desert.

Chapter 2, “Alamein Unplugged,” is the best thing in the volume—a recounting of the battle from the viewpoint of British and Commonwealth senior officers, as captured in messages preserved in the official record. Thanks to the author’s remarkable clarity of exposition, readers will find it easy to reconstruct the course of the battle as (then) Lt. Gen. Montgomery and his staff saw it. But Ball again undermines the basis of his narrative: “No one should believe that contemporaneous expression was any less artificial than later recollection. Producers of battlefield communications wrote in a *highly stylized genre*, sometimes literally telegraphic. Such messages were designed for effect, not to record a literal reality” (11; my emphasis). Here we have the voice of a man without direct experience of warfare passing judgment decades after the fact on wartime messages sent by men under great stress in dusty, crowded command posts near the front lines amid the din of diesel engines and artillery barrages, as they strove to implement Montgomery’s plan in the face of a still-formidable enemy.

1. He is editor of the prestigious journal *War in History*, and his earlier work includes *The Bitter Sea: The Struggle for Mastery in the Mediterranean* (NY: HarperPress, 2009).

2. For which, see Williamson Murray and Allen R. Millet, *A War to Be Won: Fighting the Second World War* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2000) or even *Wikipedia*, for God’s sake.

Nonspecialist readers are left to guess the correlation of forces. Ball states that the *Panzerarmee* and its four corps headquarters controlled thirteen “divisional headquarters,” while the 8th Army mustered three corps and ten divisions (12). This is not far off the mark: Rommel actually had four German and eight Italian divisions, plus the Ramcke Parachute Brigade and the Italian “Bersagliere” motorized infantry regiment. The 8th Army deployed ten divisions and two independent brigades—one Greek, the other Free French. But the divisional count is misleading, making Alamein seem like a balanced fight. In reality, the 8th enjoyed a two-to-one advantage in both manpower and equipment. Most Axis divisions fielded only six or seven understrength maneuver battalions, and the whole *Panzerarmee* numbered barely 100,000 men. By contrast, British and Commonwealth divisions had a full complement of nine or ten battalions and the 8th Army as a whole mustered over 200,000 men; its armored strength was over a thousand tanks, as against *Panzerarmee*’s five hundred or so. Ball does not mention the disparity in the two sides’ artillery: the 8th Army fielded over a thousand artillery pieces (i.e., cannon and howitzers of a caliber greater than 75mm), Axis forces less than six hundred. Air strengths, too, were lopsided: the Desert Air Force comprised about fifteen hundred front-line aircraft against the Luftwaffe and Italian Air Force’s (roughly) five hundred.

Ball also glosses over the logistical situation, which decisively favored the British. The Western Desert’s only major supply bases lay a thousand miles apart at each end of the battlefield—Alexandria in the east and Tripoli in the west. Hence, the farther an army advanced, the longer and more precarious became its supply lines. Rommel’s pursuit of the British into Egypt after his Gazala victory (June 1942) badly strained Axis logistics, especially in light of the Allied success in interdicting shipping traffic between Italy and Libya. Heavy equipment and bulk supplies trickled into Tripoli, despite the Luftwaffe’s shift of more transport planes to the Mediterranean theater.

Ball does include one very interesting vignette: as the combat raged on, an impatient Churchill dispatched Lt. Gen. Harold Alexander, Commander in Chief, Middle East, to 8th Army Headquarters. Montgomery’s “dog and pony show” (31) forestalled a decision to relieve him. The (accurate and perceptive) reports sent to Churchill

put on the official record a fourfold interpretation of Alamein: the imperial forces were fighting with unparalleled intelligence superiority; the battle was being won not by the army in the desert but by Middle East Air Force over the Mediterranean; the Axis forces were no longer formidable; and the British military handling of such advantages was too slow. (31–32)

