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978-1-107-01459-6 - Kiev 1941: Hitler's Battle for Supremacy in the East

David Stahel

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

Nazi Germany's war against the Soviet Union began on 22 June 1941 in what was the largest military undertaking in history. Code-named Operation Barbarossa the war was to be another in a series of sweeping blitzkrieg battles, which aimed to defeat the Red Army in a matter of weeks. From the beginning the fighting proceeded with unremitting violence, which saw the German Wehrmacht undertake deep advances, while crushing numerous Soviet armies. Throughout the summer of 1941 the progress of Operation Barbarossa was reported to the German people not just as an unbroken string of battlefield successes, but as some of the greatest victories in the history of warfare. Indeed, on the surface, it may have seemed justified to categorize the battles at Belostok-Minsk, Smolensk and Uman' as a series of unsurpassed triumphs. Yet the war was not all it appeared to be in the news reels of the German cinema or the *Sondermeldungen* (special bulletins) on German radio. The Wehrmacht's *Ostheer* (eastern army) was also suffering serious losses. In June 1941, during only the first nine days of the war, some 25,000 German fatalities were sustained and in the following month no fewer than 63,000 German soldiers fell (with tens of thousands more wounded), making July the deadliest month of the war until the battle of Stalingrad in the winter of 1942/1943.<sup>1</sup> Even more costly to the *Ostheer*'s chances of success were the material costs resulting from the long summer advance and unceasing battles. The vital panzer and motorized divisions suffered staggering fallout rates, which there was neither the time, facilities nor the requisite spare parts to correct. By late August 1941, Operation Barbarossa was a spent

Cambridge University Press

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David Stabel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 / Introduction

exercise, incapable of achieving its central objective of ending Soviet resistance.<sup>2</sup>

While outright victory in a single campaign may have been beyond Germany's reach in late August 1941, the intensity of the fighting in the east had in no way abated. Nor were the German high command able to appreciate the seriousness of their strategic position. Army Group Centre, the largest of the three German army groups to invade the Soviet Union, had just completed two of the largest encirclements in military history. Not only had these netted a total of some 600,000 Soviet POWs, but the German lines were now two-thirds of the way to Moscow and the Army General Staff was determined to press on and seize the Soviet capital. Hitler, however, did not agree. The eastern front was advancing at different speeds and Army Group Centre, with the bulk of the panzer and motorized troops, was far ahead of its northern and southern counterparts. Consequently a major bulge had developed in the front, which would only be exacerbated by a further push on Moscow. Hitler was therefore reluctant to attack the Soviet capital, especially as he disputed its importance and referred to it as 'only a geographical term'.<sup>3</sup> More important to Hitler was the prospect of diverting Army Group Centre's renewed attack to the north and south where, in his view, much greater opportunities lay. In the north was Leningrad, which Hitler saw as the root of Bolshevism and believed to be of fundamental importance to the survival of the Soviet political system.<sup>4</sup> Hitler also identified opportunities in the south, which offered far more tangible benefits to the German war effort. Uppermost in Hitler's mind were the riches of the Ukraine, which, along with the oil fields of southern Russia, he saw as the key to Germany's economic autarky. On the night of 19–20 August 1941 Hitler told his inner circle:

*It is not tolerable that the life of the peoples of the continent should depend upon England. The Ukraine, and then the Volga basin, will one day be the granaries of Europe. We shall reap much more than what actually grows from the soil. . . . If one day Sweden declines to supply any more iron, that's alright. We'll get it from Russia.<sup>5</sup>*

Hitler's visions of economic independence were, however, dependent upon the defeat of the Red Army and the conquest of the Soviet Union's

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David Stahel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

### 3 / Introduction

southern regions. There was indeed much to gain and, given the difficulties of Operation Barbarossa and the impending war of attrition that Germany now faced in the east, such economic wealth had never been more essential. Yet it was in the Ukraine that Operation Barbarossa had faced some of its most determined resistance and in spite of Army Group South's hard-fought encirclement at Uman' the total was still only 100,000 POWs. The great bulk of the Soviet South-Western Front (the main Red Army grouping in the Ukraine) was successfully withdrawn behind the Dnepr River. As Army Group South closed on the Dnepr, two months of hard fighting coupled with the great depth of the advance took a steep toll on the motorized forces. This complicated any independent action aimed at overcoming Soviet resistance along the Dnepr, especially given complications emanating from the Pripet marshes (in the northern Ukraine) from where Soviet forces were able to stage large-scale attacks into the German rear. With summer weather almost at an end and the South-Western Front entrenching itself further with every day, the prospect of destroying Soviet resistance in the Ukraine and breaking into the mineral-rich Donets Basin (in the east of the country) was looking increasingly remote.

