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# Operation Barbarossa And Germany's Defeat In The East (Cambridge Military Histories)



## Synopsis

Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union, began the largest and most costly campaign in military history. Its failure was a key turning point of the Second World War. The operation was planned as a Blitzkrieg to win Germany its Lebensraum in the East, and the summer of 1941 is well-known for the German army's unprecedented victories and advances. Yet the German Blitzkrieg depended almost entirely upon the motorised Panzer groups, particularly those of Army Group Centre. Using previously unpublished archival records, David Stahel presents a new history of Germany's summer campaign from the perspective of the two largest and most powerful Panzer groups on the Eastern front. Stahel's research provides a fundamental reassessment of Germany's war against the Soviet Union, highlighting the prodigious internal problems of the vital Panzer forces and revealing that their demise in the earliest phase of the war undermined the whole German invasion.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"... thought-provoking and valuable. It dispels any illusions that the first months of Operation Barbarossa were a pushover for the Wehrmacht; Stahel documents in detail, from German war diaries and letters, the heavy fighting and the high casualties." Evan Mawdsley, *The English Historical Review*"... a thoroughly researched, comprehensive, and convincing analysis of Barbarossa ... Any still-lingering notions of a German 'genius for war', as opposed to skill in some aspects of warmaking, is unlikely to survive this intellectually disciplined, archivally documented

analysis of one of history's most misbegotten, mistakenly executed campaigns." Dennis Showalter, *Journal of Military History*"Stahel paints a convincing portrait of a Germany army whose shape edge was already well into the process of being blunted during the first weeks of the fighting ... This is a serious book and a welcome contribution to the military debate over Operation Barbarossa." Robert M. Citino, *Central European History*"The author's research is impressive ... Stahel's clearly written and accessible account convincingly questions the competency of the German planning for Barbarossa ... all will profit from reading this fine work." Howard D. Grier, *The Journal of Modern History*"Operation Barbarossa and Germany's Defeat in the East will undoubtedly stand as a standard work on the first phase of Operation Barbarossa for a long time to come ... The staggering amount of detail offered ensures this is an invaluable addition to Eastern Front literature and Operation Barbarossa in particular." Yan Mann, *Global War Studies*"... interesting and well researched." Michael Jabara Carley, *Canadian Journal of History*"... a thrilling book that no military historian can afford to ignore ..." *German History*

A fundamental reassessment of Germany's 1941 campaign against the Soviet Union - a key turning point of the Second World War. This book highlights the enormous internal problems of the vital Panzer forces and reveals that their demise in the earliest phase of the war undermined the whole German invasion.

Great read, especially for the "Eastern Front" reader. Detailed account of the first 6 months of the war on the eastern front. The author theorizes that the German Army for all its image of professionalism & invincibility was essentially flawed, and grossly underestimated the power of the Soviet Union (as did just about everybody else). For example: Germany had neglected its railway system over the years thus its supply system was woefully inadequate to supply its army in a vast country like the Soviet Union. German tank tracks were too narrow to handle the Russian "rasputia" or mud. The German automobile industry could not build enough trucks to supply its army in Russia. Nor for that matter did they even have a heavy truck in order to handle supply needs. In short, the German Army (and of course Hitler) bit off more than they could chew. This book takes to task a lot of accepted history of the war on the eastern front.

David Stahel, a contrarian and advocate of Clausewitz theory has written a book that will probably be contested in the historian community. This book written partially using the findings of an exhaustive study by the Bundesarchiv-Militararchiv in Freiburg Germany claims the German

momentum didn't first lose steam at Kursk or Stalingrad or even in front of Moscow in Dec 1941. The main theme of his book is not to present the tactical events of Barbarossa per se but to suggest that the Germans lost all chance of defeating Russia by mid August 1941, after the strenuous battle at Smolensk. The Smolensk campaign also includes coverage of the nearby cities of Yartsevo, Dorogobuzh, Yelnya and Roslavl. The author does skimp on coverage and ramifications of Guderian's run to Kiev. Mr Stahel is very deliberate and meticulous; he doesn't begin the battle action until page 153. In his introduction, he describes the major research project the Germans performed in reassessing the war and describes his manner of research. He moves on to discuss a number of current theories by authors, showing good points and bad points of each. He makes special note of Stolfi's "Hitler's Panzers East" as being flawed. I thought Stolfi's book an interesting read but he failed to convince me of his position. Mr Stahel on the other hand presents a convincing case of his position and backs up his position with hundreds of primary source statements. The planning stage is next and the author spends a lot of time here describing the faulty thinking that went into the planning. Marcks, Lossberg and Paulus play major roles in the plans but all three were influenced by the distorted thinking of Halder. (I thought Halder was a puppet of Hitler but in the beginning he had influence on the dictator and plans were constructed to Halder's expectations on how he wanted the war prosecuted and not on reality. All variations of the plans were for a short war and many things were ignored.) The author doesn't discuss the entire Operation Barbarossa but restrains himself just to Army Group Center under von Bock. He also limits himself to just three battle campaigns: the Minsk pocket, the battle for the Dvina-Dnepr River line and the Smolensk pocket. His attention is primarily on the Panzer Corps that were the spearhead of the invasion and the biggest reason for German success but the author will involve the infantry on a secondary level when their support was needed but were many miles to the rear. It would not be apparent to the combatants or the world but by mid August, the Germans would no longer have a fighting apparatus capable enough to compete with the Russians in a long war of attrition. The main reason for its early success was its panzer spearhead and attack technique but by August panzer attrition was so severe combined by low tank production that would prevent the German army from ever having sufficient strength to destroy the Russians. Also Germany didn't have the huge pool of reserves or resources that Russia possessed. The Minsk operation occurred within two weeks of the start of the war but it clearly shows several major shortcomings of the Germany Army. The panzers arrived first and created a pocket around the Russian forces but without infantry the panzers were at risk and not strong enough to hold the Russians. Not having nearly enough transportation, the infantry were days behind the front line. By the time Smolensk was under control, the German Army

