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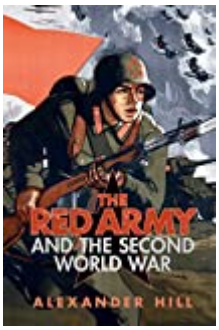
Alexander Hill. *The Red Army and the Second World War.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. xviii + 738 pp. $19.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-107-68815-5.



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Did Nazi Germany lose the war against the Soviet Union or did the Red Army win it? Was the outcome—Germany's total defeat in the East at the hands of Soviet forces—brought about, in Alexander Hill's words, by Stalin's "faceless hordes and overwhelming might overcoming superior German tactical and operational capabilities" (p. 1)? Or, on the other hand, did victory come through Moscow's superior marshaling and use of its human and physical resources to blunt and then break Hitler's war machine? There is an important difference in how one answers these and myriad related questions. The Cold War-era view of the Nazi-Soviet war generally assumed the former position, that Germany's defeat could be explained in quantitative terms and ultimately blamed on Hitler's erratic leadership. David Stahel, in his superb book *Operation Barbarossa and Germany's Defeat in the* East, considered Hitler's invasion doomed to inevitable failure from almost the start, asserting that while Allied victory was by "no means clear in late August 1941, Germany's inability to win the war was at least assured."[1] Likewise, as Stahel and many other scholars of this war make abundantly clear, the Wehrmacht's operational prowess—indeed, operational brilliance, especially in the opening months of the invasion—could not compensate for strategic miscalculations nor a grand strategy so unhinged from reality as that pursued by the Nazi elite. The alternative view is that the Soviet Union could have been defeated but that the Red Army, while benefitting from German mistakes and miscalculations and the efforts of the Western Allies, won the war on the merits of its own performance and the enormous sacrifices of the Soviet people.

Alexander Hill, professor of military history at the University of Calgary, sets out to answer this question through an analysis of the Red Army's effectiveness, or lack thereof, from the experiences gained in Spain and along the Mongolian border with the Japanese Empire through the conquest of Berlin and the destruction of the last vestiges of German resistance in Czechoslovakia. To accomplish this, Hill employs English- and Russian-language sources, archival and otherwise, to "present

a picture of change and continuity within the Red Army" from the start of Soviet industrialization to the end of the Great Patriotic War in May 1945 (p. 9). Hill's work is not a detailed narrative overview of the war's major campaigns and battles, and the author assumes that readers have read at least one of the many "sound overviews" of the war—whether John Erickson's two-volume set or David Glantz and Jonathan House's *When Titans Clashed* (1995) (p. 9). Still, this work provides more than enough of that historical narrative that readers less familiar with the course of the Nazi-Soviet war will find it useful and illuminating. While the author based this work heavily on Soviet archival sources, he also used Soviet published sources, made more effective in light of post-Soviet release of other materials.

The book begins with a chapter-length examination of the Red Army in the late 1920s, on the eve of the adoption of the first Five Year Plan and Stalin's "Great Turn" in Soviet development. Familiar parts of the narrative include a concise analysis of Mikhail Tukhachevskii's impact on the Red Army along with the general militarization of Soviet society, the adoption of tanks, mechanization, and aircraft, and the formulation of the doctrine of Deep Battle. He notes, however, that by the late 1930s, the Red Army had an abundance of relatively modern tanks and aircraft but lacked the overall mechanization necessary to make Deep Battle an operational reality (something that would dog the Red Army well into the war itself). On the eve of war, Hill deems the Red Army far more capable of defending Stalin's "socialist Motherland" than it had been even a decade before. On the other hand, while it was large and well equipped (even if much of its equipment was rapidly approaching obsolescence), the Red Army suffered from indifferent training, and a bureaucratized, stifled, and overly politicized leadership hobbled the Great Purge, a calamity that would cost the Red Army dearly in the early stages of the war. Hill rightly notes as well that significant flaws in command and control and combined arms coordination, together with deficiencies in reconnaissance, rear area support, and overall communications manifested themselves in the Red Army's bumbling invasion of eastern Poland. Unfortunately, Stalin and his advisers took little notice of these faults because the Red Army was ultimately successful in its brief Polish campaign. The disastrous Winter War against Finland just months later, however, would bring all of these shortcomings into high resolution. Expecting a relatively easy victory, the Red Army found itself mired in a costly stalemate, despite its superior numbers in men and equipment. To prevail over stubborn Finnish resistance, the Red Army eventually focused on winning at the tactical level through the application of overwhelming firepower, suffering 126,000 irrecoverable losses in what was essentially a palate cleanser for the fighting to come. Alarmed, perhaps, by the debacle of the Winter War, the Soviets subsequently left nothing to chance in staging the largely bloodless occupation/seizure of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania under the secret provisions of the Nazi-Soviet Pact: from the outset, they employed an overwhelming force of 500,000 troops backed by several thousand tanks and armored vehicles. Bereft of outside assistance, the governments of the Baltic republics chose not to resist, resulting in just a few dozen Soviet casualties.

