



2012-037

David Stahel, *Kiev 1941: Hitler's Battle for Supremacy in the East*. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2012. Pp. xvi, 468. ISBN 978-1-107-01459-6.

Review by Walter G. Moss, Eastern Michigan University (wmoss@emich.edu).

David Stahel recognizes that “in many ways the battle of Kiev [August–September 1941] is a misnomer” and that “the city itself plays a small, peripheral role in the fighting, but lends its name to the wider drama which engulfed a large segment of the eastern Ukraine” (8). In an earlier book,¹ he has argued that the German invasion of the USSR had failed as early as mid-August 1941. In this new work, he indicates that the German victory the following month in the battle of Kiev, which Hitler called “the biggest battle in the history of the world” (223), did not alter the continuing dire German prospects. Admitting that the battle was also Hitler’s greatest victory, Stahel emphasizes that Germany’s “battlefield superiority at the tactical and operational level did not make it infallible strategically”: by the time the USSR launched its winter offensive in December 1941, Germany’s “plans to conquer the Soviet Union had long since failed” (4–5). He is critical of those accounts “covering the late August and September period, as the colder weather beckoned with all its ominous implications, [which] still suggest that some form of German victory remained a realistic prospect” (4). In some ways, his point has been made before; for example, almost a half century ago Alan Clark wrote:

In contrast to their efforts to break the Russian northern flank and reduce Leningrad, the Germans’ operations in the south were dazzlingly successful Yet the operation remains essentially, because strategically, a failure. It did not win the war for the Germans, and today we can see that it was not necessary, even as a prelude to such a victory. Indeed, the Ukrainian campaign went far to lose Hitler the war, in that its conception and pursuit denied him all chance of subduing the Russians before the winter.²

Yet, *Kiev 1941* is still a valuable contribution, providing “the first intensive treatment of the battle of Kiev” and charting “the ongoing demise of Germany’s operational proficiency in 1941” (6). Compared to Clark’s book, which covers the entire German-Soviet conflict, it is more detailed and nuanced regarding Germany’s situation in the Soviet southwest in the summer and early fall of 1941. Stahel states, for example that “the battle of Kiev was almost certainly the best option for the *Ostheer* [Germany’s Eastern Army] in August 1941, but in no way sufficient for the ultimate goal of Operation Barbarossa” (352).

As in his preceding volume, Stahel tells us that “this study will concentrate predominantly on the two panzer groups that combined to enact the encirclement of the Soviet South-Western Front (Panzer Groups 1 and 2). This study can be read, therefore, as a continuation of the previous study into German operational problems on the eastern front or as a separate and distinct investigation of an all-too-neglected battle” (8).

Based mainly on sources in English and German, including some good secondary literature on the USSR, this book will please military historians who enjoy detailed accounts of military operations. The following is a fairly typical sample:

While Lemelsen’s panzer corps fought desperately to defend Guderian’s left flank, elements of Schweppen- burg’s XXIV Panzer Corps were struggling to maintain their position in the south. In addition to the vital bridge seized by the 3rd Panzer Division at Novgorod-Severskii, the 10th Motorized Infantry Division had forced another crossing over the Desna further south near Korop. On 30 August the motorized division attempted to thrust further south from the river, but was caught in the teeth of Eremenko’s offensive and, operating alone, was beaten back. By 2 September Bock’s diary recorded that the division had “lost its bridgehead south of the Desna.” (164)

1. *Operation Barbarossa and Germany’s Defeat in the East* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2009).

2. *Barbarossa: The Russian-German Conflict, 1941–45* (1965; rpt. NY: Signet, 1966) 152.

