

H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Evan Mawdsley. *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War 1941-1945*. London: Hodder, 2005. xxvi + 502 pp. Abbreviations, maps, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN-13 978-0-340-80808-5.

Karl-Heinz Frieser. *The Blitzkrieg Legend: The 1940 Campaign in the West*. With John T. Greenwood. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2005. First published as *Blitzkrieg-Legende: Der Westfeldzug 1940* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1995). xx + 507 pp. Abbreviations, maps, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$47.50 (cloth), ISBN 1-59114-294-6.

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Empirical Approaches to Military History

The world does not lack for military histories of World War II, general or specific. Hence, when new ones appear, it is legitimate to ask, do they really provide new information, insights or interpretations? Both Frieser's look at the astonishing six-week 1940 German campaign in the West that drove France out of the war and Mawdsley's examination of the titanic 1941-45 German/Soviet battle on the Eastern front meet that test. Both provide new data, or at least bring together in one book data that have been dispersed over many locations. Further, both authors look at these campaigns a bit differently than previous researchers and prod us to reformulate our understanding of critical aspects of these battles. Even so, neither is likely to have much effect on how these battles are written about in the historical surveys that college students and others read. They appeal primarily to specialists who continue to dissect these campaigns, both of which are classics in the realm of conventional land warfare.

Frieser argues persuasively that Germany took several huge risks by attacking France, Britain, Belgium and the Netherlands (the Western Allies)

on May 10, 1940. Germany was unprepared for anything more than a very short war and chose a strategy (thrusting through the supposedly impenetrable Ardennes, crossing the Meuse, and driving to the Atlantic Coast) that could have been frustrated in a half-dozen ways by the Western Allies, especially France. France, however, was led by sclerotic political and military leaders, often lacked the desire to fight and was almost always tardy in its actions. Sometimes French sloth was measured in hours (the failure to occupy and defend a critical bridge over the Semois River) and sometimes in days (the failure to mount a timely counter attack against the German Sedan bridgehead). Alas, for France, this was a campaign that was decided in its first five days. By May 14, the Germans had exited from the Ardennes, crossed the Meuse on a wide front, expanded their bridgehead and were driving to the Atlantic Coast, which they would reach on May 20.

This story of the Sichelschnitt drive to the coast and the encirclement of Allied troops by the Germans has been told many times, often by participants such as Heinz Guderian and Erich von Manstein, or by gifted storytellers such as Andre Beufre and Alistair Horne.[1] Where Frieser's account excels is in his highlighting of the numerous risks the Germans assumed and in describing small unit actions and individual heroics that turned individual engagements into German victories. Frieser's status as a Bundeswehr officer no doubt enhanced his ability to recover and describe these critical points in the German thrust (for example, when an enterprising and brave German Feldwebel of the Tenth Panzer Division captured a key set of bunkers across the Meuse River on May 13, 1940).

The 1940 campaign in the West usually is described as an example of Blitzkrieg, a term Frieser asserts has been bastardized by both the press and military people. The 1940 campaign, he argues, was not planned as a "lightning war" and the Germans had minimal ability to carry one out. If Sichelschnitt turned out to be "lightning

war," this result was largely a function of French incompetence, German luck at critical points and the actual insubordination of German commanders in the field such as Guderian and Erwin Rommel. Still, Frieser is not the first to make these points.[2]

Frieser's narration of Sichelschnitt is buttressed by extensive data--including production numbers, weapon comparisons and useful logistical information in addition to troop numbers and dispositions. The data and discussion serve to underline both the numerical and the marginal qualitative equipment inferiority of the Wehrmacht in 1940 relative to its Allied opponents. More than anything else, Frieser relates German successes to their reliance upon mission-oriented tactics (Auftragstaktik) that gave individual German commanders down to the squad level objectives to be accomplished and then accorded them great discretion in determining how best to fulfill them. Frieser contrasts this with the French tendency to give commanders detailed, rather inflexible orders often based upon rehearsed map exercises. The dynamic nature of the battlefield and the distinct communications disadvantage of the French (few radios) generated numerous disasters for them. Indeed, the French military field headquarters at the Chateau de Vincennes did not possess a single radio and therefore the front line troops might not receive new orders for as long as forty-eight hours.

Similarly, Mawdsley's examination of the largest continuous land battle ever fought---the life or death struggle between Germany and the Soviet Union-- presents extensive data to support his description of this campaign. Indeed, except for David Glantz, no other published source on the Eastern front has presented such detailed troop, equipment and economic data in such an accessible fashion.[3] However, where Frieser describes small unit actions and even the actions of individual soldiers, Mawdsley's approach is broader. He focuses on armies, not individuals, unless they were in command (for example, Friedrich

von Paulus or Georgi Zhukov). Where Frieser's story bubbles with anecdotes, Mawdsley's vista is more expansive, and his attention focuses on huge battles such as Moscow, Leningrad, Stalingrad and Kursk. In the course of these analyses, however, he does offer several provocative views, for example, that the 1937-38 Soviet purges did not destroy the Soviet Army's leadership cadre, and that Georgi Zhukov was the outstanding military commander of the entire war. Mawdsley also pays considerable attention to major topical issues such as the Soviet economy and partisan warfare.

