

The Battle for Moscow

In November 1941 Hitler ordered German forces to complete the final drive on the Soviet capital, then less than 100 km away. Army Group Centre was pressed into the attack for one last attempt to break Soviet resistance before the onset of winter. From the German perspective, the final drive on Moscow had all the ingredients of a dramatic final battle in the east, which, according to previous accounts, only failed at the gates of Moscow. David Stahel now challenges this well-established narrative by demonstrating that the last German offensive of 1941 was a forlorn effort, undermined by operational weakness, poor logistics, and driven forward by what he identifies as National Socialist military thinking. With unparalleled research from previously undocumented army files and soldiers' letters, Stahel takes a fresh look at the battle for Moscow, which, even before the Soviet winter offensive, threatened disaster for Germany's war in the east.

David Stahel is a lecturer at the University of New South Wales in Canberra. His previous publications include *Operation Barbarossa and Germany's Defeat in the East* (2009), *Kiev 1941* (2011), *Nazi Policy on the Eastern Front, 1941* (2012) and *Operation Typhoon* (2013).

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-08760-6 - The Battle for Moscow
David Stahel
Frontmatter
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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107087606

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First published 2015

Reprinted 2015

Printed in the United States of America by Sheridan Books, Inc.

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

Stahel, David, 1975–

The Battle for Moscow / David Stahel.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-107-08760-6

I. Moscow, Battle of, Moscow, Russia, 1941–1942. I. Title.

D764.3.M65819 2014

940.54'21731–dc23

2014023806

ISBN 978-1-107-08760-6 Hardback

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In *Foucault's Pendulum* Umberto Eco wrote: 'I believe that what we become depends on what our fathers teach us at odd moments, when they aren't trying to teach us. We are formed by little scraps of wisdom.' The day I was born I had an infant older brother and a mother who had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis during her pregnancy with me. In the months leading to my birth my mother had lost the use of her legs and eyes. Two years before my father had been a single young man with next to no responsibility and then, in 1975, he found himself with two infant sons and a severely disabled wife. Of course, growing up I hardly gave any of this much thought. My father just had a lot to do to take care of us all – and he never wavered in that commitment. Recalling those days and recounting the moments from which I might have gleaned little scraps of wisdom would probably fill a book in itself, but, since I am an historian and not a memoirist, this book will have to do. Happy dedication dad.

In the first instance, I wish to extend my gratitude to my long-standing mentor, colleague and friend, Eleanor Hancock. As with my past work, her support and ideas have left their mark on this study. I also owe a debt of thanks to the history department at UNSW Canberra, in particular Jeffrey Grey, who ensured that I had the time needed to complete this project. In Germany, Alex Kay has filled a number of holes in my source material as well as providing his usual insightfulness into all matters of Nazi German history. Likewise, assistance from a host of historians must be acknowledged, including David Glantz, Dennis

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-08760-6 - The Battle for Moscow
David Stahel
Frontmatter
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Showalter, Robert Citino, Jacob Kipp, Jack Radey, Charles Sharp, Mark Edele and Jeff Rutherford. Thanks also to Chrisie Rotter for her artwork and Jakob Graichen for proofing some of my more complex translations. Last, but not least, thanks to my editor Michael Watson and all the staff at Cambridge University Press for their consistently professional support.

GLOSSARY

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| BA-MA | Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv (German Military Archive) |
| <i>Das Reich</i> | 2nd SS Division |
| <i>Einsatzgruppen</i> | ‘action groups’ of the SD and Security Police, used mainly for mass killings |
| <i>Endsieg</i> | final victory |
| <i>Erhaltungsegedanken</i> | conservation of strength and preparation for winter |
| <i>Grossdeutschland</i> | ‘Greater Germany’ Infantry Regiment (later division) |
| <i>Grosstransportraum</i> | ‘large transport area’. Referring to the transport regiment responsible for bridging the gap between front- line divisions and railheads |
| KTB | Kriegstagebuch (war diary) |
| <i>Landser</i> | German infantry man |
| <i>Lebensraum</i> | living space |
| <i>Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler</i> | SS Regiment (later division) |
| Luftwaffe | German Air Force |
| OKH | <i>Oberkommando des Heeres</i> (High Command of the Army) |
| OKW | <i>Oberkommando der Wehrmacht</i> (High Command of the Armed Forces) |
| <i>Ostheer</i> | Eastern Army |
| Pz. Div. | Panzer Division |

