



Martin Kitchen, Rommel's Desert War: Waging WWII in North Africa, 1941-1943. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Matt Bucholtz, University of Calgary

While one could be forgiven for wondering if yet another volume concerning the North African campaign in the Second World War was truly needed, Martin Kitchen's book Rommel's Desert War: Waging WWII in North Africa, 1941-1943 is nevertheless a significant and worthwhile contribution to the field. Kitchen states early in his introduction that his aim is to produce a *complete* and *comprehensive* account of the desert war, and judged by this standard the author is, on the whole, quite successful. He does not pretend that his is the first, nor the last, work on the topic, but rather seeks

to provide a detailed and balanced account of the campaign based on current historiography, examining each of the combatants, and spanning the entire length of the conflict in North Africa.

Although this book is not a study of coalition warfare and the unique set of challenges that it poses, Kitchen's analysis of the German, Italian, British and American forces leads to the greatest strength of the volume, its inclusiveness. Instead of merely treating the Italians as the 'whipping-boy' of the German Army, the author includes an excellent analysis of the Axis command structure and relations throughout both the introductory chapters and the operational narrative. Kitchen details the evolving nature of the relationship between Rommel and the *Deutsche Afrikakorps*, the OKH and OKW (*Oberkommando des Heeres* and *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*, respectively), *Commando Supremo*, Italian commanders in North Africa and various other personalities like Hitler, Mussolini, and Field Marshall Albert von Kesselring. Put simply, *Commando Supremo*, and the Italian forces and commanders receive the attention and analysis that, for better or worse, they rightfully deserve. Unlike many historians of the campaign, Kitchen examines the German and Italian troops as Axis Powers, intricately and inseparably linked to each other. His analysis of the multitude of factors and personalities governing significant actions taken by the Axis Powers during the North African campaign truly distinguishes this book from other works on the desert war.

Additionally Rommel's Desert War provides an unusually complete account of the war in North Africa. Beginning his chronological narrative before the arrival of German forces in the desert, Kitchen gives a short account of the ill-fated Italian campaign against the British in Africa and Egypt. While the author naturally gives the major battles of Tobruk, and El Alamein (both the First and Second Battles) the majority of the book's focus, he does not fall into the commonly accepted pattern of rapidly finishing the account of the desert war after the Second Battle of El Alamein. Refreshingly, Kitchen pushes past November 1942, and even beyond the Allied landings in West Africa with Operation Torch, right to the eventual Axis surrender in May 1943. While it may seem questionable to single out a book on the Second World War in North Africa simply for the achievement of actually discussing the entire length of the campaign, it is more noteworthy than one might think. Many accounts either begin and end with Rommel's activity in the desert, or are overly focused on the major

battles at Tobruk and El Alamein. However, Kitchen discusses the full length of the campaign, and gives excellent analysis of *all* combatants, including the Germans, Italians, British and even the Americans for Operation Torch. Indeed, this is one of Kitchen's greatest successes with Rommel's Desert War. Few single volumes on the desert war can boast such complete and comprehensive analysis.

I have only one pressing concern and two small quibbles with this book. The first minor complaint is grammatical with the persistent use of the term 'The Panzer' to refer to all German tank forces, leading to awkward sentences such as "The Panzer had little to do in the summer of 1940" (p. 24). The second is a vagueness of definition concerning the term *Schwerpunkt* that would admittedly only bother devout followers of Clausewitz. However, Kitchen's analysis of Field Marshall Erwin Rommel is at times over-reactive to his dissatisfaction with the so-called 'Rommel worship' found in a large portion of the historiography on the North African campaign. While some authors have tended to raise Rommel's military exploits to a somewhat 'god-like' status, in his attempt to counterbalance this tendency, Kitchen is perhaps guilty of overstatement. Indeed reading the operational account of the campaign from the first battle of Tobruk to the Second Battle of El Alamein, Kitchen consistently condemns the vast majority of Rommel's actions, seemingly implying that it would have been far better to simply remain on the defensive in Tripoli and never have attacked the British at all. At times Kitchen describes Rommel's operational orders as either "absurd" or "hair-raisingly unrealistic" (p. 96). While undoubtedly Rommel was at times reckless and irresponsible with his operational plans, and rightly should be critically analyzed for the numerous and significant flaws that he was guilty of, Kitchen's highly negative critique of Rommel belabours the point. This is not to say that Kitchen's negative critique of Rommel's actions is wholly unjustified or without support, but rather the issue is one of overstatement. Rommel was clearly a gambler and risk taker and perhaps more of a gifted tactician than strategist, but he still did manage to achieve some remarkable and noteworthy exploits, including the capture of Tobruk and pushing the British 8th Army across most of North Africa in highly unfavourable matériel conditions. Nevertheless Kitchen's book has remarkable breadth and stands as an excellent and comprehensive single volume examination of the Axis Powers' campaign in North Africa during the

Second World War. Rommel's Desert War should remain a fixture on the bookshelf of military historians for years to come.

Matt Bucholtz is a PhD Candidate at the University of Calgary under the supervision of Dr. Holger Herwig. His dissertation research concerns the political nature and activities of the German Military from 1918 to 1923.