



Field Marshal von Manstein: The Janushead - A Portrait

Marcel Stein

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Most military historians are in agreement that Feldmarschall Erich von Manstein was the most outstanding German high commander of the Second World War. Many view him as the foremost exponent of large-scale mobile operations in any of the Second World War armies. Surprisingly, no biography of him has yet been written. To this day, his family refuses to release the papers of his estate to the German military archives at Freiburg. Furthermore the contradictions in the personality of von Manstein make it difficult to generate a synthesis. On one side there is an extraordinary military talent, on the other many political and moral aspects. His military achievements stand in sharp contrast to his inhumane policy of occupation in Russia, his active participation in the slaughter of Jews in Southern Ukraine and the Crimea and his ambivalent attitude to the military resistance movement. These contradictions have led the author to describe Manstein as 'the Janushead' - the term chosen for the title of the book. He has not written a traditional biography but a portrait. A complete account of all phases of Manstein's career is given in one chapter, seven more chapters deal extensively with milestones in Manstein's career: his successful plan for the battle of France which led to the defeat of the French Army in less than one month, his dereliction of duty during the battle for Stalingrad, his hubris which led to the disaster of the battle for Kursk, his refusal to take part in the military resistance movement, his compliance with the Commissar order and his involvement in the Holocaust. The author has widened the subject well beyond the personality of its central figure. It shows how the Nazi system, step by step, succeeded in perverting the centuries-old traditions of the Prussian and German officer corps. Thus, an additional number of German generals are treated in detail to illustrate how moral decrepitude progressively penetrated the highest levels of the armed forces. This is a very important book, not just because of its up-to-date treatment of von Manstein, a personality who very much requires such an examination, but also due to its wide-ranging and original examination of the Second World War German officer corps at the highest levels.

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