

David M. Glantz. *Red Storm over the Balkans: The Failed Soviet Invasion of Romania, Spring 1944.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006. 448 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-1465-3.



Reviewed by Robert Niebuhr

Published on H-War (September, 2007)

In an exhaustive account of the Soviet military operations along the southern Ukrainian frontier with Romania, David Glantz tries to use these episodes to elucidate several key issues important for understanding World War II and the subsequent Cold War. First, Glantz seeks to resurrect these operations from the supposed dustbin of history and place them among the key moments in the war. Second, Glantz dives into the intense details of the springtime battles to show that the Soviet operations resulted from far broader, more menacing motives. While a successful Red Army along this front obviously would have compromised Germany's Balkan allies and cut off the flow of oil from the Ploiesti oil fields, the more important issues lies within what Glantz sees as the reasoning behind Soviet operations as early as the spring of 1944.

Glantz argues that Soviet and Russian historians incorrectly assert that Josef Stalin's influence over Red Army operations focused on defeating Germany with a direct drive towards Berlin. Instead, Glantz asserts that Stalin advocated for a so-called broad front strategy that, on the tactical

level, would probe the entire front for individual weaknesses the Soviets could then exploit. Berlin was a central target, so this argument goes. But, if the German line broke in the southern Ukraine, for example, the way to the Balkans would open up and effectively degrade the German war effort, simultaneously giving the Soviet Union possession of territory of high strategic value. But, the significance of this argument expands into territory that is more controversial.

The implications of the broad front strategy meant that Stalin harbored a desire to seize territory throughout Eastern Europe for the benefit of the Soviet Union, and as part of the larger Allied cause against Nazism. This fits into what Glantz argued in *Stumbling Colossus: The Red Army on the Eve of World War* (1988) regarding Soviet plans for the domination of Eastern Europe. Significantly, however, it also fits within the original school of thought pointing to Soviet culpability in the origins of the Cold War.

Despite any hypotheses into Stalin's motivations, the spring of 1944 brought with it a host of pressures on the Soviet Union and its overall con-

tribution to the war effort. The other allied powers had already taken North Africa and Sicily, and were on the Italian mainland. Chaos reigned in wartime Yugoslavia, especially since the Italian surrender in 1943, and the real second front in Northern France was soon to become a reality. Neither Stalin, nor anyone else involved in the war, knew how much longer the Germans would be able to hold out, and, as a result, sweeping victories were needed to secure a suitable settlement. But Stalin had several reasons for harboring more doubts about the future of the Soviet Union in the postwar world.

Late in the war, the Germans intensified their campaign against Bolshevism--partly recognizing that the Red Army was daily gaining serious momentum--and feverishly tried to unite Europe and enlist non-German soldiers in the struggle in the East. The repercussions of this for the Soviets included the threat of a renewed German drive against them, despite the crushing defeats the Nazis suffered at Stalingrad and Kursk in 1943. But Stalin also feared scenarios that would deprive him of any spoils, such as a separate peace between the Germans and the Anglo-Americans that would free up German manpower and resources for a renewed Soviet offensive, or a deal between the Germans and Anglo-Americans that would create a combined force directed against the Soviet Union. These points, while more a product of paranoia than reality, deserve mention when trying to understand Stalin's actions, especially as the end of Nazi Germany drew nearer. Yet, nothing like these arguments appear anywhere in the book.

My primary issue with the book centers on what exactly Glantz sees as significant or different in the points that he is making. If the Soviets acted ideologically or pragmatically (or both) an assault along the southern Ukrainian front with an eye on the Balkans simply made sense. Glantz merely states that Stalin and the Soviet High Command (Stavka) had deliberate intentions of gaining the

Balkans in the spring of 1944 and that the scale of these operations prove this motivation. That the Soviets lost in the spring but would win in late summer is of no consequence to Glantz's overall position--the Soviets still harbored bad intentions. Glantz shows only that these operations comprised a significant number of men and material and that the operations' seriousness is proof itself of an earlier than assumed, if not over-optimistic, strike to dominate Eastern Europe after the war. Any claims as to how early, or to what extent, Stalin and the Stavka pushed forward these intentions, however, remain unproven.

Another issue that bothered me might prove nothing but my ignorance of the latest scholarship. Nonetheless, I wonder about some of the factors that Glantz points to as significant in the German victory. Glantz attributed German victory over the Red Army's offensive and, indeed, the Wehrmacht's limited victories in the ensuing counterassault, to its "better-trained veterans" (p. 376). By 1944, how many Wehrmacht veterans remained? Omer Bartov has shown decisively that the German armies in the East were a mere skeleton of what they were in 1941 owing to tremendous rates of attrition, particularly among the non-commissioned and junior officers so vital to the Wehrmacht's priorsuccesses.[1] While the Wehrmacht was no pushover in 1944, still excelling in effective and timely frontline reorganization, it was clearly on its last legs and merely did a good job in delaying the Soviet juggernaut. But, Glantz seems to emphasize the material imbalance between the Germans and the Soviets, and the problems facing the Red Army such as the rainy season, a poor logistical base, forced, local conscription, and inadequate training. Glantz elaborates further: "Ultimately, dread of the horrifying consequences of defeat, combined with excellent small-unit efficiency and cohesion plus a major assist from the terrain and inclement weather, contributed to the Germans' successful defense" (p. 161). I harbor little doubt as to the enormous problems facing the Soviets, and, as an

extension, I would argue that if it were not for a core of competent senior officers on the German side, this probably would have been a soldier's battle with the expected results profiting the larger Soviet forces.

Glantz excels in his detailed descriptions of the battles; as a result, the sheer amount of research that went into this endeavor deserves credit. It appears that some of the Soviet materials Glantz uses were recently released, and his mining of these sources displays some expertise with respect to the war on Germany's Eastern Front. Oftentimes though, the text relies too heavily on biased after-action reports or unit histories. Speaking generally, the narrative really picks up speed about midway through the book partly because the argument becomes more apparent, but also partly owing to some more interesting portrayals of the battles themselves. (However, one particular block quote from a German war correspondent read unsurprisingly like Ernst Juenger's *Storm of Steel* [pp. 238-239]). I was also pleased to see that many chapters included detailed information about the key officers involved as well as pictures of these men, but was never sure as to how they fit into the general organizational scheme.

Overall, the implications of Glantz's argument address holes within Soviet and Russian historiography and not, at least by his own account, any significant Western viewpoints of the war (p. 22). Glantz's explanation rests with a Red Army seeking to hide their failures (like this one in the spring of 1944) and emphasize instead their success in defeating the "Hitlerites" in their "Great Patriotic War." I suppose that the narrow literature Glantz is speaking to also explains why I kept asking myself why none of this seemed profoundly groundbreaking to a student immersed in Western scholarship.

Note

[1]. See Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 1992). In particular, Bartov discusses how the high casualties resulted in the destruction of the primary groups and how that affected the Wehrmacht as a fighting force.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Robert Niebuhr. Review of Glantz, David M. *Red Storm over the Balkans: The Failed Soviet Invasion of Romania, Spring 1944*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. September, 2007.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13594>



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