

Reviews

Operation Don's Main Attack: The Soviet Southern Front's Advance on Rostov, January-February 1943 by David M. Glantz; University Press of Kansas, 2018; 930 pages with maps, endnotes, archival combat losses and bibliography; \$34.38.

David Glantz's latest work is an operational history of Operation Don, an overly ambitious Soviet winter offensive in the first two months of 1943 that sought to capitalize on the gains made after the encirclement of the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad. Sensing that the end of the war was near, the Soviets committed elements of three fronts to seize Rostov-on-Don to cut off Germany's Army Group A in the Caucasus. Although the Germans did lose Rostov eventually, they managed to extricate the vast majority of their forces from the region. The survival of Army Group A meant not only that the war would continue, but also that the Germans felt they could regain the strategic initiative once the weather improved. Glantz evaluates both German and Soviet military archives together to discern what happened at the tactical and operational level during this campaign. In doing so, he brings to life a crucial period on the Eastern Front often overshadowed by the more famous battles of Stalingrad and Kursk.

The text of the book itself amounts to 727 pages representing exhaustive research on operational maneuvers and tactical engagements. At times, Glantz does away completely with paragraphs and instead resorts to bullet points to describe the actions of individual divisions and regiments. Generally, each chapter has a strong introduction and conclusion that identify how Operation Don unfolded in the larger context of the Eastern Front, but in between those sections there is a lot of detail that can be difficult to digest. Combined with an over-reliance on muddled archival maps, this book does not lend itself to very easy reading.

Despite its limitations, this book proves to be of tremendous value to historians of World War II. Glantz has dedicated his life to providing a Soviet perspective of the war. Operation Don, a large-scale winter offensive conducted by weary soldiers fighting at the end of a tenuous supply chain, demonstrated just how desperate the fighting on the Eastern Front was even after Stalingrad. In fact, the continued struggle of Sixth Army inside that beleaguered city hindered Soviet offensive operations elsewhere. Despite a myriad of setbacks – Operation Torch, El Alamein, Stalingrad – the Germans believed they had some opportunities to regain the initiative in Russia in 1943. A decisive victory in the East might undo the mistakes of the previous 18 months since Operation Barbarossa began. The failure of Operation Don helped nurture this lingering German hope; indeed, the survival of Army Group A enabled Generalfeldmarschall Erich von Manstein's counteroffensive at Kharkov and, months later, the final German offensive in the east at Kursk.

Glantz's work also has plenty of useful historical and operational lessons for the American armor officer. First and foremost, he focuses on Soviet tank tactics to dispel some of the Germanophilia so common in our branch. The outnumbered Germans have often been praised for their operational flexibility and their ability to seamlessly form *kampfgruppen* out of nearby units when needed. Glantz points out that the Soviets did very much the same thing and often used *ad hoc* armor formations to find gaps in the German lines. Deep Soviet penetrations with mechanized units showed how much their doctrine had evolved over the course of the war. But despite these impressive advances, Soviet commanders suffered as much from logistical over-reach as from German defensive skill. Because the destruction of Sixth Army remained the highest priority for the Stavka at the start of 1943, the Soviet Southern Front found itself struggling to maintain the offensive toward Rostov. In contrast, the Germans continued to withdraw onto their maintenance points and supply warehouses, allowing them to rapidly repair some damaged tanks and to maintain a mechanized operational reserve. As Glantz repeatedly points out, the appearance of just a few tanks made all the difference in local engagements between two sides heavily worn down after a full year of fighting.

This book is not for the casual fan of military history. Glantz provides an archive-heavy text that shows how Operation Don fits into the narrative between Stalingrad and Kursk. As such, this work is perhaps most useful for serious scholars of the Eastern Front of World War II and avid wargamers. While it may be too dense for enjoyable

reading, the book has excellent descriptions of what warfare looked like in the largest mechanized conflict in history.

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Blitzkrieg: From the Ground Up by Niklas Zetterling; Casemate Publishers; 2017; 288 pages; \$14.70 hardcover, \$9.99 Kindle edition.

Typical impressions of German blitzkrieg operations during the early days of World War II focus on the overwhelming combined-arms onslaught of tanks, dive bombers and infantry racing across Poland, Scandinavia, the Low Countries and France. Encouraged by propaganda accounts in places like *Signal* magazine, the seemingly revolutionary application of tanks and aviation was allegedly responsible for the rapid and shocking defeats of the Allied forces, a belief which persists to this day. Niklas Zetterling, a well-known military historian and former researcher at the Swedish Defence University, challenges these beliefs in ***Blitzkrieg: From the Ground Up***. He argues that German victories from 1939 to 1941 were not the result of revolutionary technologies or doctrines but rather based on German small units and military traditions focusing on initiative and decentralized decision-making.