In the thematic chapter “Prisoners,” Ball wanders far off topic in discussing “prisoner narratives,” overemphasizing a few published accounts by British prisoners captured in earlier battles in the Western Desert.³ While admittedly intriguing, these books (a memoir and two works of fiction) have little relevance to Ball’s “Alamein narrative.” In the same chapter, readers learn that over 31,800 Axis troops were taken prisoner after the Alamein battle (47). Ball cites the disquieting and “awkward fact ... that the Axis had taken more imperial prisoners on its way to Alamein than the imperial forces had taken as a result of the victory. The *Panzerarmee* reported on 30 July 1942 that it had taken 60,000 imperial prisoners during its advance” (52–53).⁴

3. Esp. John Clark Mustaré, *The Sun Stood Still* (London: Pilot Pr, 1944), and Dan Billany’s *The Cage* (London: Longman, 1949) and *The Trap* (London: Faber, 1950).

4. The number of Commonwealth POWs quoted in the 30 July *Panzerarmee* message is too high. The 8th Army’s total losses—killed, wounded and POW—during the Gazala battle and its aftermath exceeded 50,000, according to most accounts. The majority were the 35,000 men captured in Tobruk; 50,000 is too high for prisoners alone.

The most prominent Axis prisoner at Alamein was Gen. Wilhelm Ritter von Thoma, commander of the *Deutsches Afrika Korps*. The congenial von Thoma, a member of the Wehrmacht's "panzer elite," was forthcoming with his captors. He was also, Ball reports, one of many senior German prisoners whose quarters were bugged by the British. An interesting side story, but more detail on the circumstances of von Thoma's capture would have provided greater insight into the German approach to battlefield command.

Through his emphasis on the "prisoner narrative," Ball proceeds to misconstrue a controversial, widely read book—*The Other Side of the Hill*—by strategic theorist Basil Liddell Hart,⁵ who did indeed write about his conversations with captured German generals. But most of those talks happened after the war. Ball goes too far in claiming the book "brilliantly placed the prisoner narrative at the heart of the public understanding of the Second World War" (60). If any such narrative captivated the minds of the general public, it centered on Bomber Command and 8th Air Force aircrew members imprisoned in (and sometimes escaping from) the *Stalag Luft* camps.

The chapter on "Correspondents" chiefly concerns the Australian journalist Alan Moorehead, a giant of his profession. Though his early coverage of the Western Desert campaign was eloquent and gripping, as Ball admits, "Moorehead missed the Battle of El Alamein" (68).

In subsequent chapters, the battle recedes still further into the background. "Generals" traces the postwar reputational battle between Montgomery and Rommel. "Tacticians" considers subordinate commanders and staff officers and some of the operational themes of Montgomery's later wartime career, though few Alamein veterans remained in his retinue in the war's last year. Ball mentions in passing Montgomery's RAF colleague, Air Marshal Arthur "Mary" Coningham, whose brilliant tactical management of the Desert Air Force from Alamein to Tunisia earned him the praise of his US Army Air Force counterparts and postwar scholars. As regards the deterioration of relations between Montgomery and Coningham later in the war, Ball seems content to let Monty's overweening vanity speak for itself. The chapter "Soldiers" profiles a few British and Italian junior officers who wrote both fictional and nonfiction accounts of Alamein. Finally, "Strategists" explores the place of Alamein in the larger strategic context of the European war. Ball sees it as less "decisive" and significant than Stalingrad and the Allied invasion of North Africa, despite its iconic place in British wartime memory.

Alamein is a crucial point of entry for understanding the "post-war world," the saturation of Western culture ... with images and assumptions drawn from the Second World War.... Alamein served as a key point of reference because of the scope, complexity, sophistication, and nuance of its after-life (184)

True enough, but what of the "scope and complexity" of *the battle itself*? Simon Ball's restricted focus on "narrative" as opposed to underlying historical events makes his *Alamein* a poor fit for Oxford's "Great Battles" series.

5. Subtitle: *Germany's Generals: Their Rise and Fall, with Their Own Account of Military Events, 1939-45* (1948; 2nd ed. London: Cassell, 1973); US edition, *The German Generals Talk* (NY: Morrow, 1948).