



## *The Battle for Moscow* by David Stahel.

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This is the fourth in a series of books by David Stahel (Univ. of New South Wales) that explore various aspects of Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in the Second World War. *The Battle for Moscow* advances the author's overall thesis that "the turning point in Germany's war occurred as early as August 1941" because "Allied economic resources were being amassed on an unprecedented scale [and] the gap in manpower and material between the Allies and Axis had become desperately large,"<sup>2</sup> thus "dooming Germany to eventual defeat by sheer weight of arms."<sup>3</sup>

Within this conceptual framework, Stahel argues here that "the last German offensive of 1941 was a forlorn effort, undermined by operational weakness, poor logistics, and driven forward by ... National Socialist military thinking" (book jacket). In the introduction, he states his intention to challenge "a well-established narrative" according to which the last German offensive of 1941 "only failed at the gates of Moscow" (5).<sup>4</sup> In fact, many current historians have already shown that Germany Army Group Center's offensive was largely spent weeks before it came close to the capital.<sup>5</sup>

The book comprises ten chapters. The first, "Parallel Wars," begins by comparing German operations against Russia during World War I with Operation Barbarossa's opening months (17-18). There follows a preliminary discussion of the German command's decision to continue the offensive in November 1941, despite the evidence that it had reached its culmination. Stahel next describes at length the by now exhaustively studied genocidal criminality of the Nazi regime (including the Wehrmacht) during its war with the USSR.<sup>6</sup> While the subject is important, its too extensive treatment here does nothing to further the author's thesis.

Chapter 2, "The Idle Typhoon," reveals the German command's ignorance of the realities on the ground and the poor logistical planning that left the *Ostheer* (Army of the East) to starve and freeze in the Russian winter. Chapter 3, "Preparing the Final Showdown," then provides a standard rehash of Soviet efforts to bolster Moscow's defenses.<sup>7</sup> It also details the weakness of German panzer and motor-

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1. *Operation Typhoon: Hitler's March on Moscow, October 1941* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2013) 305.

2. *Kiev 1941: Hitler's Battle for Supremacy in the East* (id., 2012) 10, 349.

3. *Operation Barbarossa and Germany's Defeat in the East* (id., 2009) 442.

4. However, he cites only two of the dozens of books on the battle: James Lucas's out-of-date *War on the Eastern Front, 1941-1945: The German Soldier in Russia* (NY: Stein and Day, 1980) and Richard J. Overy's *The Dictators: Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia* (NY: Norton, 2004). The latter is not an operational military history in any sense and devotes only two paragraphs to the Battle of Moscow.

5. Including David Glantz, Evan Mawdsley, Robert Kershaw, Jack Radey, Charles Sharp, Rodric Braithwaite, Niklas Zetterling, Anders Frankson, Robert Forczyk, and myself, among many others.

6. See, esp., Wolfram Wette, *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, and Reality* [2002], trans. D.L. Schneider (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2006), Geoffrey Megargee, *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), and Omer Bartov's classic *The Eastern Front, 1941-45: German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986).

7. See further Rodric Braithwaite, *Moscow 1941: A City and Its People at War*, rev. ed. (London: Profler Books, 2007), still the best study of life in Moscow as the German army approached in fall 1941.

ized divisions before Moscow and rightly castigates the German leadership, again without patently challenging the existing narrative?<sup>8</sup>

A good example of the shortcomings of *The Battle of Moscow* is the brief mid-chapter account of the German choice between shutting down Operation Typhoon in early November 1941 or pressing on as contemplated by German Army Chief of Staff Franz Halder before the fateful Orsha Conference later that month (96–97). Stahel rightly criticizes Halder for failing to consider whether the *Ostheer* should go into winter quarters, but does not explain just why his ultimate decision was so terribly misguided. Instead, he breathlessly describes the sixty some divisions assembling behind Soviet lines for Marshal Georgy Zhukov's planned counterstrike. He omits, however, to say that most of these Soviet reserve armies were analogous to the *Volkssturm* (national militia) units Hitler cobbled together in the war's final months, though they were stiffened by some well trained and equipped divisions shifted from Siberia. Nor does he acknowledge that the *Ostheer* was still a formidable force, one capable of stopping any Soviet offensive, had it been given a month to prepare winter positions and to rest its overstressed men and repair equipment. The historical record bears this contention out. Consider what happened in reality.

