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The Battle of Stalingrad in Western Historical Perspective

No battle of the Second World War has gripped the western imagination as much as the Battle of Stalingrad. The progress of the battle was widely reported in the western allied press at the time and public opinion was clear that this was the decisive moment of the war. When the battle was over the Soviet victory at Stalingrad was hailed as the salvation of western civilisation and as the beginning of the end for Hitler and the Nazi regime. In an editorial on the battle published on the 4 February 1943 the *New York Times* wrote:

“Stalingrad is the scene of the costliest and most stubborn struggle in this war...In the scale of its intensity, its destructiveness and its horror, Stalingrad has no parallel. It engaged the full strength of the two biggest armies in Europe and could fit into no lesser framework than that of a life and death conflict which encompasses the Earth.”

In the 70 years since Stalingrad the battle has continued to occupy a central place in western historical consciousness about the Second World War. The fighting in the city of Stalingrad, the surrender of Paulus and the 6th Army and the great Soviet counteroffensive of November 1942 – these are among the most iconic images of the Second World War.

Russian historians sometimes complain that the decisive Soviet role in the defeat of Nazi Germany is not given enough credit in the west and that the great battles of the Soviet-German war are neglected by western historians. There is

some truth in this accusation but there is, in fact, quite a lot of coverage of the Soviet-German war in the west, both by historians and in the media. At the centre of this historical attention has always been the battle of Stalingrad.

This fascination with Stalingrad in the west has been fed by a constant stream of histories, novels, films and documents. Important, too, has been the publication and translation of German and Soviet memoirs. Of particular note is the impact of Marshal Vasily Chuikov's memoirs of the battle – a treatment of the battle that has formed the basis of most western accounts of the battle within the city of Stalingrad.

Postwar western historiography of the battle begins with the publication in 1946 of Alexander Werth's *The Year of Stalingrad*. Werth was a western correspondent in Moscow during the war, and his book combined memoir and personal observation together with a close reading of Soviet sources, especially newspapers. Werth repeated his treatment of Stalingrad in his general history of the Soviet-German War – *Russia at War* – published in 1964.

There were a number of German books on Stalingrad published in the 1950s, but there was no English-language follow-up to Werth's book until Ronald Seth published his book in 1959. Seth knew Russian and visited the city and interviewed Soviet participants in the battle. Seth, like Alexander Werth, was clear that the Soviet victory at Stalingrad was the turning of the tide of the war against Hitler not just for the Soviet Union but for all the members of the allied coalition.

The Seth and Werth view of the importance of the Stalingrad turning point in the Second World War as a whole is nowadays a commonplace view in west.

But that was not the case in the 1950s. The outbreak of the cold war meant that it was politically convenient to underplay the decisive Soviet role in defeating Nazi Germany and to forget the colossal losses the Red Army and the Soviet people.

During the Second World War Winston Churchill had said that “the guts of the German army have been largely torn out by Russian valour and generalship”. But Churchill also claimed that the allied invasion of North African and Rommel’s defeat at El Alamein in October-November 1942 was as important as Operation Uranus and the Red Army’s encirclement of the Germans at Stalingrad. It was this latter theme that predominated in Churchill’s influential multi-volume history of the Second World War published in the late 1940s and early 1950s. According to Churchill what he called the ‘hinge of fate’ of the Second World War revolved around El Alamein not Stalingrad.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the western historiography of the battle of Stalingrad developed considerably. There were a number of books about Stalingrad specifically and extensive treatments of the battle in general works by western historians on the Soviet-German war. In terms of the popular history of the war the most important and influential book was William Craig’s *Enemy at the Gates* published in 1973. Like much western literature on Stalingrad Craig’s book was based mainly on German sources, but his treatment was quite balanced and he captured the drama of the battle very effectively and detailed the enormous casualties incurred by the Red Army in defending the city. Craig’s book, in particular his story about the famous Soviet sniper at Stalingrad Valery Zaitsev, was the basis for the film *Enemy at the Gates*, released in 2001. But it is a film that gives a rather distorted impression of what Craig wrote in his book. Unlike the film Craig avoided the typical western stereotypes of the

Soviet system during the war as dominated by brutal generals and crazy commissars shooting their own soldiers at the drop of a hat.

Many different views were expressed in the 1960s and 1970s western literature on Stalingrad but there were some common arguments and themes:

1. That Stalingrad was a Soviet victory as well as a German defeat i.e. there was some recognition of the merits of Soviet political and military leaders, including Stalin, of the utility of the Soviet communist system in mobilising the country's resources, and of the critical role played by the patriotic mobilisation of the Soviet people in winning the battle and the war.
2. That the Soviet victory at Stalingrad owed much to the heroic defence of the city by its Red Army defenders. In this respect western commentary was heavily influenced by Soviet heroic literature on the city, including account by Soviet writers such as Simonov, Grossman and Nekrasov.
3. That Stalingrad was the most important battle and the most decisive victory of the Second World War. But this argument about Stalingrad was not uncontested and there were those who argued that Moscow and Kursk were as important or even more important battles.

In the 1990s – after the collapse of communism and the fall of the Soviet Union – another trend in western treatments of Stalingrad gained some prominence. This was the perspective that categorised the battle as merely an episode in the barbaric struggle between Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism. The Soviet Union triumphed at Stalingrad, it was argued, only because of the brutality of the

communist system and the horrors enforced on Red Army soldiers by the Soviet authorities.

