



2014-088

Lev Lopukhovskiy, *The Viaz'ma Catastrophe, 1941: The Red Army's Disastrous Stand against Operation Typhoon*. Ed. and trans. Stuart Britton. Solihull, UK: Helion, 2013. Pp. xi, 542. ISBN 978-1-908916-50-1.

Review by Steven D. Mercatante, Brighton, MI (editor@globearthwar.com).

In *The Viaz'ma Catastrophe*, Lev Lopukhovskiy does four things exceptionally well in explaining the disaster that Nazi Germany's Wehrmacht inflicted on the Red Army's strongest fronts in October 1941. First, he provides an in-depth look at the particulars of German Army Group Center's annihilation of the opposing Soviet Fronts—Reserve, Western, and Briansk—during the opening weeks of the march toward Moscow (Operation Typhoon). Second, he demonstrates how under-resourced and worn down German armies overcame an enemy that should have more than held its own, if quantitative reasons alone had been decisive in the military campaigns of World War II. Third, he delves deeply into what was happening on the often marginalized Soviet side, from matters of grand strategy down to the details of specific operations, with select analyses of tactics where pertinent. All this serves to reveal how and why Soviet political and military leaders allowed catastrophic defeats to occur in 1941. Additionally, the author recounts his experience of trying to conduct research in the highly politicized world of former Soviet archives. He makes clear just how his efforts improved the accuracy of his work and points the way for historians seeking to investigate more precisely just what took place on the battlefields of the Eastern Front.

The author's hard-won familiarity with both German- and Russian-language archives enables him to describe in detail Army Group Center's penetration into the operational rear of the Soviet Fronts in the first weeks of Operation Typhoon, from the perspective of both sides. This marks his book off from the many German-centered accounts in both scholarly and popular literature.

This balanced approach pays dividends in Lopukhovskiy's elucidation of how a weakened German army was able to decimate a large and imposing foe that had bled Army Group Center white in the grinding attritional engagements of the second part of the epic battle for Smolensk in late summer 1941. He delivers a detailed assessment of the strengths and vulnerabilities of the opposing forces on the eve of Typhoon, then walks the reader through the most salient events that led to the Soviet defenders' encirclement within a matter of days.

Typically, historians have attributed the Red Army's failures to bad planning, second-rate leadership, ill-trained soldiers, poor communications, lack of supplies, static linear defenses, and nearly nonexistent mobile reserves. All valid points, but Lopukhovskiy clarifies *why* Soviet forces were so ill-prepared at this point in the war, even though they had had ample time to prepare their defenses. For instance, in regard to the Briansk Front, he assigns significant blame to Col. Gen. A.I. Eremenko, who was commanding the 3rd, 13th, and 30th Armies plus the Ermakov operational grouping. Eremenko should have been more than ready to face the German 2nd Panzer Group and Second Army. But he spent the month of September 1941 in attacks against well defended German positions that accomplished little more than draining the strength of his own forces and leaving them poorly positioned to repulse the onslaught of Typhoon:

Despite the Stavka's [Soviet High Command's] order of September 10th to switch to the defensive, the Front's armies continued active combat operations in pursuit of local objectives. By 30 September the Front had lost 202 tanks (including six KV tanks, 79 T-34s, 18 BTs and 99 T-26s), leaving it with 257 tanks. In the second ten-day stretch of September the Front lost 18,750 men.... By 1 October, the 50th Army numbered 63,919 men, which was just 77 percent of its authorized number of personnel—the other armies were in even worse shape. (99)

Such fine-grained accounts lend force to Lopukhovskiy's indictment of Soviet decision making at all levels and expose the command breakdowns that the Germans exploited so adeptly during Typhoon's first

weeks. Beyond merely quoting a range of archival sources, the author perceptively analyzes Soviet decisions in their contexts. For example, in part 3 of the book, “The Typhoon Gathers Strength,” he persuasively explains why three Soviet Fronts that had ample foreknowledge of an imminent German attack still collapsed so quickly (171–75).

On a personal note, Lopukhovsky’s critical appraisal of this spectacular failure of Soviet military and political leadership includes a discussion of the disappearance of his father, Col. N.I. Lopukhovsky, and the unit he commanded, the 120th Howitzer Artillery Regiment. For this, the author had to enter a Byzantine atmosphere of politically motivated cover-ups and deliberately limited access to Soviet, and now Russian, military archives. Even today, over seventy years later, information on several lingering controversies haunting the Red Army continues to be suppressed. Not only is it extremely difficult to collect material about individuals, like the author’s father and countless others missing and presumably killed in action, more importantly, to this day historians the world over cannot confidently ascertain how many Red Army soldiers fell in combat, were captured, or went missing at any point not only during Operation Typhoon, but the entire Second World War (407–30). Lopukhovsky does, however, painstakingly explain why he has ultimately come to conclusions sharply at odds with the officially sanctioned reports that, like it or not, scholars must rely upon.

I have only a few, relatively minor complaints about the book. Its maps are too few and segregated in a single section instead of appearing in or near the text they relate to. This is a serious handicap in a work so richly detailed as Lopukhovsky’s. As I have noted, the narrative is mostly well balanced and impartial, but the author does sometimes lapse into a less objective, “us vs. them” style that will alienate certain Western readers.<sup>1</sup> On a final, very positive note, Stuart Britton’s skillful editing and translating of this erudite Russian-language book is a real boon to Anglophone readers.<sup>2</sup>

Although *The Viaz'ma Catastrophe, 1941* is not aimed at general readers, those with an interest in its subject and a bit of background knowledge will not find another book that closes so many gaps in our understanding of one of the Second World War’s most important campaigns.

---

1. Thus, Germans are the “adversary” or “enemy” and the Red Army “our forces.” Still, it is hard to fault Lopukhovsky, who had to work in the difficult conditions of a highly restrictive political environment. In addition, he was a student and instructor at the Frunze Academy and served in the Red Army as a colonel commanding a regiment in the Strategic Rocket Forces at a time when many of those most responsible for the Red Army’s decision making during Operation Typhoon were still very much alive.

2. Britton has done a similar service in the case of Valeriy Zamulin’s award-winning *Demolishing the Myth: The Tank Battle at Prokhorovka, Kursk, July 1943: An Operational Narrative* (Solihull, UK: Helion, 2011).