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Ostkrieg: Hitler's War of Extermination in the East

by Stephen G. Fritz

Reviewed by Richard W. Harrison, author of *The Russian Way of War: Operational Art, 1904-1940*, and *Architect of Soviet Victory in World War II: The Life and Theories of G.S. Isserson*

This reviewer must confess to a keen sense of anticipation when I first picked up a copy of *Ostkrieg: Hitler's War of Extermination in the East*. The Eastern Front during World War II is one of the few remaining areas of the conflict that still holds the possibility of new discoveries for the serious student of military history. This is due primarily to the information coming out of the Russian military archives since the collapse of the Soviet Union, while the corresponding German archives have already been heavily mined and contain few surprises.

This context should be kept in mind when deciding whether to purchase this book. As the author admits in the preface, the book is not a work based on primary research, but rather represents a synthesis, an integrated narrative, based on research by historians from several Western countries, particularly Germany. Indeed, the author's bibliography is most impressive and relies heavily on German-language sources. Therein lies the book's strength as well as its weakness.

The almost-exclusively German focus serves the author well in dealing with such questions as the ideological underpinnings of Hitler's campaign in the East. He skillfully lays out the notion that Hitler's dream of *Lebensraum* for the German people could only be realized at the expense of the Slavic and other peoples inhabiting the western part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). This was certainly convenient, as Hitler had long before singled out the Soviet Union as the nexus of a worldwide Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy. More grounded in reality was the belief that only by colonizing the area west of the Ural Mountains, Germany's India, could Hitler hope to achieve the economic wherewithal to sustain Germany in a final showdown with an American-led coalition and avoid a repetition of the German collapse of 1918.

These calculations also determined the timing of the attack. Fritz makes a good case that Hitler, stymied by British intransigence in the West, had only a very narrow window of opportunity in 1941 to destroy the Soviet Union before the United States could lend its enormous weight to the Allied cause. Time, as the author stresses throughout the work, was always against Hitler and Germany's ability to quickly dispose of the USSR; it eventually forced him into a losing struggle against a much more powerful coalition.

Fritz does a commendable job in examining what this meant for the various nationalities inhabiting Hitler's projected colonial empire—tens of millions deliberately starved so that the *Ostheer* and the German nation might

eat, as well as the more direct methods of extermination that eventually superseded this plan. This aspect of the book will inevitably invite comparisons with Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, which will remain the gold standard in this area for many years to come. Fritz's focus is inevitably narrower in terms of time and place, although this should not be held against him.

Unfortunately, the author's approach, which he freely admits is told from the German perspective, is less conducive to a balanced understanding of the strictly military aspects of this gigantic struggle. This is due to his heavy reliance on German-language sources, which lead him to view the ebb and flow of combat from a distinctly German point of view. Such an approach hobbles the book from its very inception and recalls some of the books published during the first postwar years, when our appreciation of the Eastern Front was permanently skewed by the memoirs of such German generals as Manstein and Guderian.

Indeed, the very organization of the book reflects this lopsided version of events. Of the book's 10 chapters, the first two deal with the overall strategic situation preceding the war; Hitler's political, economic, and racial motivations for the invasion of the Soviet Union; and the German preparations for the attack. The next two chapters chronicle the German army's fortunes in the East from the start of the invasion on 22 June 1941 to the eve of the Soviet counteroffensive in early December, or fully a quarter of the book's text. Chapter 5 deals with the *Ostheer's* struggle to contain the Red Army's counteroffensive, while Chapter 6 covers the German advance during the summer campaign of 1942 to the Soviet counteroffensive at Stalingrad. Thus, of the book's 395 pages dealing with military operations, 221 pages, or 56 percent, cover the period when the Germans were primarily on the offensive.

Once the initiative passes to the Red Army, however, Fritz hurries to bring the book to its inevitable conclusion, as if he had unconsciously absorbed the upbeat narrative of the *Ostheer's* offensive period, while imbibing the grimmer picture (at least for the Germans) of the war's final two years. Chapter 7, for example, quickly disposes of the Soviet counteroffensive at Stalingrad, the German Sixth Army's death agony, and the failure of the German offensive at Kursk. Chapter 8 skims over the events of the German retreat in Ukraine to the spring of 1944, while Chapter 9 attempts to encompass the numerous Soviet offensives from the summer of 1944. Finally, Chapter 10 manages to cram in the Red Army's winter offensive of 1945 and the culminating operation to take Berlin, but you get the picture.

Unfortunately, by abandoning any pretense of being a balanced account of the war, the author becomes, in effect, a prisoner of his sources, much to the detriment of the overall narrative. Thus *Ostkrieg*, while moderately successful as a political-ideological analysis of the war in the East, ultimately fails as military history.