

David Stahel. *Retreat from Moscow: A New History of Germany's Winter Campaign, 1941-1942.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019. 560 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-374-24952-6.

Reviewed by Mark Montesclaros (US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Gordon Satellite Campus)

Published on H-War (June, 2020)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

The eastern front of World War II's European theater continues to garner significant academic interest, and with *Retreat from Moscow* author David Stahel sheds new light on multiple aspects of the Soviet-German War's winter campaign of 1941. This effort helps to partially correct a situation that renowned historian David M. Glantz noted in his seminal trilogy on the Red Army at war—that a number of battles were either forgotten or neglected during the campaign, among them the Soviet offensive to retake the key German lines of communication at Rzhev and Viazma, which spanned February 15 to March 1, 1942.[1] And while Stahel's focus is from the German perspective of the Army Group Center, he masterfully covers this part of the Soviet counter-offensive as well. Additionally, the author provides much more than just a description of the military operations that ensued, effectively integrating first-person narratives that capture the essence of this war of annihilation in the East.

Stahel arranges *Retreat for Moscow* into twenty-one chapters of uniform length, accompanied by an excellent introduction that sets the context and an effective conclusion that emphasizes the main points of his discourse. As with most works describing the complexities of combat on World War II's eastern front, the book includes a

number of graphics to help the reader navigate the myriad military units and actions within Germany's winter campaign, as well as extensive notes accompanying each chapter that provide areas for further research and exploration.

The author thrives on challenging some long-held views of the Soviet-German conflict, arguing that the decisive point for the war occurred not during seminal engagements, such as in Moscow, Stalingrad, or Kursk, as have been posed by historians earlier. Stahel takes a broader view, contending that the turning point in the East had already taken place once Operation Barbarossa, Germany's opening move in Russia, failed to achieve its strategic objective of rapidly defeating the Red Army in the summer of 1941. And while this may call into question the merit of scrutinizing the winter campaign that followed, the author again challenges the common wisdom by taking a wider, more strategic view. Stahel sees it not as Germany's first defeat as do many of his colleagues but as a victory. How he arrives at this surprising conclusion is at the heart of the author's titular "new history" of the Third Reich's winter campaign.

The focal point of *Retreat from Moscow* concerns Army Group Center, the Wehrmacht's friendly center of gravity in its drive toward the

Russian capital. While its counterpart army groups to the north and south targeted Leningrad and Ukraine, respectively, it was Army Group Center that bore the brunt of the Soviet counteroffensive, which began in earnest on December 6, 1941. Following its lightning-quick initial victories over Soviet forces during the early stages of Operation Barbarossa, Army Group Center's momentum eventually stalled during the autumn rains and ensuing quagmire. Within sight of Moscow, German forces finally culminated in the attack, hampered by stiff enemy resistance, the onset of winter, lack of fuel and critical supplies, and questionable decision-making by Adolf Hitler. Against the advice of his subordinate commanders in Army Group Center, the *führer* had on multiple occasions siphoned off critical armored forces to the other groups, never considering Moscow a strategic priority. The result of all this was that Army Group Center was highly vulnerable once Soviet forces began their onslaught in early December.

Stahel is masterful at portraying and simplifying the complex details of Army Group Center's multiple operations against Soviet forces as it went on the defensive. While too numerous to enumerate given the scope of this review, several broad themes are worthy of mention. Perhaps foremost is the tension between Hitler, his key advisors, and commanders in the field as Army Group Center faced its first major setback in the East. As the Soviets mounted their massive counteroffensive, Ostheer (German army forces in the East) commanders confronted multiple threats—annihilation by a numerically superior enemy, a harsh Russian winter for which they were ill prepared, lack of logistical support, and an ever-present *führer* who scrutinized their every decision. Indeed, in this regard Hitler took two actions in December that would forever influence the war in the East. On December 18, less than two weeks after the Soviet winter counteroffensive began, he issued the seminal “halt order,” which forbade frontline commanders from ceding territory

or surrendering to the enemy. They were expected to defend in place and counterattack when possible but never to retreat without the *führer*'s authorization. On the very next day he assumed personal command of the army, ensuring that the fate of the Ostheer, as well as the German nation, was in his hands. The tension in *Retreat from Moscow* is thus palpable as capable German commanders seek to preserve fighting strength while facing two seemingly immutable forces—the Red Army to their front and Hitler to the rear—both equally intent on imposing their will.