A key text in this strand of western historiography was Antony Beevor's book on Stalingrad published in 1998 – a book that has been read by millions of people throughout the world in many different languages. Beevor's book was the popular history successor to Craig's *Enemy at the Gates*. Beevor did not know Russian but he was able to employ some researchers to work in the newly opened Soviet archives. The material supplied to him he used to detail the harsh discipline enforced on Soviet soldiers at Stalingrad, including a large number of executions carried out to ensure discipline.

The problem with Beevor's book was that if the Soviets were so brutal toward their own people, why didn't the Germans win the battle rather than the Red Army? In truth brutality and harsh discipline – of which there was undoubtedly quite a lot - is not a sufficient explanation as to why the Red Army was able to hold on Stalingrad. In Beevor's book there was insufficient recognition that a prolonged, intense and costly battle such as Stalingrad could never have been won without the heroism and voluntary sacrifice of the great majority of the Red Army who fought there.

This was the argument of my own book on the battle – *Victory at Stalingrad: The Battle That Changed History* – published in 2002 on the 60th anniversary of the battle. My aim was to re-tell in a popular and accessible form the epic story of Stalingrad, to correct the mistaken impressions created by Beevor and others, to interrogate Soviet, German and western accounts of the battle, and to re-assert the historical significance of the Soviet victory.

My book was followed by the publication in 2007 of a very important western book on Stalingrad Michael Jones *Stalingrad: How the Red Army Triumphed* – a book based mainly on the testimony of Soviet veterans of the battle. Through the accounts of Soviet witnesses Jones shows that the Red Army triumphed at Stalingrad because something quite extraordinary happened during the course of the battle – the Red Army at Stalingrad was transformed into an army of mass heroism. Jones shows that heroism was the rule rather than the exception at Stalingrad and that it was present at every level of the Red Army – from privates to generals.

Jones' narrative is possibly a little exaggerated and over-romanticised, but he constructs a powerful case that the myth of heroic Stalingrad – created by the Soviet authorities during the battle itself - was based on reality. I would add that the heroism displayed by the Red Army defenders of Stalingrad had many precedents – that there was an established tradition of mass heroism even before the battle began. I am thinking of the Brest fortress, of Leningrad, of Tula and of the siege of Sebastopol.

Jones book was also important because he proposed a number of revisions to western accounts of the battle within Stalingrad – accounts which have been heavily influenced by Chuikov's memoirs. For example, Jones contests Chuikov's claim that he never contemplated evacuating his HQ to the eastern bank of the Volga, citing documentary evidence that Chuikov made such a request but was overruled by the higher command. But on the whole Jones portrait of Chuikov is very positive and he emerges as a tough but heroic general who shared the privations and dangers of his soldiers – unlike his German counterparts who tended to stay away from the frontline.

Another important point made by Jones is that while the Soviets did impose harsh discipline at Stalingrad the number of soldiers they executed was relatively small: the vast majority of the soldiers caught fleeing the battlefield were simply returned to their units. Indeed, the blocking detachments carrying out this duty also fought and died at Stalingrad. At Stalingrad even the NKVD was heroic.

In terms of the detailed operational history of the Stalingrad campaign and battle the most important recent works are the books of the American military historian David Glantz and his co-author Jonathan House. These two authors have published the first two volumes of a massive trilogy on Stalingrad that has already become the standard western reference work on the battle. Another important contribution by western historians to the historiography of Stalingrad that is worth mentioning is Joel Hayward's *Stopped at Stalingrad: The Luftwaffe and Hitler's Defeat in the East* published in 1998. Hayward points out that while Churchill's claims in relation to the importance of El Alamein are exaggerated, the western allies' North African operations in 1942 did force the Luftwaffe to devote vital resources to the evacuation of the Afrikakorps – denying aircraft that might have been used to re-supply the trapped Germans in Stalingrad.

David Glantz is the author of many books about the Soviet-German war, the most controversial being *Zhukov's Greatest Defeat: The Red Army's Epic Defeat in Operation Mars*.

Mars was the companion operation to Operation Uranus. It was an attack on Army Group Centre in the Rzhev-Viazma area. Unlike Operation Uranus Operation Mars failed to achieve its objectives and the Red Army suffered large

casualties with nothing to show for it. Glantz argues that for Zhukov Mars was more important than Uranus and that he spent more time on the preparation and supervision of Mars than he did on Uranus – which was left to Vasilevsky to organise.

I examined this issue again in my recent biography of Zhukov, where I point out that Mars was, in fact, the third in a series of failed operations in the Rzhev-Viazma area – an insight I gained from reading the work of Russian military historians, especially Svetlana Gerasimova. I also argued that while in his memoirs Zhukov might have over-dramatised his role in relation to Operation Uranus and ignored the failure of Mars, there is no doubt that he and Vasilevsky were the two main architects of the Soviet victory at Stalingrad.

The series of 70th anniversaries of the Second World War that began in 2009 have seen the publication of number of new western histories of the war, including a new general history of the war by Antony Beevor – a book that opens with an account of Zhukov’s famous victory at Khalkhin-Gol in August 1939. Of course, if you want to read the best account of Khalkhin-Gol you will have to read my biography of Zhukov!

These new western books about the Second World War share the bias towards the western role in the war that was displayed in earlier western works, but they also reflect greater recognition of the centrality of the Soviet-German conflict and importance of Stalingrad as the great turning point of the war.

Winston Churchill famously said that “before Alamein we never had a victory. After Alamein we never had a defeat”. He also talked about El Alamein being the end of the beginning. In truth, the end for Nazi Germany began at

Stalingrad. Without that Soviet victory Britain would have faced many more defeats at the hands of Germans.