The prolonging of Operation Typhoon left Army Group Center run down and strung out across open ground with little defensive preparation and at the end of its logistical rope. Opposing Army Group Center was a Red Army enjoying a superb transportation hub, strong internal lines of communication, air superiority, and close proximity to its primary resource base. Yet Zhukov's December counterattacks and the subsequent front-wide January 1942 offensive ordered by Josef Stalin could only manage to drive the Germans back from Moscow's doorstep without breaking any one of their armies. But you wouldn't know that from reading *The Battle of Moscow*.

Chapter 4, "The Orsha Conference," gives a mere five pages to a discussion of the key moment in determining how the *Ostheer* would emerge from the winter of 1941–42. Then come ten pages on weather conditions, four on logistics, then back to the weather. The only other accounts that lay such stress on the weather are self-serving postwar memoirs of German officers. This means Stahel gives short shrift to the true reasons for Typhoon's failure: only two paragraphs on the Germans' ill-advised withdrawal of units badly needed at the front (134–35) and one on the debilitating effects of losing the airpower that the Germans deployed as flying artillery in their combined arms war of maneuver.

In chapter 5, "Typhoon Relunched," Stahel observes that Army Group Center faced only 240,000 men on Zhukov's western front. That tens of thousands were being withheld in preparation for the Marshal's planned counteroffensive has to be inferred by the reader. Nor does the author reveal how these ill equipped, understrength formations prevented any German breakthrough. Instead the overall impression the reader gleans from these passages is that once again the weather—not the Red Army—stopped the German advance. Regardless of what Stahel occasionally says about the effectiveness of the Red Army, he shows he believes it played only a secondary role in enabling Moscow to survive encirclement.

*The Battle for Moscow* contains 318 pages of text. Most modern scholarship, dating back four decades to the pioneering work of John Erickson,<sup>9</sup> attributes the German defeat on the road to Moscow to the Red Army's active and aggressive defensive efforts and bad command decisions by the Germans.

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8. See Mercatante, *Why Germany Nearly Won: A New History of the Second World War in Europe* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), and Niklas Zetterling and Anders Frankson, *The Drive on Moscow 1941: Operation Taifun and Germany's First Great Crisis of World War II* (Philadelphia: Casemate, 2012), among several books that have long since made the same points.

9. *The Road to Stalingrad: Stalin's War with Germany*, vol. 1 (1975; rpt. New Haven: Yale U Pr, 1999) 249–96.

Yet Stahel discusses the Red Army's fighting prowess on only 40 pages.<sup>10</sup> German blunders receive a more adequate 93 pages of discussion and analysis.<sup>11</sup> Then there is the weather, which receives a stunning 83 pages of coverage, over a quarter of the entire book.<sup>12</sup> Even the author's ostensible thesis is sidelined by the weather, though in this dubious fashion the book does fulfil its promises of "challenging a well-established narrative."

The chapter closes with several astute points about logistics, but reverts to a numbers game in claiming that superior manpower and economic resources enabled the Allies to defeat Germany (162–63). Readers are left to conclude that it was only a matter of time before the *Ostheer* simply collapsed, regardless of what the Red Army did or did not do.