A second theme worth mentioning is another commonly held notion the author challenges—that Hitler's halt order robbed subordinate commanders of the ability to exercise judgment and initiative in the execution of his order—a concept referred to as *Auftragstaktik*, or “mission-type tactics.” (It should be noted that a similar concept—“mission command”—figures prominently in modern US Army doctrine.) Stahel argues that the opposite is true; that is, even with the halt order in place, commanders exercised considerable discretion to “work around” or even openly defy Hitler in order to save lives and maintain a semblance of unit integrity. Of course, they were not always successful, as even proven combat leaders, such as Generals Heinz Guderian and Erich Hoepner, lost their jobs when the *führer* learned of their open disregard for the order. Other commanders, especially those known by Hitler to be staunch national socialists, were able to extract concessions from the *führer*, including permission to disregard the order if need be. Hence, *Auftragstaktik* was alive and well during the Ostheer's winter campaign, as skillfully proven by the author.

The aforementioned themes support Stahel's overall contention that the German winter campaign of 1941-42 should not be viewed in terms of a “defeat.” First, he notes that despite losing territory to the Soviets, Army Group Center evaded total collapse and was eventually able to hold a position—along the so-called Königsberg Line—

that endured until Germany's collapse later in the East. Nicholas Stargardt came to the same conclusion in his epic study, *The German War*: "What is most extraordinary about the winter crisis, however, is what did *not* happen. The ill-clad, frostbitten, demoralised men held their lines." [2] Next, by placing the winter campaign in a strategic context, Stahel argues that despite horrendous losses in men and materiel, not a single German division was lost, and in the long run Germany benefited more than the Soviets, who suffered more than six times the number of casualties (a staggering total of 1,638,000) during the winter campaign (p. 10). As the author sees it, Hitler achieved his strategic goals for the winter campaign, while Stalin did not. After the Soviet counteroffensive fizzled toward the end of January 1942, Germany would be positioned for another major offensive that would come the following spring.

Retreat from Moscow has some notable strengths, chief among them clarity and narrative pace. Even when describing the myriad operations undertaken by Army Group Center, as well as its numerous interactions with Hitler and his general staff, Stahel always keeps the reader on track, summarizing and amplifying military operations as needed. Thus, one is able to follow not only the saga of Army Group Center but also its successes and failures in the overall strategy for Hitler's campaign in the East. The author's use of maps and graphics enhances the text but does not overwhelm the reader. Additionally, Stahel breaks up what could be a monotonous narrative of combat actions by covering a wide range of associated topics, which bring to life the eastern campaign. Enhanced by first-person narratives, the book describes life on the frontlines, to include the horrors of being overrun by a relentless enemy whose numbers are limitless. Stahel delves into criminality, sexual behavior, and coping mechanisms—including the use of pervitin, a methamphetamine whose use in the army was ubiquitous. He devotes whole chapters of the book to soldiering, Christmas 1941, and surviving the winter—all of which

effectively change the narrative pace, allowing the reader to get a "breather" from the detailed descriptions of military operations. He clearly and effectively portrays the conflict as a war of annihilation, reinforcing other works, such as Stephen Fritz's illuminating *Ostkrieg: Hitler's War of Extermination in the East* (2011). Clarity of prose and narrative pace are among the book's strengths.

Perhaps the book's only shortcoming is its relative lack of primary and secondary Russian or Soviet source material, when compared to those in German. This is partially understandable, as a major focus of Stahel's work involves internal communications among Hitler, the high command, and his general officers on the frontlines—requiring primarily German sources. Nevertheless, other chapters in the book emphasize the Soviet counteroffensive and its impacts and could have benefited from additional insights and commentary from Russian archives and interviews. Moreover, while the author does include perspectives from such luminaries as writer Ilya Ehrenburg, more such Russian sources would have improved the overall balance in *Retreat from Moscow*. Long-time eastern front historian Glantz, in his seminal trilogy on the Soviet military of the period, championed the inclusion of primary sources from Russia as a means to comprehend this subject matter much more fully.

Retreat from Moscow is an excellent example of effective military history, soundly argued and articulately written. It will appeal to the specialist and to military professionals, especially those interested in the strategic and operational levels of war. As noted earlier, Stahel makes a noteworthy contribution to our understanding of the interplay among Hitler, the German high command, and the frontline leadership, as they haggled over the conduct of the campaign given the constraints of the halt order. The book's clear narrative will appeal to the general reader as well, but those seeking an understanding of the wider context of the winter campaign may benefit from a broader, less-de-

tailed synopsis of the Soviet-German War first. *Retreat from Moscow* represents sound scholarship in providing a unique perspective on the eastern front and merits widespread recognition.

Notes

[1]. David M. Glantz, *Colossus Reborn: The Red Army at War, 1941-1943* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 21.

[2]. Nicholas Stargardt, *The German War: A Nation under Arms, 1939-1945* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 216.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Mark Montesclaros. Review of Stahel, David, *Retreat from Moscow: A New History of Germany's Winter Campaign, 1941-1942*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. June, 2020.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54868>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.