



PROJECT MUSE®

General Patton: A Soldier's Life (review)

Roger Cirillo

The Journal of Military History, Volume 67, Number 1, January 2003, pp. 283-285 (Review)

Published by Society for Military History

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jmh.2003.0016>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/40442>

tence left him no private moments to think through strategic problems, much less carry on an illicit assignation with his driver. Nevertheless, he concedes that Somersby offered Eisenhower much-needed emotional support, and that her presence at Ike's side on unit tours and in high-level meetings invited gossip that caused his wife Mamie much distress.

D'Este dismisses criticism of Eisenhower's deal with Vichy French Admiral Jean Darlan in November 1942 as "contrived hypocrisy," even though it suggests that Eisenhower lacked the political instincts for high command, at least at this stage of the war. Eisenhower also nurtured an intense, and according to D'Este irrational, dislike of Jacob Devers, although the Sixth Army Group commander counted among his better subordinates. At the same time, Eisenhower salvaged the career of his friend Mark Clark, to whom he owed a great debt, despite a poor showing at Salerno and Monte Cassino. D'Este argues that it was Eisenhower's indifference to logistics, rather than his failure to set strategic priorities, that compromised Allied ability rapidly to capitalize on the German collapse in Normandy after August 1944. Montgomery criticized Eisenhower's excitability, and his tendency to micromanage operations from afar by telegrams, lightning visits to the front, and conferences. The December 1944 surprise sprung on the U.S. Army in the Ardennes was the final straw for Ike's numerous British critics, who had already declared Eisenhower's "broad front" strategy in the autumn/winter of 1944–45 wasteful and unimaginative.

While *Eisenhower: A Soldier's Life* covers ground familiar to many readers, this biography showcases the strengths that one has come to expect from Carlo D'Este—meticulous research, an intimate knowledge of the interwar U.S. Army which he lauds for its tolerance of eccentric and headstrong personalities, and a detailed command of Allied operations in World War II. Not surprisingly, Patton's biographer continues to see the Third Army commander as one of the U.S. Army's great fighters and Eisenhower's willingness to go out on a limb to protect his old friend from the consequences of his serial indiscretions as one of Ike's greatest contributions to Allied victory in World War II.

Douglas Porch

Naval Postgraduate School
Monterey, California

General Patton: A Soldier's Life. By Stanley P. Hirshon. New York: Harper Collins, 2002. ISBN 0-06-00982-9. Maps. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xxii, 826. \$34.95.

Rewriting a legend is a difficult venture for any biographer, and Professor Stanley Hirshon offers an antiheroic view of a military icon in *General Patton: A Soldier's Life*. His view of the man is dark: His Patton is an anti-semitic, an inciter of war crimes, and an obsequious careerist who spared no effort in advancing himself. He scoffs at Patton's military study, and quotes

every possible critic of any military decision Patton made. Patton, in his eyes, only survives by political connections, and needs special handling to prevent his “puerile” mind from condemning himself to bad press. A failure as a postwar military governor, the author blames his right-wing in-laws for pushing Patton “down the road that ended with his loss of the Third Army,” his most famous battle command. So how good a portrait does he paint?

Beginning with an arrogant preface downplaying previous Patton biographers and demeaning their “incomplete research,” Hirshon sets a very high bar for himself. As a military biographer, he falls far short of his own proclaimed standards and despite his stated pride in his footnotes, defines his own narrowness in his choice of sources. Hirshon uses every possible derogatory statement, piece of gossip, or historical myth to damn Patton and as many other generals as possible within his work, only one of whom he respects, Patton’s critic, “P” Wood. While calling Patton a bigot, Hirshon shows symptoms of the greatest generation’s disease, anglophobia, and repeats every slur, half truth, and nontruth possible concerning the British while citing others as sources. Patton’s acolytes often thought him a warrior from another time, Hirshon’s Patton is most often a warrior out of context.

