

Hitler's Panzers East: World War II Reinterpreted, By Russel Stolfi **Review by Walter S. Zapotoczny**

The conventional wisdom on World War II in Europe sees little prospect of the Germans Winning in 1939-1940 and virtually none after the attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941. In his book, *Hitler's Panzers East: World War II Reinterpreted*, Russel Stolfi advances the thesis that in June 1941 the Germans had the physical capabilities at the right time and place to win the Second World War. Stolfi states the German invasion of the Soviet Union, operation name *Barbarossa*, whether successful or unsuccessful had the tactical, operational, and strategic qualities that make it the hinge of fate in World War II. He claims the Germans had the fundamental physical strength to defeat the Red Army and seize the Moscow-Gorki area, and yet, they neither took Moscow nor won the campaign. At the time, the Soviets had no control over their own destiny. They fought hard but ineffectually against German armies that advanced relentlessly through their defense. Under such circumstances, Stolfi believes Germany must have failed for some reason, some outlandish misjudgment, or aberration demanding a fundamental reevaluation of World War II.

Chapter One begins with an examination of Hitler's decision-making process. The strategic potential of Britain in Europe in 1940 is examined. Hitler's use of Britain after the French Campaign (1940) to justify an attack against the Soviet Union is described. The author discusses why Hitler faced the historical necessity to attack in the east in 1941.

In chapter two, the German calculation of the rigors of an attack against the Soviet Union is discussed. The question of whether the German appraisal of the Soviet Union was accurate or underestimated is presented and examined. Hitler's calculation of the Russian strength and his direction of the German timetables of advance are correlated with his overall strategic goals. Stolfi discusses how Hitler fundamentally underestimated the offensive capabilities of the German army.

In the third chapter, Stolfi compares the strategic picture in *Barbarossa* with that in France and the Balkans. He examines Hitler's indecisive objectives in the west, 1939-1940, which set the pattern for Russia. An analogy between France (1940) and Russia (1941) is presented as well as Hitler being caught by surprise in the Balkans in 1941. The author contrasts the Balkans with the opening of the Russian Campaign and portrays German successes and strategic timing.

Chapter four covers an analysis of *Barbarossa* in the north and the great opportunity the Germans had in the Baltic in June 1941. Stolfi talks about how Hitler paces *Barbarossa* to the seizure of Leningrad and outlines the German operational possibilities on the Baltic front. The seizure of the Dvina River bridges at Dvinsk is presented as a pivotal point of the campaign. Stolfi offers an analogy between the Meuse and Sedan in the French Campaign and the Dvina in the Russian Campaign. The greatest unforeseen opportunities presented to the Germans in *Barbarossa* are discussed. The author claims the historic moment of *Barbarossa* came when General Hoepner and General Manstein failed to act in the Baltic by making the war winning drive by Panzer Group Hoepner through Dvinsk to Leningrad.

Chapter five deals with *Barbarossa* south, the fight in the Ukraine, June 1941. The extraordinary strength of the Red Army in the Ukraine, 1941 and the Soviet offensive strategic actions and options, 1939-1941 are reviewed. The mission of Army Group South in *Barbarossa* and the disintegration of the Soviet field armies west of the Dneiper, 1941 are examined.

Chapter six looks at Army Group Center's destruction of the Soviet field armies on the road to Moscow in June and July 1941. Dragging a reluctant Hitler toward victory is a main point of this chapter. Army Group Center defeats both Hitler's reluctance and the Russians at Bialystok and advances toward Moscow, June, July 1941. With the Soviets in trouble, Stalin, and the Communist party call for a great patriotic war. Hitler, believing the war won in the east, lapses into a fortress mentality. Army Group Center advances toward Moscow and victory over the Soviet Union is in sight. Stolfi examines the most important operational question for the Germans in the attack on the Soviet Union. The Soviets commit the Red Army to the defense of Moscow: 22 June – 27 July 1941. Stolfi highlights the stubborn courage of the Russian soldier despite the Germans taking three million prisoners.

