This publication is a museum catalog. Its authors have the ambition to portray a nuanced image of Rommel with much focus on the way his career became subject of a myth both inside Nazi Germany and among his British and American opponents. Altogether, the authors of the catalog succeed in providing a critical documentation of Rommel’s military career and the myth surrounding his person.

The catalog is clearly structured along the main campaigns in which Rommel fought. It starts with the 12th Isonzo Battle in October 1917, where Rommel, then a 26-year-old officer in a Württemberg mountain battalion, achieved a major victory against the Italian forces defending a fortified mountain. The battle revealed Rommel’s extreme courage, persistence, and ability to react quickly to the circumstances, some of the qualities that later became the hallmark of his career. Rommel received the highest medal for this exploit, the Pour le mérite, but he had to fight for this recognition because the German emperor initially awarded it to the wrong person due to confusion in the military correspondence.

Following World War I, Rommel was involved in a little known episode that revealed him as a cool-headed and moderate mind: during the revolutionary troubles in the spring of 1919, the Bavarian city Lindau was taken over by a revolutionary council in the context of the Soviet Revolution in Bavaria. Rommel was ordered to restore government authority in the city, which borders on Rommel’s home state Württemberg. Rommel decided against storming the city, which is situated on an island in a lake, and instead began to negotiate with the city council, reaching a peaceful return of the city to legitimate government control and sparing the city a military occupation. In light of the massive violence that characterized so many takeovers of revolutionary cities by regular and irregular units at this time, Rommel’s moderation appears remarkable and exceptional.

Rommel was able to pursue his military career during the Weimar Republic, and he got to know many of the commanders with whom he would deal in World War II. The book provides no information on Rommel’s political leanings in this period and in the first months after the establishment of the Third Reich. In September 1934, he met Adolf Hitler during a parade in Goslar. Before the event, Rommel had successfully protested against the planned positioning of an SS unit in front of his own, a protest that probably reflected the widespread dislike of German army officers for competition from NSDAP organizations with military or paramilitary ambitions. Rommel had no reservations toward Hitler at this time, however. He recorded his first meeting with Hitler with pride and fondness. The dictator began to
take note of Rommel after he published a pathbreaking book on infantry tactics (»Infanterie greift an«, 1937), reflecting on his World War I experience and applying his extensive pedagogical experience (Rommel served on the faculty of military training institutes in Dresden and later Potsdam). This book caught Hitler’s attention and established Rommel’s reputation as an educator and innovative strategic thinker. It was therefore no accident that Rommel received command of Hitler’s headquarters during the annexation of the Sudetenland and later during the campaign in Poland. Although there is no evidence to show that Rommel was himself a convinced National Socialist, he clearly established a very strong personal rapport with Hitler, whom he deeply admired at this time.

Rommel’s success as the commander of the 7th Tank Division in the western campaign of 1940 made him the subject of legend. His rapid and often unconventional decision-making, his insistence on daring advances and speed, and his unorthodox thinking endeared him to Hitler, who took pride in his own alleged intuitive military talent. Rommel’s exploits established him almost as a symbol of the Nazi Blitzkrieg. The ultimate crystallization of the Rommel Myth happened of course during his command of the German Africa Corps in 1941–1943. The book shows well how the Nazi propaganda machinery immediately exploited every minor and major success of Rommel. A deputy from Goebbels’ propaganda ministry accompanied his staff, and Rommel came to exemplify the Nazi ideal of ruthless courage, ceaseless activism, and optimism in the face of all odds, in other words, the »triumph of the will«. It soon began to dawn on Rommel, however, that this myth masked severe shortcomings of planning and a reluctance on the part of Hitler to commit substantial resources to what was a minor theater of war especially after the German attack on the Soviet Union (22 June 1941).

Rommel achieved some of his greatest successes in North Africa, such as the conquest of Tobruk in June 1942, but his myth was increasingly abused by Nazi propaganda, which tried to suggest that exceptional willpower and daring could negate the consequences of over-extended fronts, superior Allied resources and intelligence gathering, and increasing sophistication among Allied commanders. Even before the decisive defeat of the Africa Corps near El Alamein in the fall of 1942, Rommel had become highly skeptical of Hitler’s overall military aims and grasp on strategic realities. It was not only Rommel’s anger about insufficient supplies and resources that drove his disillusionment with Hitler. Repeatedly, Rommel decided to ignore criminal orders by Hitler, for example the order to massacre German émigrés from the French Foreign Legion who had become prisoners of war. Rommel also refused to violate the international conventions with respect to Jewish prisoners of war from the British army and so-called British commandos caught behind the German frontlines. These acts of defiance helped to gain for Rommel the reputation as a chivalrous commander on the side of his enemies already during the war. Meanwhile, Rommel also resisted various military orders Hitler passed, in particular orders forbidding any retreat – an absurdity in desert warfare where mobility is crucial. Temporarily incapacitated by illness, Rommel was only partially involved in the final round of fighting in North Africa. Recognizing his value for German propaganda, Goebbels and Hitler had decided to call him back already in early March 1943, two months
before the final surrender of the remaining German armies in Tunisia.

