

The Battle for Moscow. By David Stahel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. xvi, 440 pp. Glossary. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. Tables. Maps. \$35.00, hard bound.

The Battle for Moscow is the fourth in a series of David Stahel's books published by Cambridge and exploring the Eastern Front in 1941, following *Operation Barbarossa and Germany's Defeat in the East* (2009), *Kiev 1941: Hitler's Battle for Supremacy in the East* (2011), and *Operation Typhoon: Hitler's March on Moscow, October 1941* (2013). The job is still not complete. This book covers Germany's Army Group Center for the month of November 1941. It begins with an operational pause in the first half of the month, as the *Wehrmacht* was immobilized by mud and needed to rest, repair, and resupply for its final drive on Moscow. It continues through the resumption of the German offensive in mid-November, ending just as the German attack grinds to a halt and the massive Soviet counteroffensive begins on December 5–6. The Soviets are largely off-stage. They make appearances from time to time—as starving prisoners-of-war, as peasant villagers expelled from their homes in the dead of winter, and as the Soviet high command, doling out just enough divisions into the front lines from reserves to keep the Germans from breaking through to Moscow. The focus of the book is overwhelmingly on the Germans and on German sources. Stahel's history is predominantly operational: the war as seen from the viewpoint of Army Group and Army commanders. He supplements this narrative with vignettes from the daily lives of cold and demoralized frontline German soldiers, but his theme lies elsewhere.

The operational history of the Eastern Front, particularly on the German side, is thoroughly-trodden ground. What is Stahel's book adding, besides being well-written and clearly documented? His fundamental argument is that "Germany's war effort was doomed (310)," even before the Soviet counteroffensive sent Army Group Center reeling back. The key moment of the war in the east was not Kursk or Stalingrad, or even the battle of Moscow itself. Hitler's armies had been so drained and exhausted by November 1941 that they had no hope of reaching Moscow, let alone taking and holding it. In short, "Moscow's fall was never seriously in question" (7). The Soviet high command had five full armies in reserve around Moscow, either to commit to defense of the city if danger threatened, or for devastating counterattack once the German attack lost momentum. Others have emphasized the significance of failure at Moscow: Germany's Armaments Minister Fritz Todt became convinced in the winter of 1941–42 that the war could not be won. Klaus Reinhardt's *Moscow—The Turning Point: The Failure of Hitler's Strategy in the Winter of 1941–42* (1992) makes a similar argument. Stahel goes further, suggesting not simply that defeat at Moscow destroyed German hopes of victory, but that defeat at Moscow was itself inevitable.

The problem with this thesis is that many of the German commanders on the spot did not believe it, and expressed their confidence in at least the possibility of victory in both public and private forums. Though they did not enjoy the benefit of hindsight, they were good at their jobs and well-informed of the situation. Certainly, Stahel's account gives ample evidence of Germany's hollow divisions and exhausted troops: on the eve of the November offensive, one of Heinz Guderian's panzer divisions was down to nine operational tanks (108). That said, the Soviet side, which we do not see here, also perceived grave danger. The October 1941 evacuation of Moscow and the mobilization of untrained popular militia from the capital's factory workers suggest Soviet desperation. To his credit, Stahel himself presents the raw material for a counterargument. German confidence in victory among particular individuals lasted remarkably late into the offensive. It was not limited to Hitler and his circle in the high command, but included Army Group Center's commander Fedor von Bock, as well as Bock's chief-of-staff and his tank commanders (77, 80, 188–89). Certainly there were

pessimists as well, and the optimists were ultimately disheartened by defeat, but the optimism was real. Recognizing this, Stahel goes further to suggest that Nazism had rendered the German generals incapable of recognizing reality. They were “largely oblivious” (141), saw iron will as capable of triumphing over facts on the ground (153), and went well beyond the point of rationality (305–6). Though Stahel has not entirely clinched his case, he has made a powerful argument.

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De-Stalinization Reconsidered: Persistence and Change in the Soviet Union. Ed. Thomas M. Bohn, Rayk Einax, and Michel Abesser. Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2014. 276 pp. Notes. Bibliography. \$52.00, paper.

Since the turn of the century, the decade and a half that followed Stalin’s death in 1953 has emerged as a period of significant scholarly interest, resulting in a number of conferences and essay collections. Contributors and editors have wrestled with the question of how these years should be characterized. What labels are appropriate? In the volume reviewed here, the editors use the title “De-Stalinization Reconsidered,” although they articulate their doubts about the term “De-Stalinization,” noting its failure “to incorporate numerous central developments of the 1950s and 1960s” (14), as well as about the perhaps more popular term “Thaw.” Both designations, they suggest, invoke a “far reaching liberation which was often neither intended nor achieved” (15). In their stead, they suggest using Karl Popper’s concept of an “open society—based on individual decisions and abstract social relations,” when considering the “failure of the Soviet Union” (13).

The first three chapters are similarly devoted to reflecting on how the post-Stalin era should be conceived. In an original and thought-provoking essay, Stephen Bittner questions the “thaw” metaphor, but also urges us to ask new questions. Challenging the tendency to see the USSR’s final decades in terms of “collapse and decay,” he instead presents them as a time that was “fertile” for new cultural forms (41). Stefan Plaggenborg engages critically with the term de-Stalinization, arguing that even if terror was vastly diminished after Stalin’s death, many Stalinist structures survived 1953 and that Khrushchev used many of his predecessor’s methods. Like Bittner, he also extends his discussion into the very late Soviet era, and these sections are perhaps the most original, offering a depiction of Soviet social relations made up of “loose, small, and informal communities” (64), rather than either a wider sense of social solidarity or an atomized society based on the nuclear family. Stephan Merl is the most explicit in his criticism of the term “de-Stalinization,” which he claims “lacks the analytical clarity necessary to describe ‘post-Stalinism’” (67), stressing that paternalistic modes of political communication continued under Khrushchev. For him, it was only under Brezhnev that the “mobilizational dictatorship” ended (92).

The remaining chapters in the collection are more typical research-based pieces. Although the editors’ divisions are rather different, I identify three core themes, the first of them being popular opinion and dissent. In his contribution, Yuri Aksyutin draws on material from the retrospective interviews he conducted in 1999–2002, much of which was presented in his monograph, but now brought to an English readership. For him, Stalin’s death was a very painful caesura, but the 1950s and 1960s all the same saw dissent and divisions begin to emerge. Robert Hornsby’s study focuses specifically on the years 1957–58 when, in the wake of the Secret Speech and society’s sometimes troublesome responses, convictions for “anti-Soviet agitation and propa-