Chapter 6, "The Long Road to Moscow," starts with a discussion of Stalin's anger at Winston Churchill's refusal to open a second front or send troops to fight in the Soviet Union. But if the Germans' military situation was already hopeless by late 1941, why was Stalin pressuring Great Britain (which had twenty years earlier sent combat units to destroy Bolshevik forces in Russia) to send hundreds of thousands of men into the Soviet Union? The chapter also offers a substantial assessment of the Red Army's defensive effort to check the advance of Army Group Center's strongest formations (181–85). Stahel's suggestive consideration of the German state of mind (192–202) leads into chapter 7, "Victory at Any Price," which offers a fine treatment of the partisan war behind Army Group Center's front lines (202–16).<sup>13</sup> The chapter closes by explaining why *reaching* a major city as a military objective is not the same as *taking* it (223–32).

In chapter 8, "The Frozen Offensive," Stahel again excoriates German military commanders for driving Army Group Center into the ground (232–37). He then indulges in a long excursus on German atrocities instead of exploring more fully the reasons why the drive on Moscow failed. He continues to belabor his point about Red Army numerical superiority, but offers no explanation why, despite this advantage, the Soviet forces found themselves battered back into Moscow's suburbs even as, Stahel acknowledges, German commanders were making one disastrous decision after another.

Chapter 9, "Down to the Wire," takes a more detailed look at National Socialist military thinking, especially the "Nazi cult of death" (258–66), to clarify why Germany irrationally persisted in its drive into the east long after the *Ostheer* should have stopped major offensive operations for the winter. There follows a mandatory ten pages on the weather, instead of some much needed analysis of the Red Army's ferocious defensive efforts. For instance, the author cites frostbite as a key problem undermining Army Group Center's operational effectiveness, but in reality 70 percent of all frostbite victims returned to active duty (267); moreover, the cold took far fewer German soldiers out of action than did casualties inflicted by the Red Army (258).

Chapter 10, "To the Gates of Moscow," concerns the failings of Army Group Center's leading commanders, including Field Marshal Fedor von Bock. Stahel then wraps up the book by arguing that the Soviet Union's size and strength doomed Typhoon. He quotes Oswald Spengler:

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10. Viz., 6-8, 16-17, 19, 21, 24, 52, 54, 68, 79, 83, 86, 90, 101, 106, 147-48, 173, 182, 184-85, 221, 223-24, 227, 240-41, 243-46, 281, 289, 292, 303, 307-8, 315.

11. Viz., 8-9, 13-15, 18-19, 22-23, 62-69, 74-80, 93, 98, 107, 110-19, 127-30, 144-46, 152-56, 164-65, 180-81, 186-89, 191-92, 217-19, 227-30, 234-35, 278-79, 282-93, 295-96, 298-302, 306-8, 312-17.

12. Viz., 6-7, 21-23, 53-61, 68, 71, 73-75, 79-80, 91-92, 104, 110, 117, 119-27, 129-36, 142, 150, 154, 157, 159-62, 166-71, 181, 186, 189, 195, 197, 202-6, 227, 235, 241, 243, 252-57, 267-74, 276, 279, 281-83, 292, 294, 296, 303, 307.

13. The discussion here is marred by another diatribe (217-18) on the importance of numbers as the crucial element in deciding the war.

The population of this vast plain, the largest in the world, cannot be attacked from outside. The spatial expanse is a political and military strength that no one has ever been able to overcome. Napoleon himself had to learn through experience. Even if the enemy were to occupy the vastest regions, it would still be of no avail.... The whole region to the west of Moscow—Byelorussia, the Ukraine, the whole region between Riga and Odessa that was once the most flourishing in the Empire—is today no more than a huge “buffer” against Europe that could be abandoned without a collapse of the system. This being so, however, the idea of an offensive by the West makes no sense. It would run up against a void (312).

Rather than driving home this point that has ostensibly defined all four of his books, the author closes by stressing that wrongheaded German command decisions were pivotal in determining the battle’s (and the war’s) outcome (312–17). Although *The Battle for Moscow* has some value as a history of its subject, readers will consistently be frustrated by David Stahel’s dogmatic faith in a thesis the historical record simply does not bear out.