That Patton was not a role model for humanity has never been a secret and is apparent in all the biographies of the general. Hirshon demonstrates virtually no understanding of either the time or the army Patton served in, somehow thinking antisemitism must be a Patton original, that careerism in a small, money-starved force is unheard of, and that Patton, who worked behind the scenes in the Office of Cavalry to gain mechanization while not threatening the horse lobby, simply turned his back on tanks. Hirshon has not read, or understood, Patton’s large body of military writings or notes, nor has he studied the body of bootlegged intelligence reports that Patton used to study future adversaries. Also uncited or unread, are the operational and tactical guidelines written for Third Army and published by Patton, which are not only models of clarity, but as concise a guide to Patton’s military beliefs as exist. The Liddell Hart assessment, quoted with glee, is obviously wrong. Most importantly, Hirshon under-rates Patton’s career-long friendship with Dwight Eisenhower, who more than anyone else, protected Patton because he recognized his true genius, that being to get a drafted, mass citizen army whose numbers diluted any hope of professional or high class standards, to fight and win.

Hirshon’s *General Patton*, is bottom shelf military history. He repeatedly cites diaries and letters, never checking their accuracy against events, current intelligence, unit logs, or the intentions of the writers. Wood, the most quoted military witness, was embittered by his justifiable relief, had no knowledge of the higher level issues involved in the Brittany campaign which he harks back to, was not privy to Ike’s planning or intentions, and served four command echelons below the decision makers he damns. And Wood, characteristically, blames the wrong individual, a mistake Hirshon could have noted had he read the plans and orders of 12th Army Group and Third

Army's log. The stirring, lengthy, Anglophobic screed offered by Clarence Huebner about the Sicily campaign is doctrinally wrong and also would have been eliminated by any military expert. The diaries of Bradley aide Chet Hansen, and the emotional, prejudiced views of Patton chief of staff Hobart Gay, have to be used extremely carefully but are widely quoted as fact. As a former staff college instructor, I found Hirshon's judgment on military operations frequently wrong, probably due to his lack of original research into the context of Patton's operations and the war itself. Even his occasional attempts to praise Patton sometime misfire. His statement that Patton's Army suffered the lowest trench foot and cold weather casualties due to his leadership is patently false, easily disproved by checking the Army Medical Department's official history.

Hirshon's exposure of and repetitive emphasis on Patton's dark side is a good corrective to the hero worship paid to Patton, but the author's own lack of balance does not confirm his admission that Patton was a great soldier, which he undoubtedly was, and leaves a balanced assessment of his subject hanging. While often interesting, Hirshon offers little new and falls far short of Martin Blumenson's edited *Patton Papers* and Carlo D'Este's more complete and balanced, *Genius for War*. As for Hirshon's great claim that he has proven that everyone else is wrong, and that Patton was not dyslexic, one has to wonder, based on other instances, if his depth of research is as definitive as he believes.

Roger Cirillo

Institute of Land Warfare
Alexandria, Virginia

Korea Under the American Military Government, 1945–1948. Edited by Bonnie B. C. Oh. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002. ISBN 0-275-97456-1. Map. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xiv, 178. \$64.95.

Judging only by the introduction by the editor, Professor of Korean Studies Bonnie B. C. Oh of Georgetown University, *Korea Under the American Military Government* sounds as if it is just another trashing of the U.S. Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK), 1945–48. "The U.S. policy in postwar Korea demonstrated a lack of vision, planning, and coordination between the branches of the U.S. home government and with the U.S. personnel in Korea, as well as a paucity of consideration for the people of the land. Overall, the policy was comprised of reactive, incremental stop-gap measures" (p. 2). Since this anthology includes essays by James I. Matray and Bruce Cumings, one awaits another revisionist attack on American intentions and policy execution. William Stueck's essay is more balanced but still critical. Been there, read those before. No thanks to the American contributors, however, the other essayists provide a more complex picture of Korean-American relations in the southern occupation zone. At least, the other authors, all Korean academics, give the reader some sense of Ameri-