The difficulties in the Ukraine were not, however, what interested the Army High Command (*Oberkommando des Heeres*, OKH), who were responsible for directing Germany's war in the east. For the army commanders as well as the senior generals at Army Group Centre, Moscow was the sole objective they were prepared to consider for the second phase of the campaign. The result was a standoff with Hitler as a strategic crisis paralysed the German command from the third week of July until 23 August. In the end it was Hitler who broke the deadlock by categorically overruling any further debate, denouncing the army commanders for their supposed ineptitude and insisting that Panzer Group 2, on the southern wing of Army Group Centre, turn south and strike into the Ukraine. It was the prelude to the biggest and costliest battle thus far fought in World War II.

The climactic battle of Kiev in late August and September 1941 was an epic of human endurance, strategic uncertainty and ceaseless carnage. Yet the familiar portrait of a rousing German victory, which appears to confirm the *Ostheer's* dominance in the east, is misleading. The battle was not the seamless encounter often portrayed, but rather one typified by hard fighting, embittered command disputes and an exacerbation of the already serious decline in the *Ostheer's*

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David Stahel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

#### 4 / Introduction

offensive strength. Indeed the scale of the German success was much less a result of the *Ostheer*'s raw military power than of the catastrophic Soviet strategic direction, which accounted in greatest measure for the one-sided outcome. Nevertheless, the battle of Kiev was a remarkable achievement, and after the bitter disputes with the OKH over the decision to strike into the Ukraine, the battle became another resounding personal triumph for Adolf Hitler. Thus the battle of Kiev was Hitler's battle not simply by the default of his being the head of the Nazi state, but more importantly because he, with almost no support within the high command, insisted upon it. Nor was the battle just one more triumph in the string of large encirclements on the eastern front in 1941. Its sheer scale exceeded any single encounter of the preceding summer and set the groundwork for the battles still to be fought on the approaches to Moscow at Viaz'ma and Bryansk as well as along the Nogai Steppe on the Sea of Azov. As Army Group South's war diary stated on 1 September: 'In the opinion of the commander of the army group carrying out the annihilation battle in the Ukraine is of decisive importance for the outcome of the whole eastern campaign.'<sup>6</sup> Such a statement may reflect the forlorn hopes of outright victory, but it also underlines the extent of the Soviet calamity in the south. Indeed in many respects the battle of Kiev may be considered the Wehrmacht's single greatest set-piece battle of World War II and, despite attracting surprisingly little attention in the historical literature, it remains Hitler's most significant battlefield triumph.<sup>7</sup>

While it may be taken for granted that Nazi Germany sought to derive as much propaganda value as possible from its 1941 battles in the east, what is less explicable is the endurance of many similar depictions throughout numerous histories of the Barbarossa campaign. Accounts of the early summer period provide the best examples,<sup>8</sup> but even those covering the late August and September period, as the colder weather beckoned with all its ominous implications, still suggest that some form of German victory remained a realistic prospect.<sup>9</sup> Even more radical interpretations suggest that the German failure in 1941 occurred by only the most slender of margins.<sup>10</sup> Although by 1941 the Wehrmacht was the most refined and professional fighting force in the world, its battlefield superiority at the tactical and operational level did not make it infallible strategically. Indeed the defeat of the *Ostheer* did not begin with the first retreats (and at times routs) following the launch of the Soviet winter offensive in December 1941. By this time German plans to conquer the Soviet Union had long since