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| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| <i>rasputitsa</i> | ‘quagmire season’; refers to the biannual difficulties caused by heavy rains or melting snow in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine |
| <i>Reichsbahn</i> | German railways |
| SD | <i>Sicherheitsdienst</i> (Security Service) |
| <i>Sondermeldungen</i> | special news bulletins |
| SS | <i>Schutzstaffel</i> (Protection Echelon) |
| <i>Stavka</i> | Soviet High Command |
| <i>Vernichtungskrieg</i> | War of annihilation |
| Wehrmacht | German Armed Forces |
| <i>Wirkungsgedanken</i> | exploitation of all resources to achieve maximum effect |

TABLES OF MILITARY RANKS AND ARMY STRUCTURES

Table of equivalent ranks

| German army/ Luftwaffe | Translation used in this study | Equivalent US army rank |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Officer ranks | | |
| Generalfeldmarschall | Field Marshal | General of the Army |
| Generaloberst | Colonel-General | General |
| General | General | Lieutenant General |
| der Infanterie | of Infantry | |
| der Artillerie | of Artillery | |
| der Flakartillerie | of Flak Artillery | |
| der Flieger | of Aviation | |
| der Kavallerie | of Cavalry | |
| der Luftwaffe | of the Luftwaffe | |
| der Panzertruppe | of Panzer Troops | |
| der Pioniere | of Engineers | |
| Generalleutnant | Lieutenant-General | Major General |
| Generalmajor | Major-General | Brigadier General |
| Oberst | Colonel | Colonel |
| Oberstleutnant | Lieutenant-Colonel | Lieutenant Colonel |
| Major | Major | Major |
| Hauptmann | Captain | Captain |
| Oberleutnant | 1st Lieutenant | 1st Lieutenant |
| Leutnant | Lieutenant | 2nd Lieutenant |
| Enlisted ranks | | |
| Stabsfeldwebel | Master Sergeant | Master Sergeant |
| Oberfeldwebel | Technical Sergeant | Technical Sergeant |

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 978-1-107-08760-6 - The Battle for Moscow
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(cont.)

| German army/ Luftwaffe | Translation used in this study | Equivalent US army rank |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Feldwebel | Staff Sergeant | Staff Sergeant |
| Unterfeldwebel | Sergeant | Sergeant |
| Unteroffizier | Corporal | Corporal |
| Gefreiter | Private | Private 1st Class |
| Soldat | Private | Private 2nd Class |

Source: Karl-Heinz Frieser, *The Blitzkrieg Legend. The 1940 Campaign in the West* (Annapolis, 2005) p. 355.

Structure and size of the German army

| Germany army formation | English translation | Number of subordinate units | Average number of personnel ^a |
|------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Heeresgruppe | Army Group | Two or more armies | 100,000 to more than a million |
| Armee | Army | Two or more corps | 60,000–250,000 |
| Korps | Corps | Two or more divisions | 40,000–70,000 |
| Division | Division | Two or more brigades | 12,000–18,000 |
| Brigade | Brigade | Two or more regiments | 5,000–7,000 |
| Regiment | Regiment | Two or more battalions | 2,000–6,000 |
| Bataillon | Battalion | Two or more companies | 500–1,000 |
| Kompanie | Company | Two or more platoons | 100–200 |
| Zug | Platoon | | 30–40 |

Note: ^a Wide variations of these figures occurred, especially after 1941.

Source: Author's own records.