Despite cataloguing these obvious problems within the Soviet armed forces, Hill is within the mainstream of military historians in asserting that Germany's defeat at the hands of the Soviets was inevitable, writing that it is "difficult to imagine it [Operation Barbarossa] achieving more than it would" (p. 119). The important thing for Stalin and the Soviet Union was that, whatever its shortcomings, the Red Army fought—first, by wearing down the Germans, then by breaking them utterly and completely. In this regard, Hill echoes the assessments of other historians of the German invasion—while the Wehrmacht piled up dazzling operational victories, each operational success the Germans achieved was essentially setting the stage for their ultimate failure. Hill wrote that "every suc-

cess limited German potential to concentrate resources for the next as losses mounted and supply lines were increasingly strained" (p. 232). In some areas, Soviet resistance collapsed with alarming speed; in others, Soviet troops fought with grim determination. With their country's literal survival at stake, Soviet armies executed, without "particular initiative and creativity," frequently pointless frontal assaults (p. 240). These relentless Soviet counterattacks not only cost the Red Army dearly, they steadily wore down the Wehrmacht as well, inflicting losses on the German army not seen in any of its previous campaigns in this war. As an aside to this, Hill even includes a brief, but enlightening, discussion of the Red Army's use of vodka to fortify its assault troops, as well as its use as a tonic for frayed nerves and sagging morale, concluding that "it is actually possible that vodka rations improved Red Army effectiveness" (pp. 243-44).

Interestingly, Hill notes that contemporary Russian historians fall largely into two camps: revisionists who seek to unwind the triumphalist Soviet narrative of the war and Russian neo-Soviet types, seeking to replace the Communist Party with Russian patriotism as the driving force of victory. They, and the majority of their contemporary Western counterparts, agree that, in Hill's words, the "Red Army became a more effective fighting force as the war progressed" (p. 2) and that Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, likewise, became a "more effective military leader than he had been when it [the Soviet-German war] started" (p. 3). Yet Hill centers his attention throughout the book on the concept of "effectiveness" in this context. Despite suffering appalling losses in the first months of the war, the Red Army saved the Soviet Union from certain annihilation at the hands of a barbarous enemy. "If the aim was to repel the Nazi-German invader and its allies, and then defeat them" Hill writes, "then the Red Army achieved the objective and was effective" (p. 3). "However," Hill writes, "rarely do we consider effectiveness in terms of achieving a goal at any cost" (p. 4). He further grants that while the Red Army played a leading role—"possible [*sic*] the principal role"—in defeating the German Wehrmacht, it did so while suffering mind-boggling losses that were not all the result of the operational skill, ferocity, or barbarism of the German assault and their occupation policies. A substantial proportion of Soviet losses stemmed from the regime's bungling and mistakes Stalin and his marshals made prior to and during the first eighteen months or so of the war. Certainly, in the early weeks and months of the invasion when the very existence of the Soviet state and its people was at stake, the Red Army hurled men into battle often with slight regard for the state of their training or equipment. Hill, however, notes that even when there was no compelling operational or strategic reason to do so, Stalin and the Red Army's generals displayed all too often "a criminal disregard for the lives of [their] troops in hammering away at German forces in ill-conceived operations" (p. 6).

Still, by mid-1944, Hill notes, the Red Army was "in many ways at the peak of its effectiveness in terms of balancing cost and clear benefit" (p. 498). When the Red Army launched its own summer offensive that year, code-named Bagration, on the third anniversary of the German invasion, the Soviets combined superior operational prowess with a massive superiority in personnel and equipment to achieve one of the war's greatest victories—the destruction of German Army Group Center. The Soviets, admittedly aided by Hitler's stand-fast orders, clearly not only outgunned the Germans by a huge margin but outfought them as well. Hill notes further the contribution of the Western Allies to Soviet success that critical summer, citing a heretofore unseen degree of Soviet mobility and sustainment provided by thousands of Lend-Lease trucks and vehicles. While Soviet losses remained high, Hill concludes that the Red Army, by the second half of that year, was reducing German strength far more economically than earlier thanks to "a combination of its increased effectiveness and other factors such as Hitler now being the one to throw away troops with attempts to hold territory

at any cost" (p. 511). By the end of 1944, the Red Army had "shown what a combination of qualitative improvement and quantitative might could achieve" (p. 512).

