



*Prelude to Berlin: The Red Army's Offensive Operations in Poland and Eastern Germany, 1945* ed. and trans. Richard W. Harrison.

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Review by Timothy Heck, King's College London (timothy.heck@gmail.com).

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Soviet military operations during World War II remain an understudied subject among Western historians. Standard histories of the war, often written with the assistance of captured German generals in the 1950s, “routinely tended to describe warfare against a faceless and formless enemy, an enemy whose sole attributes were its army’s immense size and its limitless supply of expendable human resources.”<sup>1</sup> Symposia at the US Army War College’s Center for Land Warfare in the mid-1980s produced excellent Cold War-era histories of Red Army operations in 1942–45. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, more nuanced and better informed studies have appeared, thanks to the release of documents by the Russian Federation’s military archives and the publication of memoirs by Soviet participants in the war. Other works, written for both scholarly and popular audiences, have explored the campaigns on the Eastern Front with greater depth and insight than earlier histories based chiefly on German memoirs.

Helion and Company has now published a number of English translations<sup>2</sup> of formerly secret Soviet General Staff studies of wartime operations that have filled gaps in Western knowledge of both Soviet operations and the postwar Soviet understanding and exploitation of them. In *Prelude to Berlin*, historian Richard Harrison (formerly of the US Military Academy) has edited and translated seven Soviet sources concerning operations in Winter 1945 that brought the Red Army within striking distance of Berlin. The volume opens with a 1965 article entitled “How the Last Campaign for Defeating Hitler’s Germany Was Planned” by Col. Gen. S.M. Shtemenko,<sup>3</sup> the wartime deputy chief of the Red Army General Staff. There follow five Soviet Army General Staff studies of operations in the Vistula-Oder region, East Prussia, East Pomerania, Lower Silesia, and Upper Silesia, written between 1947 and 1957. The book concludes with a collection of recently published wartime planning documents and orders related to specific operations.

As General Staff studies, these papers are replete with details about orders of battle, command and control relationships, logistics, correlation of forces, and questions of manpower and materiel. Although dry, these particulars clarify the Soviets’ planning and execution of massive front-scale military operations, the growth of the Red Army, and the influence of years of intense combat on Soviet mili-

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1. David M. Glantz, *The Failures of Historiography: Forgotten Battles of the German-Soviet War (1941–1945)* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, 1991).

2. Other volumes in the series to date, all of them edited and translated by the indefatigable Richard Harrison, are *The Battle of Moscow 1941–1942: The Red Army’s Defensive Operations and Counter-Offensive along the Moscow Strategic Direction* (2015), *Rollback: The Red Army’s Winter Offensive along the Southwestern Strategic Direction, 1942–1943* (2016), *The Battle of Kursk: The Red Army’s Defensive Operations and Counter-Offensive, July–August 1943* (2016), *The Berlin Operation, 1945* (2016), *Operation Bagration, 23 June–29 August 1944: The Rout of the German Forces in Belorussia* (2017), *The Budapest Operation (28 October 1944–13 February 1945): An Operational-Strategic Study* (2017), *The Iasi-Kishinev Operation, 20–29 August 1944: The Red Army’s Summer Offensive into the Balkans* (forthcoming 2017).

3. In the Soviet Ministry of Defense’s *Voenna-istoricheskii zhurnal* [military-historical journal]. The article seems to be a more detailed and sophisticated version of his essays printed in the English-language *Soviet Military Review* in the 1960s and 1970s.

tary art. They capture the perspective of a front commander in the realm of operational and strategic planning, but, as discrete studies by various authors, they display distinct, uneven levels of analysis.

Harrison notes that the materials gathered in *Prelude to Berlin* are presented essentially as they were originally written. It comes as no surprise, then, that they are saturated in Marxist-Leninist jargon and communist social, military, political, and economic ideology. For example, Soviet commanders' decisions are praised for "proving correct" this or that Soviet principle or "justifying" Lenin's understanding of war. While not quite as pedantic as works like Adm. S.G. Gorshkov's *The Sea Power of the State*,<sup>4</sup> the studies collected here are patently products of their time.

Some of the authors make bold but dubious claims about the timing of operations and their impact on Western Allied successes. Others hew to party-line propaganda to provide a context for ensuing Soviet actions. For example, the 1953 analysis of operations in Lower Silesia states "the sole force withstanding the neo-Fascist aspirations of American imperialism and that of its English partner was the Soviet Union." Hence, the Western Allies are routinely presented as "treacherous," "impudent and criminal," and harboring a "disgusting desire to foil the Soviet Army's [offensives]" (342). Fortunately, more recent historians have preferred facts to dogma.

"Ideological boilerplate" aside, these studies are remarkably forthright about deficiencies in Soviet leadership, planning, and logistics. We read, for instance, that the Eighth Mechanized Corps and its commander were "insufficiently decisive" (319) during the East Pomeranian campaign. In short, the essays present balanced accounts of the decisive campaigns that destroyed the remnants of German military strength in the East.

During the Cold War, Western analysis of Soviet operations during the so-called Great Patriotic War were preoccupied with their effect on NATO policies and strategy. *Prelude's* staff studies reinforce James McConnell's judgment that "Soviet military scientists ... do not believe in history for its own sake."<sup>5</sup> The essays collected here were written for Soviet officers in command of forces opposing the Western (later NATO) allies. In that light, specific Soviet actions are presented because they "offer instructive examples" (274) for modern combat operations. In short, this is not history in the traditional sense, but a set of tutorials based on combat experience and intended to prepare officers for future combat.

This is not a book for the casual reader; it is a dense technical work packed with the minutiae of campaign planning and execution. Unlike the multivolume *History of the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union, 1941-1945*,<sup>6</sup> it tells few human-interest stories of action below the brigade level and rarely mentions individual soldiers. But *Prelude to Berlin* does evoke the speed and power of Soviet Army advances late in the war. Ten days into the East Prussian offensive, elements of the Red Army arrived in the town of Elbing, where they found a population "living the usual life of a rear-area town: lights burned in places, soldiers from the tank school were marching and singing songs, and trolley cars were working" (214). Near Lubawa, Soviet units found a sign reading "The rallying point for the personnel of the 507th 'Tiger' Tank Battalion is in Bischdorf. Pass through the towns of Deutsch Eylau and Freistadt in the direction of Graudenz" (216)! Such incidents attest to the swiftness of Soviet offensives against German defenders.

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4. Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 1979.

5. "Analyzing Soviet Intentions: A Short Guide to Soviet Military Literature," Center for Naval Analyses 593 (Mar 1989) 7 - [www.miwsr.com/rd/1706.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1706.htm).

6. Ed. P.N. Pospelov (Moscow: Inst. Marxism-Leninism of Central Committee KPSS, 1960).

One serious drawback of the book is the paucity of maps. The publisher includes just seven; oddly, some campaign studies have none, while the Vistula-Oder campaign merits three. This is unfortunate, given the vast scale of the operations discussed and the difficulty of visualizing them.

Overall, Richard Harrison has done a great service in making these detailed staff studies available to Anglophone readers; they illuminate the Soviet winter offensive of 1945 across “a broad front [of] 1,200 kilometers ... [with] truly enormous” strategic results (280). Equally important, in the present global context, as Russia aggressively reasserts its military power, *Prelude to Berlin* will acquaint Western commanders and defense planners with the value system and thought processes of the inheritors of the long Soviet military tradition.