

# Book Reviews

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***Barbarossa Unleashed: The German Blitzkrieg through Central Russia to the Gates of Moscow, June-December 1941***, Craig W.H. Luther, Schiffer Publishing, 2014, 808 pages, \$42.

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After the American Civil War, is there any subject that has been as written about in World War II as much as the Eastern Front has been? There are some modern authors one can be certain of, such as David Stahel and of course David Glantz, but when one encounters a new doorstop of a tome like ***Barbarossa Unleashed***, one may approach it with a healthy dose of jaded skepticism. One wonders what new can be said, outside of a more far-fetched thesis, on this topic, as the Russians have again limited access to the World War II archives. Leave that skepticism behind and buy this book – a statement that one seldom sees in a book review’s first paragraph. Luther will not disappoint you with ***Barbarossa Unleashed***. Luther has written, without qualification, the single most important and overarching work on Army Group Centre in Operation Barbarossa.

What Luther has done is to break the very complex subject of Operation Barbarossa down into easily digestible periods. The central tenet behind Luther’s work is only on the Moscow axis, where there was any potential for the initial shock and awe period of the invasion to produce a military and political victory. Neither the Army Group North axis, centered on Leningrad, nor Army Group South, focused in Ukraine, could of themselves have produced a decisive victory – although they could contribute mightily by their operational success. Luther at the beginning of the book neatly encapsulates the issue that would dog Hitler, the Operation Barbarossa planners and the Wehrmacht: what was the center of gravity for this campaign? Luther comes back to this theme of strategic indecision time and time again, and he addresses this theme within a context all too familiar to American forces from Iraq in 2003: we won all the battles so far; now what?

Luther is surprisingly perhaps most comfortable when talking about logistic planning for the invasion and then the ensuing nightmare of keeping the panzers supplied. Luther uses this challenge with supply to add more context to the invasion’s operational planning and focuses on the fact that German staff planning for logistics was built on a foundation of many hopeful assumptions. For instance, it seems that no one analyzed what fuel and oil consumption rates would be if the army was not traveling on hard-surfaced roads. The Nazis’ failure to carefully delineate worst-case assumptions meant the German infantry and its horse-bound army suffered tremendous personal hardships.

The book not only addresses roads and the vast array of captured vehicles, minus a ready stockpile of repair parts that outfitted the German army, but Luther speaks in detail about why the rail system failed and the enormous assumptions that wished away potential problems – such as what if the Soviets conducted a scorched-earth policy on their rail system?

Don’t make the mistake of thinking that Luther relied primarily on secondary sources; he obviously spent a good deal of time in archives researching primary sources. In addition, Luther uses a lot of heretofore-unpublished material from letters and diaries to add depth – not just color – to the challenges facing combatants in this theater. The reader might be surprised at some of the material used, which only adds to the comprehensive breadth of this work. One of the facts that comes out time and again in these letters is of the early resurgence of the Red Air Force. Luther dispels the myth that the Soviet air force ceased to exist until the later stages of Operation Typhoon. We also begin to understand how thinly stretched the Luftwaffe became by August 1941, trying to provide logistical support to panzer spearheads, conduct tactical close-air support and strategic bombing, and build an infrastructure to support air operations.

It’s interesting to note that Luther gives a passing nod to Hitler as being the superior strategist to his vaunted General Staff. Luther thinks that Hitler had a better intuitive feel for what was needed for a long strategic war against the British Empire and the United States.

The beauty of this book is that Luther builds well on the foundation of others. Luther’s synthesis of previous works, and of modern historians like Glantz, Jones and Stahel, is simply superb. Luther also digs deeper into the issue of

histography by addressing the previously accepted view of World War II as the captured German generals sold to us in their various debriefings. The German generals painted a picture of an honorable army, fighting an honorable war against an Asiatic, ruthless horde, where due to the nature of combat, excesses happened. But as new works such as *Hitler's Executioners* have demonstrated, the German army was complicit in the crimes and the genocide practiced on the Eastern Front as a matter of policy.

My final thoughts are that if you find this book on sale, buy it right then and there. The biggest problem with the book is its sheer volume, for it appears daunting. The type size at the end of each chapter, however, *is* daunting! My test for any book is how slowly I will force myself to read it, to savor every delightful page. Luther accomplishes that goal with *Barbarossa Unleashed*. Add clear, concise prose, a logical roadmap and structure for the reader to follow, and great documentation, and you have a near-perfect book. Don't be fooled by the fact that it is published by Schiffer Publishing, a specialty house – it's simply a top-notch book that might not have got the lovely treatment it received if not for Schiffer Publishing.

If you buy one book in the next year on the Eastern Front, this work on Army Group Centre's battles in perhaps the decisive campaign that sealed Germany's fate in 1941 deserves the highest consideration.