In chapter seven, the author compares the fight in France with that in White Russia in June and July 1941. Conditions leading to victory in blitzkriegs and the potential for German defeat in France, 1940 are examined. The Germans attempt to throw away victory in the French Campaign, through the pre-Dunkirk orders to halt on 15 and 17 May 1941. Stolfi makes a comparison of these actions with the decisions by Hitler in Russia. The similarities between the opening battles of the French and Russian campaigns are thoroughly discussed.

Chapter eight deals with the reevaluating the German advance through White Russia in June and July 1941. The Germans seizure the land bridge to Moscow is explained. The pace of the Germans operations in White Russia and the dual role of the German mobile divisions in the battles of encirclement are highlighted in this chapter. The complexity and style of fighting in the Russian Campaign along with the breakdown of Soviet command, control, and communications are main topics.

The author discusses the German capability to advance on Moscow in August 1941 in chapter nine. The author claims that gripped by a fixation on Leningrad, Hitler vacillates over strategic objectives creating the German halt in the advance on Moscow. Hitler's decision created the turning point in World War II. The Germans destroy eight of nine Soviet field armies massed for the defense of Moscow, yet are halted before victory. The correlation between the timing of a German summer advance on Moscow and the potential defeat of the Soviet Union is made. German casualties and tank losses are discussed, contrasting numbers and qualities of the opposing tank forces.

A main question in this chapter is whether the Germans have the combat strength to seize Moscow in the summer of 1941. The importance of the German blitzkrieg is also explored in this chapter. German tank losses in the great opening battles of the Russian Campaign are compared with German tanks available for the advance on Moscow in August 1941. The reality, myth, and irony of the Soviet T-34 tank are also discussed in chapter ten.

German logistics is the theme of chapter eleven with the question of whether the Germans could have supported an advance into the Moscow-Gorki space in the summer of 1941. A logistical system for victory in the summer of 1941 including winter clothing and supplies for the Germans in 1941 is reviewed. The German logistics in Barbarossa is thoroughly examined to include: rail lines, railheads, and truck columns, the German concentration of forces against the Soviet border, and the quantity on material and mode of operations required to reach Moscow-Gorki space.

Stolfi constructs an alternate historical past in chapter twelve with the taking Moscow and defeating the Soviet Union, August-October 1941. He explores how the Germans could reach Moscow in August 1941 with the advance of Army Group Center into Moscow and beyond. Under this alternative, an early autumn drive to Gorki, September 1941, and the destabilization of the Soviet strategic position west of the Volga River is presented.

In chapter thirteen, Stolfi presents a German Fuhrer driven by a siege mentality. He examines Hitler and the most important political military decision of the 20th century in the context of the Russian Campaign. Hitler's decision-making pattern is summarized. Soviet intentions in the summer of 1941 are examined as well as Hitler's aggressiveness during German initiatives in foreign policy and war, 1935-1941. The author proposes there were two Hitlers: one Hitler who demonstrated aggressiveness in his foreign policy and another who is tentative and indecisive in operational matters.

Chapter fourteen concludes the book with a discussion of popular identifications of turning points on World War II in Europe. The battles of El Alamein, Stalingrad, and Kursk are examined and rejected as a turning point in World War II in Europe. Hitler's decisions in the Russian campaign are offered as the primary reasons Germany did not defeat the Soviet Union and win World War II. Hitler's decision, Stolfi contends, was based on the Fuhrer's "siege mentality." Hitler had an ultraconservative propensity to conceptualize military campaigns as efforts to extend Germany's defensive position, rather than to effect swift and total blitzkrieg victories. If not for Hitler's interference, the German army would have driven on to victory in Russia in 1941, and by extension, victory in Europe.

If Germany had defeated the Soviet Union in 1941 and conquered all of Europe, the political and socio-economic dynamic might have been different in Europe. The political and social consequences of

this outcome would have been tremendous. Liberal democracy would undoubtedly have been suffocated. Marxian socialism would probably have been made extinct. This book highlights the burden of command and the impact of various solutions in the prosecution of war. Hitler's Panzers East: World War II Reinterpreted offers the student of Readings in Military Leadership a unique perspective on the question of whether the man shapes the times or whether the times shape the man.

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