



Operation Don's Main Attack: The Soviet Southern Front's Advance on Rostov, January-February 1943 by David M. Glantz.

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Students of military history know that all wars consist mostly of ghastly mistakes. Belligerents that commit the fewest strategical errors usually—though not always—emerge victorious but rarely feel celebratory about the outcome. The ghastliest strategic mistake of World War II was Operation Barbarossa, the German campaign in the Soviet Union. Launched on 22 June 1941, it ground to halt before the gates of Moscow some six months later.

Joseph Stalin and the Stavka (Main Command of the Armed Forces of the USSR) sought in 1943 to go over to the offensive with a thrust against the city of Rostov on the Don River, aiming to liquidate an entire Wehrmacht army group before the German command could withdraw and avoid another encirclement. Unfortunately, Operation Don was launched before the Red Army could sufficiently prepare to achieve its ambitious objectives. In the end, Operation Don was a flagrant instance of military command overreaching at a terrible cost to the men at its disposal. In *Operation Don's Main Attack*, the prominent military historian David Glantz¹ has tapped newly accessible archival sources to produce a “brutally candid” (iv) treatment of this subject.

The book comprises eight chapters, three appendices, extensive notes, a select bibliography, and a detailed index. There are multiple tables, both in-text and in the appendices, as well as ninety-one maps of variable quality. The great strength of the book lies in the author's perceptive discussions of the strategic logic, operational challenges, and messy tactical realities on the ground, all related in real-time granular detail. Glantz assesses the strategic picture in January 1943 as follows:

While the Germans faced the challenge of withdrawing their forces in the Caucasus before they were cut off and destroyed, the *Stavka* and the Trans-Caucasus Front agonized long and hard over how to orchestrate a major offensive and an effective pursuit. Since Soviet offensive operations in the region on November and December had been generally ineffective, the *Stavka* sought a new concept for mounting more effective offensive operations. (18)

The *Stavka* was nonetheless influenced by the events of December 1941, when local Soviet counterattacks against the German army at the gates of Moscow for the first time blunted the Wehrmacht's overextended spearhead. When Marshal Georgy Zhukov then coordinated counter-strokes involving whole armies, the buckling of the German position at several points signaled a more general and exploitable weakening. Stalin and the *Stavka* reasoned that hitting the Germans at all points of their position would open a breach through to make an in-depth strike. But it was unclear whether an advancing Soviet army would have the logistical means to pursue the retreating Germans fast enough to keep them off balance.

1. With Jonathan House (US Army Command and General Staff College, emeritus), Glantz is co-author of the magisterial “Stalingrad Trilogy”: *To the Gates of Stalingrad* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2009), *Armageddon in Stalingrad* (id., 2009), *Endgame at Stalingrad* (id., 2014).

Miscalculating the Wehrmacht's residual fighting power and local tactical realities, Stalin and his generals directed the Red Army to undertake "multiple offensive operations simultaneously, ranging from reducing German Sixth Army at Stalingrad to conducting major offensives along virtually every axis north and south of the Don River" (34). Inevitably, the attacking forces had to compete with each other for scarce supplies, while harsh weather and the Germans' destruction of railway lines south of Stalingrad exacerbated matters. The Red Army's Southern Front units were forced to make do with what they had at hand or live off barren land, even as German units retreated along interior lines "through a rear area strewn with warehouses and logistical installations" (35).

Even early on, it was clear where Operation Don was heading. In an 8 January combat report, the 6th Mechanized Corps informed the headquarters of Gen. Rodion Malinovsky that:

The enemy has created strong points with developed systems of engineer fortifications in all populated points. The trenches are full profile and the houses are prepared for defense. The enemy has mined extensively. An interrogation of a prisoner clarifies that SS "*Wiking*" Division is operating on the corps' front. (140)

Outnumbered German units took advantage of their enemy's poor coordination and inability to apply constant pressure. They occupied successive defensive positions and inflicted heavy casualties on Red Army units, sometimes launching frontal assaults in the teeth of concentrated firepower. Soviet casualty rates ran as high as 60–80 percent in the first five weeks of the operation. To cope with its enemy's superior numbers, the Wehrmacht reorganized its depleted units into Kampfgruppen (combat groups), mix-and-match formations ranging in size from company to corps with complementary combined-arms capabilities. These formations expedited flexible cut-and-thrust defensive actions and counter-attacks. They repeatedly thwarted Soviet attempts at encirclement by short-circuiting the Red Army's operational timelines. Before Operation Don, Stalin and the Stavka, owing to poor intelligence, underestimated the ability of the German army in Southern Russia to resist a major offensive. Once the operation was underway, moreover, the Germans' heat-of-the-moment economies of strength laid bare the folly of Soviet ambitions. In a particularly acute passage on the role of the Kampfgruppen, Glantz observes that:

In general, Vormann's 23rd Panzer Division was in roughly the same shape as Senger's 17th Panzer Division. It was capable of fielding two panzer-grenadier battalions and smaller *Kampfgruppen* from its motorcycle, engineer, and panzer battalions and roughly 10 to 20 tanks and assault guns on any given day. Gille's SS *Wiking* Motorized Division was stronger because of its greater establishment strength and its ability to field about two battalion-size *Kampfgruppen* each from its *Nordland*, *Westland*, and *Germania* Regiments, as well as smaller *Kampfgruppen* from its reconnaissance and engineer battalions and a panzer *Abteilung* with 15 to 30 tanks and assault guns. However, it too was nearing the end of its strength in February 1941. By the end of January 1943, a battalion-size *Kampfgruppe* from any one of these German divisions could expect to face roughly a full Soviet rifle division or one or two rifle brigades. However, given the dilapidated state of Soviet forces in terms of combat troops ("bayonets"), the Soviet superiority in manpower was largely negated by the maneuverability of the opposing German forces. (695)

Malinovsky replaced Gen. Andrei as front commander on 2 February. Opposing him, Field Marshal Eric von Manstein—head of the German Army Group South and the Wehrmacht's best operational commander—concluded that the Soviet offensive was badly overextended and contrived a counterstroke to throw back the Red Army in southern Russia. This involved a consolidation of the German position by withdrawing Army Group Don to the Mius River. Manstein then

struck the Red Army's extended flank and led a drive to recapture the northern Donbas and Khar'kov regions. Rostov was aborted in mid-February, after the Red Army had spent a week of intense combat along the approaches to the city. Hence, Malinovsky's mission suddenly changed to pursuing the German army fast enough to keep it from establishing a defensive position along the Mius. All this without significant reinforcements and even worse logistical support than he had enjoyed at Rostov.

By late February, the operation had failed to prevent the German forces from escaping and squandered too much manpower in the effort. Never one to lose sleep over gratuitous blood-letting, Stalin celebrated the fact that the offensive had nonetheless driven German forces from the southern half of the Don basin westward to the Mius, albeit temporarily.

Glantz concludes that Operation Don was "a valuable lesson in assessing reality and avoiding the pitfalls of overoptimism," but that the lesson was ill-learned. Indeed, Stalin never lost faith that military pressure applied everywhere would produce military success somewhere—a conviction that would "characterize Soviet military strategy until the war's end" (700–701). The strength of Glantz's book is his ability to apply his extraordinary research in German and Soviet records to the testimony of human misery on the ground and the calculations of generals stooped over maps in search of the next valuable lesson of war.