LTC (DR.) ROBERT G. SMITH

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*Barbarossa 1941: Reframing Hitler's Invasion of Stalin's Soviet Empire*, Frank Ellis, University of Kansas Press, 2015, 624 pages, \$39.95.

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The University of Kansas Press has become one of the powerhouses in publishing works on the Eastern Front of World War II. Is there any subject written about as much in World War II as the Grecian tragedy that played out between the forces of Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Red Army in the cataclysmic struggle that defined World War II and the modern world? So upon seeing that University of Kansas Press was to release a new volume on Operation Barbarossa by Frank Ellis, I eagerly awaited its arrival.

Ellis notes to the reader that much of this material has been available for the past decade but without use or context. With current Russian-West relations at a nadir, one cannot be sure how long any archival material and access will be available.

Ellis' approach will seem mystifying to the blood-and-snow type of readers who want only to see if Ellis contributes anything new to the actual combat that consumed much of Europe's lifeblood, but Ellis' subtitle tells you much about his intent – that his concept is a reframing of the invasion by Hitler's Operation Barbarossa into Stalin's Soviet Empire. Indeed, a review of the chapters tells you this is either a provocative new book – with chapters dealing with topics such as Soviet intelligence assessments of German military intentions, the Victor Suvorov Stalin attack thesis or reflections on the Commissar Order – or a retelling of the same story with perhaps a few new "highlights." Instead, Ellis has produced a gripping tale that will make readers question many of their cherished Eastern Front truths.

Ellis has two theses running concurrently through the book. At one level, we have his declaration that this was a war of ideologies, which is of itself nothing new. What makes it refreshing is Ellis' analysis of how it was really the Soviet Union who launched this war of ideologies, unleashing its murderous rage on its own peoples in the 1930s purges and Ukrainian starvation of the kulaks, culminating in the Polish Katyn Massacre. Out of this fear of the Bolshevik tide and the NKVD, murders increased, coupled with Hitler's vision of Lebensraum in the East, the Commissar Order and the more infamous, but less well-known, Barbarossa Military Jurisdiction Order. The Commissar Order allowed the liquidation without trial of any captured Soviet commissars, and perhaps by inference any other Soviet-type functionary. The Barbarossa Military Jurisdiction Order allowed the employment of full-scale barbaric methods to be used without any legal issue by Wehrmacht soldiers to cow the Soviet peoples, a form of shock and awe by barbarity.

Ellis' other key thesis is that the Soviet intelligences services did extraordinary work in the months leading up to Barbarossa. We read time after time detailed reports of the construction of new infrastructure and the movement of Wehrmacht units to the east. All these preparations could only point to one thing, and these reports were sent

up through the Soviet chain. As Ellis notes, this superior intelligence work “makes Stalin’s failure to act in good time and in good order all the more perplexing.”

Ellis makes good use of the diary of Gefreiter von Wiedebach-Nositz of 20<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division. This account extends from before the launch of Operation Barbarossa until the time of his wounding and evacuation in January 1942. This diary, like other accounts and letters I’ve read, stresses “comradeship, duty and obedience.” Yet I found the diary less interesting than the formal interrogation record of GEN Dmitry G. Pavlov, commander of the key Western Front, the gateway to Moscow via Minsk and Smolensk. Until now, I can say my own military experience meant I saw Pavlov as incompetent, but the review of Pavlov’s interrogation that found him engaged in a conspiracy to betray the Soviet Motherland, coupled with the chapter on intelligence, allows one to be more sympathetic to him.

The Victor Suvorov chapter is perhaps the hardest to pin the intellectual tail on the donkey, for at the end, the reader might rightfully conclude that Ellis himself is certain what to make of the thesis. Suvorov, a high-ranking defector from the Soviets’ intelligence services, is still considered a traitor by the Russian Federation. Suvorov postulated that Stalin was preparing to attack the West, specifically Germany, and that *ipso facto* Operation Barbarossa was in essence a preventive war. This had been dismissed out of hand by almost all historians until the revelation of a May 1941 wargaming exercise run under the watchful eye of then-GEN Georgy K. Zhukov that saw the launch of a Soviet offensive into the West – as well as Stalin’s speech of May 5, 1941 – that buttresses this exercise post-1991. However, Ellis all but demolishes Suvorov’s thesis in a 30-point rebuttal. Ellis, though, hedges his bets by noting that if such a plan ever existed, it has not been declassified and could the Russian Federation ever sanction the publication of such a plan? After all, that plan’s publication would revamp the entire history of World War II and not accrue favorably to the heroism of the Red Army and, by extension, the Russian Federation.

