The War Hitler Won: The Battle for Europe, 1939-1941

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Abstract

From 1939 to 1941, circumstance handed the Wehrmacht a perfect opportunity to fight Bewegungskrieg: short, sharp campaigns within the friendly confines of central and eastern Europe, with its relatively short distances, temperate climate, and highly developed road and rail infrastructure. When it came to operational-level maneuver warfare under these conditions, the Wehrmacht was without peer. None of this was new in Prussian or German history, and indeed the exact same description might be applied to Prussian armies under Frederick the Great. The summer of 1941 saw the opening of the war’s main event. Operation Barbarossa was the greatest undertaking in military history, and German success in the opening weeks was amazing. With the Panzers ranging far and deep, the Wehrmacht sealed off one immense encirclement of Soviet forces after another: at Bialystok, Minsk, Smolensk. By December, the Germans stood outside Moscow. They had inflicted four million casualties on the Red Army, about 3 million of whom were prisoners, and to many observers, the Soviet Union seemed finished. Indeed, Germany had conquered the continent. What we might call the “Great European War” of 1939-41 was over. It was the war that Hitler won.