



Battle for Belorussia: The Red Army's Forgotten Campaign of October 1943–April 1944 by David M. Glantz and Mary Elizabeth Glantz.

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In their Operation Bagration (23 June–19 Aug. 1944), Soviet forces demolished the Wehrmacht's Army Group Center and liberated Belorussia from German control. But the campaign, while justly celebrated as a great feat of Soviet arms, has overshadowed the Red Army's frustrated previous attempts to retake the region. As early as October 1943, the *Stavka* (Soviet high command) directed three army fronts to drive German forces from Belorussia; after the ensuing five months of continuous attacks—and over 700,000 Soviet casualties—the Germans still retained control of most of the targeted territory. In *Battle for Belorussia*, the eminent expert on Soviet military history David Glantz, in collaboration with his daughter, Mary Elizabeth,¹ provides a detailed operational history of the campaign, with attention to both its failures and its preparation for the victories to come.

The authors begin by explaining why the pre-Bagration offensives have gone overlooked. They point the finger at Vasily Sokolovsky, a protégé of Marshal Georgy Zhukov, who served as chief of staff of the Soviet Western Front from February 1943 until his dismissal from the post in April 1944. He was subsequently able to restore his reputation while serving as Zhukov's chief of staff in the final year of the war. He then held a number of posts culminating in Chief of the General Staff for most of the 1950s. Because of his postwar prominence, the Glantzes conclude, "Sokolovsky's reputation had to be, and was, preserved" (579). Concomitantly, the achievements of Marshal Konstantin Rossokovsky, including his "skillful and successful" campaign as commander of the Central Front, were sent down the memory hole "to avoid tarnishing the record of a truly 'Russian' general when compared with the achievements of another general many considered merely a 'Pole'" (xix).

Success was a relative concept in the Belorussian offensives of fall and winter 1943–44. The Glantzes make clear, however, that victory was a reasonable expectation. By late summer 1944, the Soviet forces enjoyed considerable advantages in numbers and especially armor, and they meant to use them to crush Army Group Center in a series of strikes against the 4th Army at the center of the German defenses in the Orsha and Mogilev regions. The authors recount these operations in detail, carefully reconstructing the movements of corps, divisions, and even brigades throughout the region. Soviet forces made progress, but fell short of the objectives set by the *Stavka*.

As in previous years, the Germans resisted skillfully and tenaciously, regardless of their dwindling resources. By fall 1943, however, this resistance was also driven by frustration and increasing desperation. The weather, too, proved as serious an adversary as the Germans. Although the Soviet front recorded several spectacular gains, particularly around Nevel' in the north and west of Loev in the south, deteriorating weather in mid-November prevented them from exploiting these success-

1. Author of *FDR and the Soviet Union: The President's Battles over Foreign Policy* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2005).

es. Sheer exhaustion also worked as a brake on the Soviet realization of their anticipated victories.... Finally, the Red Army's critical logistical umbilicals through which flowed the ammunition and fuel necessary to sustain operations became overextended and choked because of bad road conditions and unreconstructed and overburdened railroad lines. (206)

The *Stavka* was nonetheless bent on continuing the campaign. In early December, the Soviets sought to exploit the gains made by Marshal Ivan Bagramian's 1st Baltic Front farther north and by Rossokovsky on the now-renamed Belorussian Front in the Gomel' region to the south; specifically, they redirected their forces on the Western Front northward, hoping to envelop and destroy the Germans' Army Group Center. This was one of several larger winter-campaign offensives around Leningrad and in the Ukraine and the Crimea. These movements strained Soviet military resources and worsened ongoing problems of reinforcement and resupply of the Belorussian offensives.

Yet, the Glantz maintain, for all the dire problems of logistics, geography, and weather, it was poor leadership that doomed the campaign to ultimate failure. They demonstrate this by again contrasting the results of Sokolovsky's offensives in the central part of the region with Bagramian's in the north, and especially Rossokovsky's in the south. Whereas Sokolovsky's unimaginative efforts and detached style of command resulted in enormous casualties for little gain, Rossokovsky's planning and effective use of his resources showed what could be accomplished even in the face of a determined German defense. Sokolovsky's failures became too much even for the hard-hearted *Stavka*, who, after a damning autopsy of his conduct of the campaign, relieved him of his command.

In their massively detailed new book, David and Mary Elizabeth Glantz have written a revisionist history of the highest order. By combing through fragmentary personal accounts and recently released archival records (among other sources), they have shed needed light on a long-neglected campaign. Historians must now revise their interpretations not only of Soviet military operations in the Second World War but of the argument that Stalin pursued a "narrow-front" strategy during this book's target period. No serious student of the history of the Eastern Front during the Battle for Belorussia can afford to ignore it.²

2. The illegibility of many of its maps is the book's only serious flaw.