Finally! A work that answers the questions of what both the Soviets and Germans were doing in terms of intelligence work and preparing their side of the battlefield pre-invasion. The more I read, the deeper I was drawn in by a truly different approach and by Ellis’ considerations of a generally-heretofore-ignored aspect of this campaign. Ellis’ approach allows readers to fully grasp much of what they may have wondered about in terms of the run-up to Operation Barbarossa that had been generally ignored by all other historians. Ellis greatly expands our overall knowledge of the pre-invasion period of Barbarossa as well as adds to our comprehension of the Wehrmacht’s initial surge into the Soviet Union. Ellis’ work will cause you to re-evaluate and ponder much of what passes for historical knowledge in this campaign.

My final thoughts are this: don’t buy this book if you don’t want to have a number of your World War II Eastern Front cherished truths challenged. Ellis’ book – although a little weightier than the average Barbarossa book and despite its different emphasis – is a new must-read for any serious student of Operation Barbarossa.

**LTC (DR.) ROBERT G. SMITH**

*(Editor’s note: As an historical side note regarding the cavalry profession, Zhukov began his Red Army career as a cavalry soldier and officer, commanding 39<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment and 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Brigade of 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Division; serving as assistant inspector of cavalry of the Red Army; commanding in 4<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Division and in 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Corps (later 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Corps); and serving as deputy commander of the Belorussian Military District for cavalry before being selected to command First Soviet Mongolian Army Group in 1938. In the 1938-1939 undeclared border war with the Japanese, Zhukov demonstrated and tested the techniques he later used against the Germans on the Eastern Front.)*

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**Genesis, Employment, Aftermath: First World War Tanks and New Warfare, 1900-1945**, edited by Alaric Searle, Helion and Company Limited, 2015, 1,244 pages (including maps and photographs), \$79.

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At the end of the first day of the 1917 Battle of Cambrai, British LTC R.W. Dundas wrote to his wife, “Unless some mischance occurs this afternoon, the tank has finally established itself as a weapon of warfare.” Insights into how the need to restore maneuverability to the World War I European battlefield led to the tank’s creation are

provided in Alaric Searle's work *Genesis, Employment, Aftermath: First World War Tanks and New Warfare, 1900-1945*.

The book is a compilation of academic essays that discuss the technical and industrial development of this new instrument of war. While there are references to various tank engagements, Searle's work concentrates on the production, employment and impact of British, French and German tank programs. There is no in-depth battle analysis presented in the book. The nine chapters of the book are authored by individuals possessing impressive academic credentials that are reflected in the composition of each segment. The chapters address the development of the tank from conception to employment, along with the supporting systems that enhanced effectiveness.

What is a tank? One contributing author cites the definition of a tank as found in writing of the period as "a device which transports men and guns, behind the relative safety of armoured plate, to a point on the battlefield where they can do the most good, or harm."

How that definition became a reality is amply addressed in this book. As the industrial age matured, the concept of placing an artillery weapon into a maneuverable platform came to the forefront of European military planning. Various pre-war designs were put forth, and each eventually was rejected as either excessively expensive or unfeasible. European leaders believed that any future conflict would be a swift war of maneuver and that current weapons, tactics and techniques would ensure victory. This framework was subject to serious alteration as a general stalemate engulfed the Western Front. Massive artillery bombardments made large-scale maneuver virtually impossible. As a result, tactical commanders became obsessed with finding a way to restore battlefield maneuverability to their ground forces.

As the editor notes, "Social systems in competitive situation – and, war is surely one of the most competitive situations in human life – secure their future existence through innovation." With reference to the tank, innovation was ably assisted by improved industrial capability and capacity. The challenge then, as now, was to divine from the mass of ideas presented which would bear the most fruit on the battlefield. As various authors thoroughly explain, attaining the best weapon at a reasonable price required a unique blend of tacticians well-versed in the required need, political support to secure funding and an industrial capability that could quickly provide the required system.

While the Allies sought a system to enhance maneuver, the tank's development was carried out simultaneously between the British and French with limited coordination. German development was subject to a unique series of considerations. Contributing author Ralf Raths relates that the development and production of the German A7V tank was restricted by the competitive industrial requirements to manufacture airplanes and submarines. The highly effective Allied blockade of Germany played a large role in limiting the tank's subsequent production. To compensate for their lack of like systems, the Germans developed effective countermeasures such as anti-tank weapons, grenades and mines.

As initially produced by the British, the Mark-series tanks were noisy, foul-smelling pieces of equipment. Contributor Bryan Hammond details the duties and responsibilities of the crews manning the tank, the armament developed and the uniform adapted to withstand the heat of the vehicle's internal-combustion engine. The effects of terrain, an inability to communicate within and outside the tank, lack of close infantry support and the tenacity of the defenders are addressed by authors Jim Beach and Brian Hall in their contributions to the book.

In addition to manufacturing the tank and training the crews, as noted by several contributors, all the combatants had an effective method for distributing tactical lessons. The gathering of information, staff-production process and distribution of the publications is covered by each author. The contents of these publications usually included a detailed description of a given action, lessons extracted from the battle and recommendations for the modification of tactics to counter a given threat. An abundance of footnotes in each chapter provides information on the source document for those seeking more information.