Unlike books by Rodric Braithwaite³ and Michael Jones,⁴ *Kiev 1941* devotes little space to the effect of the German soldiers on the Soviet civilian population. There are a few exceptions: it does pay tribute to the determination, patriotism, and self-sacrifice of the Soviet peoples, including the civilian population, as “the real story of Soviet survival in 1941” (47). It also mentions that some Ukrainians regarded the Germans as liberators from Soviet oppression, but then correctly states that Hitler’s racial policies and other actions soon dashed such hopes (81–82). There are brief mentions of Soviet partisan warfare and less than two pages on the German roundup of Kievan Jews and their slaughter at the Babi Yar ravine (259–60). And in one of his most heartfelt paragraphs, Stahel writes:

Between seventeen and eighteen million Soviet civilians died in the war with Nazi Germany and most of these died not as a direct result of a German action (that is, by being shot), but rather from the conditions created by the German army and occupation forces (starvation, disease, exposure, overwork, etc.). Accordingly, however some historians may seek to “interpret” the circumstances or apply restrictive definitions to what constituted a war crime, the fact remains that the *Ostheer* and its soldiers, each to varying extents, participated in and contributed to the conditions which resulted in the deaths of so many. In this sense one must keep in mind that the well-known suffering of the German army during the winter fighting had even worse results for the civilian population, especially in the areas of heavy German troop concentrations. (333)

Nevertheless, such passages are exceptions to Stahel’s emphasis on military strategy and tactics, with some treatment of how the conditions of soldiers affected these military considerations. This is not to fault him—authors may choose their subjects as they please—I merely alert readers that the book is devoted more to the strategy and tactics of military history rather than to the larger tragedy of World War II. We *feel* little here of all the civilian tragedies suffered in the Soviet southwest in the summer and early fall of 1941. The British novelist Ian McEwan once tried to convey a sense of such personal anguish when he wrote that one of his characters

was struck by the recently concluded war [World War II] not as a historical, geopolitical fact but as a multiplicity, a near infinity of private sorrows, as a boundless grief minutely subdivided without diminishment among individuals who covered the continent like dust.... For the first time he sensed the scale of the catastrophe in terms of feeling—all those unique and solitary deaths, all that consequent sorrow, unique and solitary too, which had no place in conferences, headlines, history, and which had quietly retired to houses, kitchens, unshared beds, and anguished memories.⁵

As I have said, Stahel does deal with the conditions of soldiers, especially on the German side. He makes extensive use of the diaries and letters of German soldiers as well as works by and about German generals and political figures like Hitler and Goebbels—there are about a hundred pages of endnotes and bibliography. Excellent maps and tables clarify the complex military operations.

Stahel early on makes a strong case that Operation Barbarossa—intended “to be a short and decisive campaign establishing Germany’s complete dominance of the continent” (52)—had to succeed in 1941 to give Germany any real chance of winning the war.

Chapter 1 spells out the increasing role the British and American governments played in aiding the USSR, summarizing, too, Soviet strengths and weaknesses in the first few months of the war. We read that, even though the Soviet Union seemed overwhelmed at times by the German advance, its much larger population of young people gave Stalin a crucial advantage in mobilizing new troops. Although its military was initially hampered by antiquated equipment, some of the new weaponry produced “in record quantities” in 1941 was excellent: “The newer model Soviet tanks were ... far superior to anything the Germans possessed” (37).

Chapter 2 further illustrates why Germany had to win the war in 1941 or face rapidly lengthening odds of success. “Before World War II began, the peacetime industrial output of Germany measured only some 10.7

3. *Moscow 1941: A City and Its People at War* (NY: Knopf, 2006).

4. *Leningrad: State of Siege* (NY: Basic Books, 2008), with my review at *MiWSR* 2009.03.03 – www.miwsr.com/2009/20090303.asp.