However, Hill's account of Soviet operations through to the end of the war demonstrated that despite growing manpower shortages, postwar political aims drove operations that often incurred, once again, huge numbers of casualties. Large-scale offensive operations in peripheral theaters such as in Hungary, gained notable victories, including the defeat of the puppet government of that country and opening the route to Vienna, but neither result was "crucial for defeating Nazi Germany by this stage" (p. 526). Indeed, the author is highly critical of other such peripheral Soviet operations in East Prussia, where German units, cut off from the main front by February 1945, put up a desperate and futile resistance to the very end of the war. Rather than simply screen and contain these stranded German units, the Red Army battered away at them at great cost. He likewise notes that the Soviet leadership sacrificed many of their soldiers' lives for postwar territorial gains rather than for any reason related to the immediate defeat of the enemy. Even with Germany's defeat an absolute certainty, in the conduct of the Soviets' Berlin operation, "political factors were now increasingly prominent as military and justified heavy losses that would have been intolerable for the democracies fighting to the west" (p. 541). Hill rightly stipulates that the barbaric nature of the Soviet-German war, including its duration, could explain the enormous disparity in losses suffered between the USSR and the Western Allies. Yet "such arguments hide the extent to which Stalin and the Soviet system under Stalin exacerbated the price of what under any circumstances would have been a costly struggle" (p. 560). Despite the clear progress and institutional learning exhibited at all levels of the Red Army and even the Kremlin leadership, Hill concludes "the late-war Red Army was still man-for-man, tank-for-tank, aircraft-for-aircraft all too often not as effective as either its principal opponent or key allies in terms of the ability to destroy the enemy ... without first being destroyed" (p. 566).

Readers familiar with the nature of Stalinism and the Soviet state itself should not be surprised by these conclusions. Hill includes a chapter on Stalin's purges of the Red Army's officer corps, but this was but one relatively small element of his vicious and often capricious rule. In the 1930s, as Timothy Snyder and others have documented, "the Soviet Union was the only state in Europe carrying out policies of mass killing."[2] Before the Second World War, the Stalinist regime, as Snyder noted, had "already starved millions and shot the better part of a million."[3] In his quest to turn the Soviet Union from a backward, agrarian empire into a modern industrial giant, Stalin terrorized and enslaved millions of his own people on flimsy or nonexistent charges of wrongdoing, committed genocide in Ukraine, and even murdered tens of thousands of otherwise loyal members of the Communist Party and even his inner circle. We should not expect, then, that such a regime would wage war any differently than it did, even after the tide had turned decisively in Moscow's favor. After all, whether building "socialism" at home or waging war to save and then expand the Soviet empire, results were all that mattered to Stalin and the military and civilian leaders who lived or died at his whim.

Despite immense losses among its ranks and the civilian society that supported it, the Red Army had not only saved the Soviet Union, it ultimately and completely vanquished its foes and drove into the very heart of Europe, where Soviet power would hold sway for the next forty-five years. Taking all this in hand, Hill concludes that "both the Red Army and the Soviet system had passed the test of total war—a considerable achievement when one considers the state of the Red Army and Soviet economy in the 1920s. Millions had paid the ultimate price for that victory—a sacrifice on an unprecedented scale that stands as a chilling re-

minder of the potential of modern industrial states to wage intensive, sustained, and total war" (p. 582). Military professionals and academic specialists alike will benefit from Hill's analysis. ***The Red Army and the Second World War*** is meticulously researched, including among its sources an extensive number of Soviet and Russian sources, including diaries, memoirs, interviews, and eyewitness accounts. Hill adroitly includes concise accounts of the war's dozens of operations and battles that, together with his insightful analysis, will make this a valuable single-volume resource for all those seeking to expand their understanding of this still-evolving narrative of this crucial period in military, European, and Russian history.

Notes

[1]. David Stahel, ***Operation Barbarossa and Germany's Defeat in the East*** (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 451.

[2]. Timothy Snyder, ***Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*** (New York: Basic Books, 2010), x.

[3]. Snyder, ***Bloodlands***, xi.