Using unit and personal diaries located in the German military archive in Freiburg, the book is divided into seven chapters, beginning with a brief review of German tactical and operational doctrine and training during the World War I and interwar period. Zetterling focuses his narrative on the experiences at the tactical level, rarely higher than a company or a battalion task force. His protagonists are the “enlisted men ... and junior officers commanding platoons, companies and battalions,” including attached surgeons, chaplains and maintenance personnel. The result is a book that is focused in scope and easy to read.

Zetterling’s first chapter outlines German developments and concepts of war up to the invasion of Poland, allowing for a brief focus on the macro level of German rearmament. He outlines the legacy of World War I, Hitler’s seizure of power and the debates between COL-GEN Ludwig Beck and GEN Heinz Guderian over the nature of Germany’s armored forces. He also lays out, in clear terms, the balance of forces, industrial capacity and the divisions within the Germany military branches themselves.

The second chapter focuses on the tactical-level engagements once the German armies cross the border into Poland in 1939. After recounting several battles between German armor and Polish defenders, Zetterling concludes “German [p]anzer divisions can hardly be regarded as fighting in a way fundamentally different to the infantry divisions. ... Offensive action, initiative, independence, rapid decision-making and combined arms were emphasized in both types of division[s].”

His third chapter, on the German invasion of Norway in 1940, is the least armor-centric in the book. While tanks did play minor roles, the nature of blitzkrieg Zetterling focuses on here relies largely on mountain and airborne troops, with an emphasis on surprise. Readers interested in joint operations will find this chapter particularly valuable.

The invasion of France and the Low Countries starts with an aside that warrants further investigation. Germany’s initial invasion plans were stalled by several months due to a lost courier aircraft on which a staff officer was carrying the invasion plans. Germany thus delayed her invasion, spending the intervening time dedicated to “an ambitious training program ... to reveal and attend to the shortcomings through extensive training and exercises.” Unfortunately, this is the only discussion of those exercises, depriving the reader of a deeper understanding of the way the German army conducted self-assessment prior to turning west.

The largest section of the book, almost a quarter of it, focuses on German combat in the Soviet Union from June to December 1941. Unsurprisingly, this section provides the most holistic view of German tactics and operational art as it contains both German successes and their ultimate defeat at the gates of Moscow. At the outset, the German army was at “their pinnacle in terms of training, experience and confidence. The long string of victories had allowed the Germans to finely hone their methods of warfare.” Nevertheless, their defeat became more and more likely the further they pushed into the Soviet Union and their capacity to move and transport supplies collapsed.

Without the ability to sustain its forces, the German army became stuck and their previous high-tempo operations came to a halt, forcing them to wait out the Soviet winter without adequate supplies.

Blitzkrieg: From the Ground Up provides a new perspective on the German campaigns, tying operational art to the experiences of the common soldier and junior officer. It is, however, not without room for improvement. Specifically, tactical situations are linked directly to strategic and operational results without enough explanation or supporting data. The examples used, while illuminating, are presented as representative of larger trends or concepts. This is not to say they might not be perfect examples, but without a deeper explanation or references to similar events, they are limited in impact. Zetterling's survey of some of the early German campaigns is revealing, and the book should find a ready audience in casual readers and small-unit leaders. For more analysis on the German way of war, though, readers should look to his other books written with Anders Frankson: **The Korsun Pocket: The Encirclement and Breakout of a German Army in the East, 1944** (Casemate Publishers, 2008) and **The Drive on Moscow, 1941: Operation Taifun and Germany's First Great Crisis of World War II** (Casemate Publishers, 2012).

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South Africans Versus Rommel: the Untold Story of the Desert War in World War II by David Brock Katz; Stackpole Books; 2018; 352 pages with photos, tables, maps and index; hardcover \$10, Kindle \$22.57.

Many of us think of South Africa as the nation that put the word *apartheid* in our vocabulary, but what we may not know is that South Africa's military in World War II was designed for and excelled at mobile, maneuver warfare. Nor do many of us know the story of South Africa's contributions in World War II. David Brock Katz's book, as can be seen from the subtitle, addresses that.

