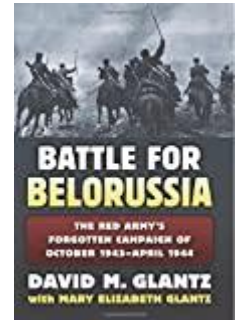


David M. Glantz, with Mary E. Glantz. *The Battle for Belorussia: The Red Army's Forgotten Campaign of October 1943-April 1944.* Modern War Studies Series. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016. Illustrations, maps, tables. 784 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-2329-7.



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Published on H-War (October, 2021)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

The Soviet campaign of October 1943-March 1944 in Belarus, which preceded Operation Bagration, has been all but unknown. But no more, thanks to acclaimed historian David J. Glantz and his historian daughter, Mary E. Glantz, who bring to bear exhaustive research in Soviet sources and a painstaking reconstruction of events. This volume offers an accounting of major and minor actions, starting with the Kalinin front's move to open the Smolensk "gate" to the expulsion of German forces from the east bank of the Dnieper River. As a result, it constitutes an important contribution to our understanding of war on the eastern front in World War II. This reckoning is full of insights, even if much work is required to extract them. The dense text is not for the faint of heart. And the top-down approach will disappoint, even as it is likely to remain the leading account of operations preceding Bagration.

Army General Makhmut Gareev first summoned scholars to study the forgotten Belarusian campaign in 1994, and the Glantzes couch this book—David Glantz's thirty-ninth on Russian

military affairs—as a response to this very challenge. In so doing, it offers a corrective to the Soviet historiography, which long dismissed the fall and winter offensives as a sideshow or elided them entirely. These offensives are revealed as a major effort, capitalizing on the success of the Kursk battle and the race to the Dnieper and aspiring to the liberation of Belarus and finishing off Army Group Center. The authors deftly deal with Soviet objectives and plans, and the early chapters are some of the most valuable. The Soviet High Command, or *Stavka*, was giddy with success, assigning targets such as Minsk and directing attacks on multiple axes by the Baltic, western, and 1st Belorussian fronts. Plans crystallized even as forces marched to the Dnieper while many units were reduced to as low as 50 percent strength and lacked replacements for lost men and equipment. Available tank armies were deployed in support of other efforts, leaving the Belarusian and western fronts to make do with lesser formations, including cavalry divisions. Partisan operations were undertaken in support of combined arms thrusts,

although poor weather scotched planned airborne operations.

From the outset, the campaign proved bruising and unproductive. Offensives with scant superiority broke through the thin German front line only to lose ground to ferocious counterattacks. The western front's five November offensives around Orsha gained but 6-12 kilometers for 94,200 casualties, including 25,500 killed, along with the loss of 177 precious tanks. Multiple campaigns caused competition between fronts, the Glantz reveal. In one episode, Army General Konstantin Rokossovsky brought forward an offensive, to make use of forces he was soon to lose to another commander. The campaign, nonetheless, continued into winter, with the authors arguing that a bid to liberate Belarus thus became one to better position the Red Army for another effort in summer 1944. These later phases of the campaign were conducted under challenging climatic conditions. They proved no less bruising and yielded no greater gains. The laggard was the western front, whose commander, Army General Vasily Sokolovsky, was relieved in April to find the guilty but elide the sources of failure. The lone bright spot, to which the work devotes considerable attention, is the operations of the 1st Belorussian front under Rokossovsky, whose winter offensives recorded a steady, 220-kilometer advance.

The Glantz' account reveals not only the heretofore hidden offensives but also some important features of Stavka's direction and the Soviet military art as the war moved toward its decisive phase. Red commanders were keen to wring as much advantage as possible out of the Kursk victory, thus foregoing any pause to reconstitute and refit forces. The High Command and Soviet generals were ruthless in flinging worn-down units at the foe, in order to wrest further gains, a strategy that only produced diminishing returns. Although Soviet accounts stress the reliance on a single axis, the authors show that strategic offensives were launched on multiple paths. The study

contains insights into the employment of divisions on horseback. Plans rested on the assumption that Army Group Center had suffered at least as badly, probably more than the Soviets. In this they underestimated German capabilities. This the authors attribute to the rapid pace of the summer-fall campaign, which made estimates of enemy power dicey. Probably the greatest contribution of the study as well as the basis of its strength is the discovery and use of Soviet sources, plans and war diaries from the Central Archives of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation. The most important of these are reproduced in English translation in the volume's substantial appendices. No non-Russian specialist has been so dogged in search of materials nor had such facility in analyzing these.

This substantial contribution is not without its faults. It may well be that faulty estimates came from the fluid conditions, but this is not demonstrated. The habit of continuing with anemic offensives even after German capabilities are revealed will perplex the reader, who will no doubt ask "why?" There are substantial lacunae. Air power passes almost entirely without comment, apart from a brief mention of German air operations in mid-October 1943. The obvious message is that air power had no impact on operations apart from these few days, although I doubt the authors intended this. Logistics likewise come in for little or no attention. The difficult conditions and their effect are hinted only at with isolated and terse references to the *rasputitsa*, the rains of autumn, and the deep snows of winter. This is a top-down, operational history, a narrative of major movements, the dates and places of engagements, and outcomes. The study seldom delves below division level for insights, while analysis sticks to the measures of ground gained and casualties incurred. The authors have some sympathy for the legions involved and their ordeal in fighting these costly engagements. The study "celebrates the suffering and silent sacrifices of the tens of thousands of Red Army and German soldiers who fought in,

perhaps died in or survived these battles,” but has aught to say about the experience of those men and women (p. xxiii). The prose is brisk and clear, yet the text is ponderous. The welter of armies, corps, divisions, and brigades is dizzying and difficult to keep track of. The volume includes copious maps reproduced from original documents, although some are illegible, while others require the use of a magnifying glass. Although it is a wonder that the authors were able to cover so much in a single volume, coming in at 758 pages, it is likely to discourage the general reader or buff.

In *Battle for Belorussia* the Glantz team has provided a detailed narrative of the operations preceding Bagration. This account has brought to light an episode that has heretofore been relegated to obscurity. It will likely remain the chief record of this campaign for many years to come. Yet the daunting, dense text will scare away the general reader, while the narrow analysis will disappoint most professionals. Researchers investigating the European war will value the volume, but principally as a reference work, mined for data on troop movements, the dates of engagements, and casualty counts as well as for planning directives and bibliography.

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Citation: Matthew Schwonek. Review of Glantz, David M.; with Mary E. Glantz. *The Battle for Belorussia: The Red Army's Forgotten Campaign of October 1943-April 1944*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. October, 2021.

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