5. *Black Dogs* (NY: Doubleday, 1992) 140.

percent of world production, with Japan's share accounting for just 3.5 percent and Italy's even less at 2.7 percent." The Allies (including the United States by the end of 1941) "produced some 70 percent of the world's industrial goods" (51). In the months after Germany launched its attack on the USSR on 22 June 1941, a scarcity of fuel and other supplies plagued the Germans. "Shortages of workers and raw materials were at the heart of Germany's stalled economic effort.... Hitler's underestimation of Soviet arms and industry was a fatal mistake that he himself exacerbated.... Between 1940 and 1941 the United States tripled its armament output, while the UK and the USSR almost doubled theirs" (57, 60).

Also in this chapter and in his Conclusion—after eight additional chapters, including one on preparations for Operation Typhoon's attack on Moscow—Stahel explains why the failure of Germany's attack on the USSR was almost inevitable. Even before the US declaration of war in December 1941, "Germany was fatally overextended" (349). As to why Hitler conceived such a flawed strategic plan, Stahel cites Robert Citino's emphasis on the Prussian-German cult of the offensive.⁶ But he also thinks Hitler's strategy flowed from his worldview, which overemphasized the power of German "will" and cast Slavs as inferior beings. "The primacy of 'will' assumed fundamental importance in Hitler's conception, with weaponry viewed as subordinate to the moral qualities of the soldier" (61). There was also the Führer's stubborn pride and egotism. His lightning success in France "led to a dangerous hubris in Hitler's strategic thinking (supported by Germany's political and military elites), causing him to underestimate Britain's future prospects" and the danger of attacking the USSR (52).

Nor was Hitler alone in his arrogance and poor strategic thinking. Stahel writes of the "unrestrained hubris rampant within the German high command" (150) and often mentions that generals fighting among themselves impeded the German war effort. Furthermore, even though it "was painfully obvious by September [that] Operation Barbarossa was attempting too much ... there was hardly any acknowledgment of this fact within the highest ranks of the army.... Nothing changed and nothing was learned" (204).

Stahel stresses the German high command's heartless execution of Hitler's genocidal policies and plans for killing Leningraders—men, women, and children—by starvation. "The army leadership was more than willing to oversee" such atrocities (278). While not ignoring war crimes committed by Soviet troops, he stresses more those of German soldiers. Among these was the appalling treatment of Soviet prisoners of war: "Of the 3.3 million Soviet POWs who were captured in 1941 more than 60 percent—roughly 2 million—would be dead by February 1942" (305). The Germans simply did not want to use valuable supplies and manpower to care for them adequately. In addition, many Soviet soldiers were killed outright rather than taken prisoner.

Since Stahel's expertise relates primarily to Germany, he deals more with German than with Soviet leadership, public opinion, and military plans and operations. He does, however, write of "Stalin's astonishingly inept judgment" (214)—for example, his refusal to withdraw from Kiev and his "obduracy and incompetence" (223). But these judgments apply mainly to Stalin's early leadership before the crushing blow at Kiev had taught him valuable lessons. By contrast, Hitler's victory blinded him to the difficulties to come.

Like other historians of the German-Soviet conflict in 1941, Stahel emphasizes that bad weather (starting already in September with much rain and colder temperatures) and poor Soviet roads hindered the German panzer attacks. But he gives special weight to all the German losses, of soldiers and operational equipment, sustained at Kiev: "By 26 August, after just over eight weeks of warfare on the eastern front, the army had suffered the loss [by various means] of a staggering 441,100 men, which equalled 11.67 percent of the whole army on 22 June 1941" (131). September 1941 was the "costliest month" for the Germans in the year after 1 August 1941 (310). Given its smaller population and industrial resources, such losses hurt Germany much more than the larger Soviet losses hurt the USSR.

Although this book is primarily concerned with the battle of Kiev itself, the final chapters examine its implications for the siege of Leningrad, begun shortly before the fall of Kiev, and the battle for Moscow, begun soon after it. To sum up, in this most detailed English-language treatment of the battle of Kiev, David Stahel furnishes ample evidence that, despite its Ukrainian victories in late September 1941, Germany remained ill prepared to defeat the USSR.

6. *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2005) 173.