Maneuver-warfare leaders will quickly realize that Katz's book is a study in what not to do, with lessons applicable even 77 years after the battles occurred. For instance, Katz mentions Operation Crusader (November 1941) as a "unique testing ground for mobile-warfare doctrine, providing insights that persist to the present day."

Katz pins the rose directly on the British for their "clumsy" operations and tactics, which he said "cost the South Africans dearly in lives sacrificed." (Of course, there was more going on in the desert war than "clumsy" British war-conducting, such as the Axis' interception of secret dispatches from a U.S. military attaché in Cairo giving British strength, positions, losses, reinforcements, supply, situation, plans, morale and other sensitive information.)

As scene-setting, South Africa was part of the British Empire at the time of World War II, but there was a great deal of leftover animosity from the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1901). Therefore the book cannot ignore – and it does not – the peculiar human relationships, especially among commanders.

Katz is a South African army (called the Union Defence Force) officer, but he doesn't spare his countrymen either when it comes to an assessment of South African troops' performance in the Western Desert of North Africa, where South Africa served as part of the British Eighth Army. Katz offers a soldier's eye in assessing the South African mindset.

As Katz summarizes, "Unfortunately the British had negligible use in North Africa for the South African penchant for mobility and often misused the Union Defence Force in a static role. ... The British failure to institute combined-arms warfare left the sometime hapless South Africans to their own devices. The natural role for the highly mobile South Africans would have been integration with the British army formations, but this proved to be a step beyond British vision and command capability."

The South Africans had a distinct military doctrine of their own based on maneuver warfare and combined-arms warfare, which conflicted with British thinking at the time that armored fighting vehicles should act independently, downplaying the need for combined-arms cooperation. This thinking meant that there would be a "profound clash of doctrine between South Africans and the British in North Africa." Instead, Eighth Army often confined the South

Africans to a “static role when the British tank brigades could have better used South Africa’s inherent abilities at mobile warfare in their support.”

Katz takes the British to task for dividing their divisional assets, such as artillery and antitank guns, among brigades. Chapter 6 details the Gazala battles, showing the contrast of the success the Germans had because they concentrated their divisional assets at a decisive point.

The British did use the combined-arms approach at El Wak with motorized infantry, artillery, armored cars, light tanks and air support, but these circumstances were not repeated a year later at Sidi Rezegh, resulting in 5th South African Infantry Brigade’s defeat. The British try at combined arms in the Gazala battles failed because “[c]ombining different weapons in a coordinated attack takes practice and the Cauldron [an area of battle on the Gazala line] was not an appropriate place to learn.”

The disparity between German and British doctrine would cost the British and later the United States “dearly” in North Africa, Katz writes.

By the First Battle of El Alamein, where the German advance was stopped by South African artillery, there was much animosity between the British generals and South Africans. The British thought South Africa wanted to “run away.” Sir Claude Auchinleck did not have confidence in the South Africans’ morale, and the British did not think they could give the South Africans any serious or difficult operation tasks.

Nor were the South Africans unified among themselves. The problem was bad enough that LTC Max Gooler, a U.S. military observer, reported on the dysfunctional command structure in Tobruk between the South African commanding general and heads of various staff sections – in particular, operations and intelligence. The South African general discounted assessments by his intel staff, for example.

After Axis forces surrounded and isolated the defenders of Tobruk, those holding Tobruk surrendered and 10,722 Soldiers from 2nd South African Division went into captivity, causing widespread political repercussions back home. South Africa did take part in “fierce and protracted campaigns in Italy” later, but the Second Battle of Tobruk was the “largest military reversal suffered by South Africa.” It also brought the country shame because in the first siege of Tobruk, the Australians held out for 244 days.

The logistics materiel that fell into Rommel’s hands supplied him with the impetus to advance to El Alamein, but there the Allies were finally victorious. In Second Alamein, the defense of Miteirya Ridge was the final assault by South Africa on Axis forces in North Africa. Somewhat after this, South Africa withdrew 1st South African Infantry Brigade from the war and troops returned to their parent unit in South Africa. The newly formed 6th South African Armoured Division absorbed many of its former units and personnel.

The book is worthwhile reading, although Katz does make his point about the misuse of South Africa’s mobile, maneuver capabilities perhaps once too many times. However, it is a good look at other Allies’ (besides the common triune of the United States, United Kingdom and Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) contributions during World War II.

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