Cambridge University Press

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David Stabel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 5 / Introduction

failed and the fact that the Soviets were now pushing the Germans back only further confirmed Germany's crisis in the east. Yet post-war scholarship quickly adopted the tone set by the German generals, who were themselves simply echoing many of the triumphant phrases previously trumpeted by Goebbels.<sup>11</sup> More recently, the overly affirmative tone has been accepted in some otherwise first-rate works,<sup>12</sup> which reflect the lack of specialized operational studies conducted in the area.<sup>13</sup>

Far more revealing and accurate accounts of the 1941 campaign have emanated from studies on the Soviet side of the front. Unlike German historiography these works did not first have to shed the fog of distortions generated by German memoir literature, and although there were similar distortions contained within Soviet era publications these were rightfully treated from the very beginning with a far greater degree of scrutiny. Yet for all its distortions and blatant falsifications, Soviet and East German historiography did at least take a far more critical view of German operational success in 1941 and argued for Soviet successes far earlier than anyone in the west was willing to concede. At the time such views were dismissed outright as the usual self-absorbed hyperbole typical of so many eastern bloc fabrications. Although the communist view erroneously proclaimed the historical inevitability of their victory by arguing for the superiority of the Marxist/Leninist political ideology, on strictly military matters they were frequently closer to the mark than contemporary western accounts. Standard Soviet histories certainly presented the war in a typically sensationalist style with at times grossly distorted figures that helped explain Soviet setbacks, but their general conclusions about the 1941 campaign are far more consistent with the picture gained from German military files. As Soviet high school textbooks explained:

*In the summer and autumn of 1941 the Red Army fought fierce defensive battles against the invading forces of Nazi Germany. The Smolensk battle lasted almost two months. The enemy was held at this point until the middle of September. The German invaders suffered enormous losses and were forced to postpone for more than a month their attack on Moscow... The stubborn resistance of the heroic cities of Leningrad, Kiev and Odessa and the defensive battle at Smolensk played an important role in frustrating the Hitler plan for a 'lightning war'.<sup>14</sup>*

Cambridge University Press

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David Stabel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 / Introduction

In the west, the pioneering studies produced firstly by John Erickson<sup>15</sup> and later by David M. Glantz<sup>16</sup> have contributed more than any other<sup>17</sup> to providing a corrective remedial to the overly congenial view of German military operations.<sup>18</sup>

By contrast, while there has been a huge amount written on the German military campaign in the east, the standard has not always been high. In Germany much of the literature stems from the former veteran community and appears in the form of soldiers' memoirs, unit histories and campaign summaries. These typically tend to steer clear of any reference to the uglier aspects of the war in the east and project images of a gallant, long-suffering army struggling to do its duty in the east under increasingly difficult conditions. The strong interest in the Anglo-American world for perspectives of the war from the German standpoint has led to many works being translated into English, particularly German soldiers' memoirs.<sup>19</sup> Such books have formed a steady source of primary material within the western discourse, which tends to underline the innocence of the Wehrmacht, while at the same time drawing unfavourable, pro-German comparisons with the Red Army's professionalism (although this is somewhat less pronounced in books covering the latter stages of the war). Not only was much of this early literature uncritically accepted within the Anglo-American discourse, it helped spawn secondary works that likewise incorporated pro-German perspectives, which, especially during the cold war, audiences avidly received. Decades of such publications helped establish a flawed orthodoxy,<sup>20</sup> which has proved hard to break and requires a very conscientious and circumspect approach to the literature on Germany's military campaigns in the east. The prevailing taboo within German academia towards military history<sup>21</sup> and the relative lack of scholarly publications in the Anglo-American field have, as a result, left much room for new research to provide the requisite riposte to established popular accounts. With so little research having been done on the German side of the war in the east, and mindful of how much needs to be revisited in light of the many post-war myths, there is much fertile ground for original studies on both well-known aspects of the war and the so-called 'forgotten battles', which are regrettably numerous.<sup>22</sup> To that end my current study seeks to fill two important gaps in the literature: on the one hand, to provide the first intensive treatment of the battle of Kiev and, on the other, to chart the ongoing demise of Germany's operational proficiency in 1941.