The more Olympian focus of this book is understandable, since the 1941-45 campaign on the Eastern front, when compared to the 1940 German invasion of the West, eventually involved six times as many personnel, generated almost one hundred times as many casualties (if civilians are included) and lasted about thirty times as long. If one wants the story of the exploits and agony of individual Eastern front soldiers, then one should look elsewhere.

Mawdsley's strength is as an explicator of the major forces that determined the outcome of this, the most destructive land battle of all time. He sets the scene for all major battles, describes the strategic options available to the participants, briefly describes the course of these battles, totes up the results and discusses their implications. In this, his approach does not differ markedly from existing histories of the eastern front such as John Erickson, Glantz and Glantz and Jonathan House,[4] except that Mawdsley often provides more targeted supporting data and his conclusions may therefore be less susceptible to quibbles than other efforts.

Mawdsley believes that he has written a history that neither relies predominantly on German sources (as did most early Western histories such as those by Alan Clark and Paul Carell), nor exclusively on Soviet sources (most of which are suspect on one count or another).[5] As he notes, "[t]he general histories of the Nazi-Soviet war, even the larger ones, have focused on one side or

the other" (p. xxi)--including reputable works that incorporated Soviet sources such as those of Alexander Werth, Earl Ziemke and Erickson.[6] His own work, he argues, is a "balanced" history because he has no ax to grind, although he confesses to being an historian of Russia.

The increased availability of Russian sources over the past two decades and the continuing pioneering work of Glantz (who has published more than thirty volumes on the Eastern front) and the estimable work of Mueller and Ueberschaer[7] enable Mawdsley to provide a variety of reinterpretations of earlier histories noted above. Sometimes this reconsideration occurs when he shines light on events that the Soviets preferred to hide (examples include two unsuccessful offensives led by Zhukov in 1942) and other times via his skillful expose of the self-supporting narratives of German generals who in the postwar years attempted to blame their failings on Adolf Hitler.

Setting aside the treasure trove of valuable data Mawdsley provides, the most valuable portions of the book emerge when he asks salient questions that arise from the entire campaign, for example, why did it take the Soviet Union, which enjoyed numerical superiority and frequent equipment superiority over Germany, so long to defeat the Germans? Additionally, did Soviet ability to out-produce the Germans and demographically overwhelm them ultimately determine the outcome? With respect to the first question, he concludes that political blindness, frequently inept leadership, and the backwardness of the Soviet Union and its peoples in 1941 were critical. With respect to both the first and second questions, he notes Mark Harrison's argument that military issues determined the war until 1942; after that, economic and demographic issues did.[8] Glantz, however, believes that the evolution of Soviet military doctrine and the command structure were most the important influences on the outcome.[9] Mawdsley concludes both were important.

Mawdsley is one of the first military historians

to pay substantial attention to Joseph Stalin's speeches. The previous tendency has been to regard them as rank propaganda. Mawdsley demonstrates that Stalin's utterances actually contain substantial information and should not be ignored by anyone who wishes to know what was going on in Soviet minds.

The superbly productive work of David Glantz and the not-yet completed ten volume *Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt* series entitled *Germany and the Second World War* have done the most to advance our understanding of many specific aspects of the Eastern front, often relying upon difficult to access Russian and German sources. Still, Mawdsley's effort, which has the advantage of being able to rely upon this fine work, is now the state-of-the-art general history of the Eastern front.

Serious students of the 1940 campaign in the West or the 1941-45 German/Soviet conflict, will want these books. Both extend our knowledge and improve our understanding of what actually happened and why.

Notes

[1]. Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, tr. Constantine Fitzgibbon (New York: Dutton, 1952); Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories*, ed. and tr. Anthony G. Powell (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1958); Andre Beufre, *1940: The Fall of France* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968); Alistair Horne, *To Lose a Battle: France 1940* (London: MacMillan, 1969).

[2]. Clive Ponting, *1940: Myth and Reality* (London: H. Hamilton, 1990).

[3]. David M. Glantz, *Companion to Colossus Reborn: Key Documents and Statistics* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2005).

[4]. John Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad: Stalin's War with Germany* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976); idem, *The Road to Berlin: Continuing the History of Stalin's War with Germany* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1983); David M. Glantz, *Colossus Reborn: The Red Army at War, 1941-1945* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press,

2005) and idem and Jonathan M. House, *When the Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1995).

[5]. Alan Clark, *Barbarossa: The Russian-German Conflict 1941-45* (New York: Quill, 1965); Paul Carell, *Hitler Moves East 1941-43*, tr. Ewald Osers (Winnipeg: J. J. Federowicz Publishing, 1991).

[6]. Alexander Werth, *Russia At War, 1941-1945* (New York: Dutton, 1964); Earl F. Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East* (New York: Military Heritage Press, 1968).

[7]. Rolf-Dieter Mueller and Gerd R. Ueberschaer, *Hitler's War in the East: A Critical Assessment* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002).

[8]. Mark Harrison, ed., *The Economics of World War II: Six Great Powers in International Comparison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[9] Glantz, *Colossus Reborn*, passim.

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