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Review of *Panzers on the Vistula: Retreat and Rout in East Prussia 1945* by Hans Schäufler (trans. Tony Le Tissier)

**Timothy Heck**

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## BOOK REVIEWS

present and future members of the Parachute Regiment and thoroughly recommended for military historians of all ages.

STUART CRAWFORD  
Independent Scholar, UK

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**Hans Schäufler (trans. Tony Le Tissier), *Panzers on the Vistula: Retreat and Rout in East Prussia 1945*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2018. 139pp. ISBN 978-1526734310 (hardback). Price £19.99.**

The rapid collapse of German defenses east of the Oder River in early 1945 stranded significant numbers of German soldiers and civilians behind the front. Communications officer Hans Schäufler's 4 Panzer Division, part of Army Group North, was trapped against the Baltic with diminishing hopes for escape and none of victory. Recounting the retreat from Latvia into East Prussia, *Panzers on the Vistula: Retreat and Rout in East Prussia 1945* relates a company-grade officer's attempts to keep his men and equipment together in spite of overwhelming odds.

Translated by historian Tony Le Tissier, the book is divided into eighteen chapters, plus a foreword, maps, and a timeline. The narrative largely focuses on combat between mid-January and war's end, with the three concluding chapters addressing the postwar fate of 4 Panzer Division's men as prisoners. Schäufler writes from a first-person perspective but does not provide context on his own background, including any previous combat in the East, an unfortunate omission.

In January 1945, the 4 Panzer Division was recouping in East Prussia after evacuation from the Courland Pocket. Hastily called into action, the division spent the following months fighting the Red Army in a losing series of battles in and around Danzig. Schäufler's depictions of the chaotic situation reveal the desperate actions of a weak rearguard force attempting to stop the near-inexorable advance of the Red Army. Schäufler's narrative of leading men in the absence of fire support or logistics is a powerful one. The emotional burdens of maintaining morale in the face of overwhelming odds are apparent in the text. His experiences urban combat in and around Danzig are particularly gripping. Under his leadership, the men of Schäufler's section continue to fight against overwhelming odds and at great personal cost though he claims to have known the war was lost much earlier.

Why, then, did Schäufler fight on when the war was lost in his mind? As he states: 'Why had we actually fought? Why had we had to put up with all of this? Why had so many splendid young men died? Why? Why? Why? Where was the sense?' (p. 105.)

The fate of fleeing refugees is frequently mentioned and discussed throughout the book as a primary motivation for 4th Panzer Army's stubborn resistance. Trapped along the beaches of Frische Nehrung, Schäufler states that 'behind our backs were tens of thousands of women and children waiting for ships to take them to safety...now the front here had to hold or bend and break' (87). The Soviet massacre at Nemmersdorf in October 1944 and other suspected massacres are listed as a further motivator for fighting on in defense of 'the rising stream of fleeing people, [4th Panzer Division wanted] to secure and protect their escape route and make their salvation possible' (p. 101).

Originally published in 1991 as *1945: Panzer an der Weichsel. Soldaten der letzten*, Le Tissier's translation leaves the original work largely unaltered. As a result, there are some errors and awkward translations in the text. For example, American B-29 Superfortresses, are supposedly responsible for the bombing of Danzig on 19 March 1945, when none flew in the European theater. Additionally, there are some awkward translations. For example the *Jagdtiger* tank destroyer is translated as 'Hunting-Tank IVs', part of Tank-Hunting Battalion 49, a mistake one would not expect because '*Jagdtiger*' is commonly used in English sources untranslated.

The omission of recent scholarship on war crimes and the myth of the honorable Wehrmacht is glaring, specifically in the book's closing chapters. Le Tissier allows Schäufler's apologetic voice to defend the Wehrmacht's conduct unchallenged throughout. Schäufler quotes the final dispatch from Admiral Dönitz:

'...almost six years of honourable struggle have come to an end...The German armed forces have finally honourably succumbed to immense superiority...Every soldier can uprightly and proudly lay down his arms...' (p. 117)

Indeed, the honorable Wehrmacht myth remains in the narrative despite multiple debunkings. After fighting ends, Schäufler encounters concentration camp survivors but states he only learned 'much, much later about all the inhumanity they had suffered' (p.111). Most audaciously, he claims their survival is, in part, because 4 Panzer Division 'enabled them to flee to the West' (p. 111). Such claims, and the continued propagation of the 'clean' Wehrmacht myth, should have been addressed by Le Tissier.

*Panzers on the Vistula* is a powerful tale of the chaos and fears experienced at the company-grade level at war's end in the East. Faced with overwhelming odds, Schäufler

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manages to keep his men together and fighting until ordered to surrender. His bottom-up view of the Wehrmacht's collapse is a valuable perspective in spite of its flaws. The book's narrow focus allows for in-depth understanding of the campaign in East Prussia as seen by one of its participants.

TIMOTHY HECK  
King's College London, UK

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