Cambridge University Press

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David Stabel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 7 / Introduction

When Hitler overruled his generals and diverted the most powerful panzer group on the eastern front<sup>23</sup> into the Ukraine, it was a decision which reflected the growing weakness of Germany's strategic position rather than the masterstroke it has occasionally been branded. Indeed the scale of the German victory in the Ukraine was highly dependent on the obstinacy of the Soviet dictator who steadfastly refused to countenance any withdrawal even after the prospects for holding Kiev had become utterly hopeless. Starting with Marshal Georgi Zhukov in late July, a string of Soviet generals had tried to warn Stalin about this, but to no avail. In addition to Stalin's unwitting complicity in Germany's success, Hitler's own commanders had fiercely opposed the operation from the beginning. To Hitler's mind the first two major encirclements in the central part of the eastern front at Belostok-Minsk and Smolensk had both failed to carve a gaping hole in Soviet defences through which a rapid, and largely unmolested, advance could be made. Yet, even more importantly, Hitler strongly emphasized the economic importance of the Ukraine, which may suggest he was beginning to doubt whether the war could be won in the rapid blitz-style campaign that had originally been conceived. In any case Hitler's interest in diverting the attack into the Ukraine was firstly economic and secondly military. Throughout August he was told time and again by his military commanders that the bulk of the Soviet reserves were being concentrated opposite Army Group Centre to defend the approaches to Moscow, and it was here they argued that a decisive blow to the Red Army should be struck. Hitler, however, was prepared to subordinate military objectives to his own sense of priorities, just as he had done by declaring Leningrad a vital objective for its political significance, rather than its military value.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the retrospective tendency of many histories, to suppose that the ultimate success of the Kiev battle was both obvious and apparent, was simply not the case. Hitler's interest was essentially economic and while he also recognized an attractive operational prospect, a victory on the scale that was ultimately achieved was by no means a preordained certainty. An advance into the Ukraine from the north presented significant operational hurdles, not least of which was the conduct of such an offensive with a long, exposed left flank perpendicular to the Soviet front. Serious combat losses within the spearheading XXIV<sup>25</sup> Panzer Corps<sup>26</sup> and mounting supply difficulties further hampered the offensive, while vigorous Soviet counterattacks against both Field Marshal Fedor von Bock's Army Group Centre and

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David Stahel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 8 / Introduction

Colonel-General Heinz Guderian's panzer forces produced periods of sudden crisis in the German front. There was also a new round of intense internal wrangling within the German command, this time concentrated firmly within Army Group Centre, which extended so far as to see Bock seeking Guderian's dismissal. Yet for all the complications on the German side of the front, without a doubt the most important factor in the outcome of the battle was Stalin's own role. Not only did the Soviet dictator's obstinate strategic direction benefit the Germans far more than it hindered them, but from the German perspective there could have been no accounting for this at the start of the battle.

In many ways the battle of Kiev is a misnomer. As with the so-called battles of Belostok-Minsk and Smolensk, the city itself plays a small, peripheral role in the fighting, but lends its name to the wider drama which engulfed a large segment of the eastern Ukraine. As with my preceding volume this study will concentrate predominantly on the two panzer groups that combined to enact the encirclement of the Soviet South-Western Front (Panzer Groups 1 and 2). This study can be read, therefore, as a continuation of the previous study into German operational problems on the eastern front or as a separate and distinct investigation of an all-too-neglected battle. Indeed, it is interesting to note that, although this was one of the most significant and largest-scale battles of World War II, there has been only one study written on it.<sup>27</sup>

First appearing in 1964, Werner Haupt's *Kiew: Die grösste Kesselschlacht der Geschichte* represented much of what is wrong with the military history of the eastern front from the German perspective. Haupt, himself a veteran of the northern sector of the eastern front, produced his study without any footnotes or bibliography, which together with his sensationalistic prose and keen use of exclamation marks, gives the study a distinct feel of historical dramatization. Research certainly went into the book (it is definitely not a fictional account), but Haupt's close affinity with both the German soldiers and the events he describes clouds too many of his judgements and conclusions. This has resulted in an all-too-benevolent picture of Germany's soldiers on the eastern front, who, according to Haupt's rendition, can be seen as both markedly superior in the art of warfare and, at the same time, long-suffering victims of the war's hardships. At the same time, the Red Army is contrasted with Haupt's duty-bound *Lansers* as a faceless and iniquitous enemy.