was a shell of itself. A summary of each of these campaigns would involve pages so a summary of the errors of commission or judgment will be listed (The author clearly shows numerous examples of these faults being committed.):

- Insufficient panzer divisions
- Insufficient motorized divisions to carry infantry with the panzer spearheads.
- Insufficient production capacity. Throughout the war Germany would lag far behind the Russians in production.
- Insufficient human reserves.
- Insufficient natural resources, especially oil.
- Lower technology than the enemy. Russia's new tanks, the KV1s and T34s were much better and more powerful than the German Mks.
- The attitude by panzer commanders, like Guderian, that were obsessive on forward movement without clearing Russian resistance continued to produce disastrous results to rear area units, supply columns.
- Extremely poor coordination between panzer and infantry divisions.
- Hitler's obsessive and relentless drive to continually over extend his forces, putting them in jeopardy to counterattack.
- No long term strategy. Hitler would shift directions with the wind.
- Poor coordination with the commanding generals. Each general had his own style and agenda that often worked against the others. Kluge was cautious while Guderian was reckless. They were always fighting.
- Complete underestimation of the Russian soldier.
- Savage treatment of civilians produced a lethal partisan reaction that killed many German soldiers plus destroyed communications with the front.

The narrative is completely German-centric. The pros and cons of the Russian army capabilities in 1941 is not specifically included in the author's calculations when this turning point occurred but the author has to be influenced by knowing how the war ended to make these conclusions. The level of resistance the Russian Army could exert as well as the quality of tanks surprised the Germans and is mentioned by the author. Through inference the author uses this condition in his calculations but the primary basis for his conclusions is based on Germany's insufficient ability to recognize and correct the deficiencies mentioned above. By mid to late August it would be too late for the Germans to make corrections in their war doctrine, improve the capacities of their panzer and mobile units and increase production to a point that could compete with the Russians on a long term basis. There are few photos and 16 maps. The maps looked very familiar; upon checking it turns out the maps were made by David Glantz. The maps are good, showing detailed dispositions of the troops on almost a daily basis. The daily change in closing the Smolensk Pocket is intense, glaring. The fighting in the Yelnya Salient is also noteworthy. The book also has many footnotes and a impressive Bibliography if further research is wanted. In addition to the author's logical presentation of facts, he inserts hundreds of communiques, and diary entries to help support his position and to give the reader a better understanding of what the German command was experiencing and the level of apprehension that had been generated as the battle moved into August. While Hitler and Halder continue to think of

ways of expanding the war, the field commanders like Strauss, Schweppenburg, Hoth, Guderian and others feared their forces wouldn't be able to hold the Soviets back. They were also clamoring for more fuel, ammo, engines and reinforcements but little would arrive. The Germans would continue to have victories like Kiev, Uman, Vyazma, Bryansk and Rzhev but with each campaign the life blood of the German Army was being drained and it didn't have the capacity to replenish itself but because it did not experience a terrible defeat it was not apparent that Germany no longer had the capacity to defeat the Russian Army. This would be proven at Moscow, Stalingrad, Kursk, Vitebsk (1944). In the area of tactical problems of the Wehrmacht when facing the Soviets, Mr Stahel concentrates much of his presentation on the AGC sector. By expanding his attention to the rest of the line, additional evidence could have been provided that would have bolstered his position but I believe the author presents sufficient evidence to prove his thesis but even if you're not convinced, he clearly shows the weaknesses of the German Army and presents critical reasons for their eventual failure and for this reason alone the book is worth reading. His discussions of the key German commanders and the friction generated from within were also interesting and it helps you understand the early war. The profiles of Hitler, Halder, Bock, Kluge and Guderian were of special interest. This book has much merit and I hope the author will treat us with coverage of another campaign. This book is highly recommended to all serious students of the war.

Excellent detailed analysis on the early days of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, and why by beginning of August the signs were already clear that the objective of the Operation Barbarossa plan had failed. Hitler, and the Generals inability to come to grips with this reality as the operations developed, via politics, confusion, and ego's, contributed a great deal to its failure. For example, the supply system dependence on quick initial victories crippled the panzers from being adequately refitted (along with their use to "fill the line" in the front) which left little time for refits even when there were supplies. Good book, Highly detailed and documented for someone whose interest in this subject goes beyond the who, what, and when towards asking the various "why's" of this pivotal moment in human history.

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