



Operation Don's Left Wing: The Trans-Caucasus Front's Pursuit of the First Panzer Army, November 1942–February 1943 by David M. Glantz.

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Review by James R. Smither, Grand Valley State University (smitherj@gvsu.edu).

Not till the glasnost era of the later 1980s did the Soviet Union begin to open its military archives. Since then, former army officer and prolific historian David Glantz has mined those records to create a far more complete and accurate account of military operations on the Russian front during World War II. In so doing, he has specialized in campaigns ignored or glossed over by historians for lack of sufficient sources for the Soviet (and sometimes German) experience.

The book under review here is a sequel to the author's earlier *Operation Don's Main Attack*,¹ which concerns the Soviet offensive against the German forces not surrounded at Stalingrad. But that campaign started later than the actions covered in *Operation Don's Left Wing* and proceeded independently of it. Hence, to better grasp the context of events recounted in the present volume, readers should consult the relevant parts of volume 2 of Glantz's multi-volume study of the Stalingrad campaign,² which traces German Army Group A's invasion of the Caucasus until it was stopped in November 1942.

Glantz traces two separate Soviet offensives: in one of these, the North Caucasus Group fought the German 1st Panzer Army, which had penetrated deep into the Caucasus mountains in an effort to capture the oil fields in the region; in the other, the Soviet Black Sea Group fought German 17th Army forces in the hills near the Black Sea coastline. The two campaigns ultimately merged as Soviet forces advanced on Rostov. After the 1st Panzer Army escaped from the Caucasus, much of the 17th Army was left to defend the Taman Peninsula east of the Crimea in hopes that it might be a useful base for a future offensive.

The first half of the book mostly concerns the Soviet counterattacks against the Germans who had been stopped short of the oil fields—mostly 1st Panzer Army's mobile units. Though these thwarted Soviet plans to encircle or destroy them, there were simply too few Germans to cover the vast expanses they were trying to defend, and the Soviets drove them steadily westward.

The second half of the book recounts the struggle on the Black Sea coast, where Soviet forces were confined to narrow stretches near the coastline and had to attack uphill into prepared German positions. The fighting was slow and costly. The Germans gave ground, but held their positions long enough for their units farther east to stage their own withdrawal largely according to plan.

Glantz draws heavily on Soviet documents that lay out plans for specific operations, describe the forces involved, and narrate operations; he includes, too, critiques of those operations by officers on various levels of the command structure. The latter were confidential documents meant to help correct mistakes and improve performance of the participating units and commanders;

1. Subtitle: *The Soviet Southern Front's Advance on Rostov, January–February 1943* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2018).

2. With coauthor Jonathan M. House, *Armageddon in Stalingrad: September–November 1942* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2009).

these proved to be valuable, but must be seen in context. In examining three different critiques of the Black Sea Group's failure to drive the Germans out of Krasnodar, Glantz comments that they

focused on either the effects of weather and terrain on the offensive or on the operational and tactical problems within the Black Sea Group and its subordinate formations. What they all ignored were the *Stavka's* [Soviet high command's] decisions regarding the feasibility of the offensive in the first place and the likelihood of its success. In this regard, like the *Stavka's* decisions about the Southern Front, its decisions about the Trans-Caucasus Front were characterized by overoptimism about the front's prospects for success and a woeful misunderstanding of the strength and combat capabilities of German Army Group A's forces. (437)

It is a leitmotiv of Glantz's works that the Soviet military during the war was a work in progress, gradually learning how to function properly at all levels, from the training of soldiers and field officers to the development of effective support services, and to plan operations and adjust them as needed.

At this stage in the war, the author argues, while the Soviets generally had more men and equipment than the Germans, as well as commanders who took due account of strategic considerations, they overestimated the capabilities of their own forces, while underestimating how far the Germans surpassed them in military efficiency. Consequently, their higher commanders demanded far too much of their forces in the field, committing them to costly, ill-fated attacks and failing to follow up effectively on the successes they did achieve. But they were learning: given adequate resources, some Soviet commanders were gaining local successes, even as their superiors tried to fix problems identified in the critiques. Of course, the more the Soviets learned, the more dangerous they became to their enemy. Conversely, the Germans were losing irreplaceable men and equipment, and paying the price of their over-ambitious previous offensives. They could still slow, but not halt the tide of the war.

Glantz's book is a valuable addition to the literature in the field, but not without its flaws: these include lack of context for specific operations and underuse of German archival materials in favor of (too few) secondary sources. The maps mostly replicate those created by the Germans during the campaign; they are hard to read, omit certain places mentioned in the documents, and sometimes misidentify Soviet units. That said, Soviet maps are not available and Glantz does provide a few maps of his own.

Like most of its author's books, this one is very much a top-down operational history focused on high-level officers rather than common soldiers. It clarifies, in rich detail, the strengths, equipment, movements, and casualties of specific units. The nature and inadequacy of the sources available to him help to explain his book's forgivable limitations. As is generally true of David Glantz's body of work, *Operation Don's Left Wing* is must reading for specialists in the field, if a bit too challenging for casual readers.