Cambridge University Press

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David Stabel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 9 / Introduction

In the English-language literature there is very little to be found on the events taking place in the Ukraine during September 1941. For the most part the battle is subsumed within wider events of Operation Barbarossa and features in many narratives merely as a stepping-stone victory on the way to the final showdown at Moscow. Yet Kiev was a vast battle, which involved three German armies (Second, Sixth and Seventeenth), two panzer groups (1 and 2) and elements of two air fleets (2 and 4) as well as elements of six Soviet armies (Fifth, Twenty-First, Twenty-Sixth, Thirty-Seventh, Thirty-Eighth and Fortieth). In sheer numbers the battle draws few parallels even on the eastern front and yet, in spite of being one of the largest and most decisive battles of World War II, it has yet to merit its own study in English. This is a deficiency not only given its intrinsic importance as one of the great battles of the war, but because the description of events given in more general accounts has typically been coloured by the well-known outcome. Rather than highlighting the ills of Germany's campaign during the interlude before Moscow, there has been a preoccupation with the especially large numbers of Soviet POWs captured in September 1941 that has given the battle of Kiev a one-dimensional status. This interpretation neither reflects the difficulties of the battle for the Germans nor highlights the perils of overextension that were stretching the *Ostheer* to breaking point. This has helped feed the myth of the Wehrmacht's unbroken series of victories in the east, which continued, according to the popular legend, to the very gates of Moscow. There can be no question that the battle of Kiev was far more costly to the Red Army than to the Wehrmacht, but this did not alter Germany's strategic predicament in the east. Indeed even before the victory at Kiev, Germany confronted an inevitable crisis. By the end of September, without rest or spare parts the vital motorized divisions were in a terrible state. Moreover, losses throughout September had risen by another 125,000 men,<sup>28</sup> the flow of supplies was hopelessly inadequate, there was no winter equipment and the autumn *rasputitsa*<sup>29</sup> was about to begin. Even the Nazi propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, who was busy trumpeting the *Ostheer*'s achievements, privately betrayed an understanding of the inherent dangers now confronting Germany in the east and his increasingly awkward role in reporting it. Writing in his diary on 11 September 1941 Goebbels confided: 'In my opinion the nation now has a right to know what is and what will be, above all that the progress of the eastern operation is not what we had actually wished

Cambridge University Press

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David Stahel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 10 / Introduction

for and what the people had also imagined it would be.' Goebbels then alluded to his fears for the coming winter. 'To conduct propaganda when one attains victories on a conveyor belt is not difficult; but to hold a people in the palm of your hand when a crisis threatens is difficult and also shows the propagandist's actual skill.'<sup>30</sup> Clearly Goebbels had some idea of where things were headed and did not wish to be caught off-guard in explaining a crisis at the front.

Having already written at length in my preceding volume about Germany's ominous strategic predicament after two months of warfare against the Soviet Union, the first chapter of this study opens with a more expansive discussion of Germany's war effort and the respective strengths and contributions of the three Allied powers. Here one gains a perspective into the centrality of the eastern front and the defining role it was already playing in the demise of Nazi Germany. Far from being a mere setback, by the end of the summer Operation Barbarossa's failure left Hitler's strategy rudderless and, although scarcely recognized at the time, beyond repair. In the weeks following the invasion, the new east-west anti-Nazi coalition was rapidly taking shape and gaining in strength from week to week. Allied economic resources were being amassed on an unprecedented scale, while mobilization, especially in the United States and the Soviet Union, was proceeding by leaps and bounds. At the same time the *Ostheer* was rapidly being forced into an unsustainable war of attrition, which placed Germany at a tremendous disadvantage as the third year of the war began. Having gained a perspective from the other side of Germany's hill the second chapter further contextualizes Hitler's war against the Soviet Union by assessing the economic fragility of the Nazi empire and why the failure of the summer blitzkrieg doomed Germany's long-term outlook. From this point my discussion concentrates firmly on the fighting in the east, beginning with a brief overview of Germany's summer campaign in Army Group South and then continuing through to the main events at Kiev in late August and September 1941.