One note of caution: as stated earlier, this is not an in-depth battle analysis of various tank battles, nor, despite the title, do the authors connect World War I actions to those of World War II. The sole focus is World War I. Well-written, painstakingly researched, with photos that support the text, this book will appeal to those seeking to enhance their appreciation of the development and employment of World War I tanks.

***Route 9 Problem, The Battle for Lang Vei***, David B. Stockwell, Book Publishers Network, 2016, 361 pages (including photographs and maps), \$21.95 paperback, \$9.99 ebook.

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It was a chilly, overcast night Feb. 7, 1968, when U.S. Army SGT Nickolas I. Fragos, a medic with Special Forces Detachment A-101, squeezed the handset of his field telephone and yelled the warning, "We have tanks in the wire!" Just 42 minutes after midnight, the Battle for Lang Vei began.

The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) had intended to send about 40,000 troops to attack the 6,000 U.S. Marines at Khe Sanh as part of its wide-ranging Tet Offensive of 1968. There was one tactical snag for the NVA, though: the small U.S. camp at Lang Vei.

Retired U.S. Army Armor officer LTC Dave Stockwell recounts the heroism of the outnumbered U.S. forces in a battle fought by four of our armed services, as well as the bravery of those on the homefront. As Stockwell writes, the NVA commander wasn't worried, as he expected his tanks to easily overcome U.S. defenders at Lang Vei before moving on to an expected quick and decisive victory at Khe Sanh. However, the tough defenders at Lang Vei had other ideas; the two-dozen U.S. Army Green Berets and their 400 local-tribesmen allies fought so hard that they became known as the "Route 9 problem" at the North Vietnamese government's highest levels.

The Tet Offensive, now considered by military historians as the turning point of the Vietnam War, has elicited a number of books recounting acts of valor and self-sacrifice by combatants on both sides. Although Stockwell's ***Route 9 Problem, The Battle for Lang Vei***, is another book on the subject, it stands out as a good choice for **ARMOR** readers because it details the NVA's first use of tanks against U.S. forces during the war. Also, Stockwell's writing is an action-packed account of the battle rather than a dry historical recounting of the impact of the NVA's PT-76 tanks attacking in the heavily wooded area along the South Vietnamese border with Laos.

Stockwell, who also wrote ***Tanks in the Wire! The First Use of Enemy Armor in Vietnam*** (1989), admitted in the preface of ***Route 9 Problem*** that he wasn't happy with his first book on the battle for Lang Vei, thus his motive for writing this second book on the subject. "It didn't honor the men who fought there in the manner they deserved and in the way I intended," Stockwell said. So he decided to write a more comprehensive story with the encouragement, help and consent of many of the battle's survivors. The new story still highlights the heroic Green Berets and their friendly indigenous forces at Lang Vei, but it also details the crucial roles of other participants. For example, the U.S. Marines at Khe Sanh provided artillery support and rotary-wing aviation evacuation flying into enemy fire, while Navy and Air Force pilots flew nearly constant air support, including low-level bombing and strafing runs.

Stockwell's latest book includes details of the varied backgrounds and personalities of the participants that adds depth to the story. It also relates the war's impact on the Soldiers' families back home during and after the battle. It is written in an easy-to-understand style so that today's young adults with no military experience can understand the war their fathers or grandfathers won't talk about. Therefore, there's no profanity, and the military jargon is explained. Veterans will still enjoy it, though, especially for its authentic and detailed account of the battle.

Individual acts of courage filled the battlefield at Lang Vei. Illustrative of the valor displayed by all the outnumbered defenders, one such selfless act by SFC Eugene Ashley Jr., senior medic of U.S. Army Special Forces C Team (who was at the nearby "Old Lang Vei Camp" at the start of the battle), earned him the posthumous award of the Medal of Honor, the highest military honor of the United States.

Also detailed is the courage of Army MSG James W. Holt, senior medic assigned to U.S. Army Special Forces Detachment A-101. He killed three NVA tanks during the battle before becoming a casualty, and was listed among the missing-in-action heroes of Lang Vei for 47 years. He was repatriated and buried at Arlington National Cemetery May 14, 2015, with national press coverage. The Armor Association awarded Holt the Saint George Award (Bronze) Sept. 28, 2016 – the first posthumously awarded, and also the first time the honor was awarded to a Green Beret.

**GARY A. JONES**

Deputy editor, **ARMOR** magazine

**(Editor's note:** *James William Holt was a sergeant first class at the time of the Battle for Lang Vei. He was promoted to master sergeant while listed as missing in action. Source: **The Virtual Wall Vietnam Veterans Memorial**, <http://www.virtualwall.org/dh/HoltJW01a.htm>.)*