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David Stahel, *Operation Typhoon: Hitler's March on Moscow, October 1941*. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013. Pp. xviii, 412. ISBN 978-1-107-03512-6.

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Operation Typhoon is the third in a series of books by David Stahel (Univ. of New South Wales), each exploring the operations of the panzer and motorized formations of German Army Group Center (AGC). It aims, first, to show that “despite success on the battlefield, the wider German war effort was in far greater trouble than is often acknowledged Germany’s hopes of final victory depended on the success of the October offensive” (dust jacket blurb), seeking to “eliminate the bulk of the Red Army before Moscow, seize control of the Soviet capital and force an end to major operations on the eastern front before the onset of winter” (2). Secondly, as in his previous volumes, Stahel argues that “the turning point in Germany’s war occurred as early as August 1941” (305). “Allied economic resources were being amassed on an unprecedented scale [T]he gap in manpower and material between the Allies and Axis had become desperately large,” thus “dooming Germany to eventual defeat by sheer weight of arms.”² For reasons such as this, Stahel is fast becoming this generation’s foremost proponent of the discredited idea that mass and material are the most important variables in determining victory in modern warfare.³

Operation Typhoon nonetheless comprises some of Stahel’s best work to date. Several chapters are devoted to a clear and engaging narrative of AGC’s struggles on the ostensible road to Moscow. However, he does not prove that German “hopes of final victory depended on the success of the October offensive,” instead managing to undermine the larger argument of his three books—that quantitative measures were more important than qualitative measures in determining the outcome of World War II.

The book is rife with inconsistencies. For instance, Stahel asserts that the Germans’ failure to take Moscow doomed their larger war effort, then proceeds to write that “Moscow was not the key to Germany’s final victory in the east” (17). He underrates the options available to the German command before and during Typhoon, likely because a discussion of these would diminish the importance of the drive on Moscow and point up the inconvenient truth that the *Ostheer*’s potential to break Soviet resistance in September 1941 means the war had not turned decisively against Germany in August 1941. To his credit, Stahel attributes Typhoon’s shortfalls to German command failures, but in so doing vitiates the entire quantitative basis of his body of work. The failure to seize Moscow is regarded by many as the critical turning point in Germany’s war. Stahel, preoccupied with statistics, overlooks the reality that Germany’s wrap-up of operations prior to the onset of winter 1941 affected the Third Reich’s war effort far more than whether Moscow fell or not.

Stahel correctly states that the Red Army would have fought on even had Moscow fallen (17), but never recognizes that Soviet loss of critical resources in Southern Russia would have crippled the Red Army, since, as he himself puts it, “Only a long series of sustained, resource-intensive offensives, separated by temporary halts to rebuild armies and bring up supplies, could lead to outright victory on the eastern front” (17).

Though he touches (lightly) on critical strategic-economic aspects of the war, Stahel never proves his primary thesis. Despite the litany of German weaknesses and losses he documents,⁴ the fact remains that in 1942 the supposedly mortally weakened Wehrmacht came within a whisker of seizing the Soviet Union’s

1. *Kiev 1941: Hitler's Battle for Supremacy in the East* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2012) 10, 349.

2. *Operation Barbarossa and Germany's Defeat in the East* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2009) 442.

3. See Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 2006), and Steven D. Mercatante, *Why Germany Nearly Won: A New History of the Second World War in Europe* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012).

4. Previously explored in detail by, e.g., Robert J. Kershaw, *War without Garlands: Operation Barbarossa 1941-1942* (Shepperton, UK: Ian Allan, 2000).

primary sources of petroleum and other critical resources necessary to fuel an army capable of winning the war. Indeed, by the late fall of 1941, “the Germans had seized or destroyed 47 percent of the Soviet Union’s prewar agricultural land, 41 percent of its railroad network and the sources of 62.5 percent of prewar coal output, 68 percent of prewar steel output, and 60 percent of its aluminum output.”⁵ In the last decade, historians have often stressed that the Soviet economy relied on natural resources perilously within Germany’s potential reach. Stahel nevertheless ignores this existing scholarship and concentrates on the USSR’s sheer size, even as he ignores the actual value of the land closest to the eastern front. For example, he prominently quotes a German soldier educating a new replacement: “Have a look at the map of Russia. The land is immense. And how far did we advance? Not even as far as Napoleon in 1812—our conquest is only a thin strip on the map” (19). Does the author actually believe that the empty and nearly completely undeveloped lands making up the vast majority of the Soviet Union provided a sound basis for waging an effective war against a German state that, if it captured Southern Russia’s resources, could effectively harness the economic and demographic power of Europe?

Stahel emphasizes that Germany, from 1942 on, “never came close to matching the tremendous, and ever-increasing, figures for military production within the Allied powers” (23). In fact, the Allies had outstripped German production from the first days of the war—as illustrated in the author’s own Table 1 (29), which shows a 1939–41 production deficit versus the Allies in crucial categories such as aircraft, major naval vessels, and tanks. Nor does he factor in the 1939–40 French contribution to the Allied cause or the impact of US Lend-Lease aid in further tilting the early-war playing field against Germany. And, too, Germany nonetheless engineered some of the greatest victories in modern military history in 1939–41. So mesmerized is Stahel by the effect of superior numbers on battlefield outcomes that one detects a distinct tone of surprise when he writes of one Soviet counterstroke that “Not only was the Soviet attack successful in forcing a German panzer division into retreat but also, even according to German sources, the Soviets did not achieve this through numerical superiority” (66).

In four chapters (2–5), Stahel correctly and repeatedly stresses the dire effects of bad command decisions on the German armies, but again at the expense of his main thesis (259, 262, 288). These chapters also clarify just how tough an opponent the Red Army really was, even early in Operation Barbarossa (35–39, and *passim*). But that point is obscured by Stahel’s fixation on sheer numbers to explain the war’s outcome, and his belaboring of weather conditions in accounting for Operation Typhoon’s ultimate breakdown.⁶ This attribution of German failures overwhelmingly to natural forces is reminiscent of many a self-exculpating postwar memoir by Wehrmacht officers. Although Stahel meticulously documents AGC’s tank and manpower losses (41–44) and consequent unreadiness on the eve of Typhoon (134–38), he yet identifies weather as the primary cause of the army’s loss of speed and shock force.⁷ For that matter, describing the thinly stretched German forces on the defensive, he spotlights the breadth of the front (26), while disregarding the army’s shortage of sufficient troops to man positions in depth. Even the late-war Red Army, for all its size, was notorious for stripping bare quiet sectors of the front to provide numbers at the point of attack. The fact that, during World War II, victory almost always came to the army that better deployed its mobile reserves for defensive or offensive purposes gets no mention in this book.

In his latest book, David Stahel furnishes the casual World War II enthusiast with an engrossing if rather conventional distillation of Operation Typhoon. He does not, however, much advance his career-long argument that “the turning point in Germany’s war occurred as early as August of 1941” (305) or that Typhoon was ultimately irrelevant to the German war effort. In this regard, *Operation Typhoon* obscures just why and how the Second World War reached the conclusion it did.

5. Mercatante (note 3 above) 111.

6. See 4, 7, 8, 78–81, 92–97, 127–30, 165–66, 174–75, 188, 190, 193–95, 239–46, 250–55, 260, 266–67, 283, 290–92.

7. See 250, “[it was] not for want of raw firepower that Hoepner’s panzer group could not drive forward,” and 257, “As Guderian recalled: ‘The strength of the advancing units was less dependent on the number of men than on the amount of petrol on hand to keep them going.’”