The book touches on Rommel's brief involvement in the occupation of Italy, during which he oversaw the recruitment of forced laborers and called for ruthless suppression of Italian army units having joined the partisans. He also witnessed the traces of a massacre of Jews by the SS, apparently with dismay. Unfortunately the book gives little more information that might have helped to contextualize these two experiences.

The final chapter of Rommel’s career, his command of German defenses on the Atlantic coast, is inseparable from his involvement with the German resistance against Hitler. The book follows the well-known arguments about Rommel's advocacy of a coastal defense against an invasion and against the strategy of gathering strong reserves away from the coast, Rommel's increasingly pessimistic evaluation of Germany's military prospects, which resulted in severe confrontations with Hitler, and his contacts and discussions with members of the resistance. Rommel was severely wounded on 17 July 1944, just three days before Stauffenberg's bomb exploded in Hitler's headquarters, and we do not know how he would have reacted had he still been in active command on that day. There is clear evidence, however, that Rommel was keen on signing a truce with the western Allies and willing to defy Hitler to that purpose. During the trials of the resistance, more and more evidence surfaced that incriminated Rommel. Not only had he heard about plans to assassinate Hitler without reporting them to the police, he had also made highly critical remarks on Hitler and made it clear that he would welcome a success of the plot to remove him from power. The Nazi regime, reluctant to reveal somebody as a »traitor« after elevating him to the rank of a mythical hero, decided that Rommel should die allegedly as a consequence of his wounds, from which he had not yet fully recovered. Faced with an ultimatum that threatened a public show trial and harm to his family, he chose to swallow the poison given to him by SS men sent by Hitler on 14 October 1944. As a reward, he received a state funeral with all honors.

The final chapter of the catalog deals with the »Rommel Myth« after the war. Fueled by popular biographies and documentaries by British and American authors and by admiring memoirs from some of his former colleagues, Rommel became the symbol of an allegedly professional, non-Nazi German army. This new »Rommel Myth«, stressing not only his military exploits but also his chivalrous acts and his opposition to Hitler, helped to justify West German rearmament in the 1950s and provided a role model for the new army. The catalog stresses, however, that this role model did not find uncritical reception. In recent years, barracks and streets named after Rommel have become controversial, and his memorial stone has been repeatedly defaced and attacked by critics who stress that he was a Nazi hero and supporter of the Nazi system for a long time.

It would be wrong to measure a richly illustrated exhibition catalog by strict scholarly standards. Yet, »Mythos Rommel« shows the work of responsible historians. The substance of the book is critical; it seeks to differentiate between the man and the myth, and it traces the creation of the myth in its different shapes
during and after the Second World War. The authors do not whitewash Rommel’s initial admiration for Hitler and his long-lasting loyalty to him. A few lacunae remain, however. The catalog does not explain why Rommel’s book on infantry tactics was so enormously influential in many different armies of the world. More importantly, it would be good to know more about Rommel’s »chivalry« in the French campaign of 1940 and in the occupation of Italy. Although there is no evidence incriminating Rommel himself, his unit did fight in areas where German massacres of black French prisoners of war were extremely common in June 1940. He later took a very active role later in a Nazi propaganda film about these battles, in which surviving Black African prisoners had to »act« under dangerous and degrading circumstances.

Given that the borderline between anti-Partisan campaigns and atrocities against innocent civilians were so porous in Nazi-occupied Europe, it would be important to contextualize Rommel’s role in Italy more. Maybe there is no specific evidence, but it remains unclear whether Rommel ever made a connection between the foolhardiness of Hitler’s overall strategy, which he repeatedly criticized, and the depraved criminal character of the Nazi regime, which he witnessed through Hitler’s orders against prisoners of war and the corpses of murdered Jews he found in a lake in northern Italy in 1943. In other words, did he ever comprehend not only the military blundering of the German leadership but also the unprecedentedly criminal nature of the regime he served so well?

Rommel’s career was untypical, not least insofar as he never served in the one campaign that more than any other exemplified the Nazi »war of annihilation,« namely the campaign against the Soviet Union. But it would be unhistorical and unfair to judge him outside the context of his time and his peers. Rommel may not have fully committed himself to the plot against Hitler before he was wounded. But given that so many German officers, whether driven by fanaticism or resignation, followed the dictator’s path toward apocalyptic destruction and self-destruction to the very end, Rommel appears as more clear-sighted and courageous than most of his peers even if his urging Hitler to seek a separate peace with the western Allies appears hopelessly naïve in retrospect.