

H-Net Reviews

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David M. Glantz. *Zhukov's Greatest Defeat: The Red Army's Epic Disaster in Operation Mars 1942.* Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999. x + 421 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0944-4.



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Over the last decade, David Glantz has made a reputation for himself as a reinterpreter of the Soviet-German portion of the Second World War. Basing his writings on materials from the newly opened Soviet archives, he has authored or co-authored several books on the Russo-German War. In addition, he has served as editor of the *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*. *Zhukov's Greatest Defeat* is another in his continuing series of works of reinterpretation.

It is Glantz's contention in this book that the main Soviet attack in the Winter 1942-1943 campaign was not meant to be the Stalingrad Offensive (Operation Uranus), but rather the Rzhev salient attack, along the western direction toward Smolensk, Warsaw, and Berlin (Operation Mars). Indeed, he spends a great part of the last chapter of the book detailing the comparisons to be drawn between the two offensives. He notes that G. K. Zhukov, the Deputy Supreme Commander, coordinated the fronts in Operation Mars, while his junior, A. M. Vasilevsky, carried out that task in Operation Uranus. He further notes that the Soviets deployed similar numbers of forces and equipment in each operation, and that the commanders were of similar prominence both before and after the battles.

Finally, the author argues that the Soviets dropped Operation Mars down the "memory hole" when it failed

abysmally to achieve any success, treating it, if at all, as a skillful diversionary attack. He contends that this falsified account has become the received history of the Winter Campaign of 1942-1943.

Then, Glantz argues that he has rescued the real facts of the situation from oblivion, while also showing Zhukov's great cruelty and his equally great skill at preserving his own reputation. Finally, he avers that he has thus demonstrated how much is still to be learned from mining the Soviet archives.

If correct, Glantz's contentions and conclusions are noteworthy and might have made a fine journal article. However, one has to question whether they are of sufficient importance to merit the publication of a lengthy book. First, the author does not prove his point. The military historian looking at the Russo-German front in the summer and fall of 1942 sees immediately where the Soviets' main thrust had to fall. The great German salient to Stalingrad and beyond was of vital importance. The two dictators, Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, had staked their regimes on the Battle for the City of Stalin. Soviet planners had to see that this salient was the German's Achilles heel. The flanks were held by Romanian, Hungarian, and Italian Divisions, not German. The Nazi forces had failed to take Stalingrad in a vicious, bloody, lengthy struggle. The Soviet opportunity to achieve great

things was obvious.

To the north, around Rzhev, were German forces, the weakest of which were Luftwaffe Field Divisions. There was no clear strategic point to pinching off the Rzhev salient. One can see nothing in this work to cause a change in the current interpretation of the Winter 1942 campaign.

What the reader does see are practices of writing generally not accepted by professional historians. Glantz makes the following statement in his Introduction: "I have reconstructed the course, scope, and intent of Operation Mars based on sound archival sources, and I have inferred [italics in original] larger aspects of the Soviet Fall 1942 strategic plan . . . The decisions, actions, personalities, motivations, and undocumented [emphasis added] conversations and thoughts of the commanders, however, are based on archival materials to a markedly lesser extent. They reflect my subjective understanding of the operations and men, in some instances from their own accounts and more often, based on their subsequent actions or ultimate fate. This historical license on my part, however, in no way detracts from the factual accuracy of what did occur in Operation Mars and why" (p.3). In short, the author feels free to read minds, as he does on pages 9-10, where he tells the reader Stalin's thoughts with absolutely no evidentiary support, and on pages 30-31, where he likewise tells one what Zhukov thought, again without any sources. He repeats this practice in many more instances elsewhere in the book, on both the Soviet and German sides of the front. Can this mind reading be called history?

Further, given the book's grand strategic foci, how is it that the reader finds himself enmeshed in the movements of regiments and even battalions? After two and half decades as a military historian with staff college experience, this reader found these lengthy sections very

rough going. One pities the History Book Club members who took this book as a main selection of the club.

In addition, Glantz never explains how different the Soviet military organization was from what one expects in the West, which makes reading all the more unclear. Nor does he forbear to list commander after commander of various units, to what purpose one can only speculate. The book rapidly spirals into operational and tactical history of the worst sort. This descent is not helped by the maps, which are not clear and are far too difficult to read.

Finally, to argue that one is spotlighting and documenting the sufferings of the common soldiers (p. 324) is a fine goal, but then not do it is to fail at one's own task. There have been recently published several excellent works on the Russo-German War, such as Antony Beevor's book on Stalingrad, which do treat the sufferings of the combat soldier with great feeling. This work does not.

Furthermore, one must be concerned when a scholar using German sources notes that the German Army High Command was the Oberkommando des Heere, or OKH (p.5), when the proper German is Oberkommando der Heeres. One feels quite insecure about German translation thereafter.

In the last analysis, this is not a very useful book. Glantz raises issues that are important, but he never really proves his points, nor does he justify his long descent into minutiae. Ultimately, one must also say that this work is not good history. It is slipshod, tendentious, and dismissive of the canons of proper historical writing.

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