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Boris Gorbachevsky, *Through the Maelstrom: A Red Army Soldier's War on the Eastern Front, 1942–1945*. Translated and edited by Stuart Britton. Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2008. Pp. xix, 453. ISBN 978–0–7006–1605–3.

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Boris Gorbachevsky served in the Red Army, first as a combat infantryman, then as a front-line junior officer, and finally as a Komsomol (Communist Youth League) organizer on the Eastern Front from mid-1942 through the end of the Second World War. His memoir¹ records experiences he had during those horrible years when the Soviet people suffered approximately twenty-five million military and civilian casualties (i.e., about half of the deaths caused by World War II globally). His central question is “Why did the cost of victory turn out to be so unimaginably high?” (xvii). One obvious answer is the unstinting barbarity not only of the Nazis but of the *Wehrmacht* as a whole in their treatment of Red Army prisoners and Soviet civilians in the German-occupied areas of the USSR.² Another answer, to which Gorbachevsky pays grudging respect, is the tactical skill of German commanders and the tenacity of their fighting men. But these subjects are not the author’s focus; rather he seeks deeper answers in the way the USSR fought the Great Patriotic War and the responses of the Soviet people to Adolf Hitler’s onslaught.

These latter topics were the subject of an avalanche of Soviet-era publications from 1945 to 1991, virtually all of which were required to trumpet the myth of the Great Patriotic War, that is, the legend of the wise leadership of Josef Stalin and his senior commanders and the willing self-sacrifice of the Soviet peoples. Even the partial criticism of Stalin during the administration of Nikita Khrushchev did not dare encroach upon the sacred myth. After the collapse of the USSR, a new wave of more honest memoirs and critical works of historical scholarship has emerged. Gorbachevsky’s book is a valuable addition to this trend.

Having asked why victory was so costly, the author uncovers a number of answers on the Soviet side. First, the USSR was forced into the war unprepared in many ways. The Red Army was still wedded to strategic concepts current in the Russian Civil War of 1918–1920, but fatally outmoded in the 1940s. Gorbachevsky and his 1942 class of officer trainees learned strategies and tactics with no relevance to the realities of combat on the Eastern Front. Clearly, a serious appraisal of the Barbarossa debacle in 1941 would have been too embarrassing for Stalin and the Red Army’s senior commanders. Moreover, the Great Purges had eliminated the most innovative and technologically sophisticated general officers. So, generals fighting the last war led to slaughter ill-trained recruits often too frightened to oppose even the most suicidally wrong-headed orders.

A second answer follows from the first: lacking adequate training, weaponry, modern tactical and strategic concepts, as well as freedom of initiative and flexibility, Soviet commanders frequently mounted futile “human wave” attacks that needlessly squandered millions of lives. The author uses the battles for Rzhev on the central front, where he received his own baptism of fire, as a case in point. The Germans had absolute mastery of the skies and a stout, deeply echeloned defense. The Russians lacked adequate tank and artillery support, sufficient vehicles to make their infantry rapidly mobile, as well as effective battlefield communications gear. Their inferior machine guns frequently malfunctioned. Wave after wave of Red Army troopers were simply fed into the “meat grinder.” In Gorbachevsky’s first assault on German positions at Rzhev, intense machine gun fire, screaming Stuka dive bombers, and enemy artillery decimated his unit. Soviet

1. Previously published as *Rzhevskaiia miasorubka: Vremia otvagi. Zadacha—Vyzhit'* [The Rzhev Meat Grinder: A Time of Courage. The Task—Survival] (Moscow: Iauza & Eksmo, 2006). The English edition contains some additional material not in the original.

2. This gruesome subject has been persuasively analyzed in Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941–45: German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare* (NY: St. Martin’s, 1986).

forces fought from January 1942 until March 1943 before driving the enemy from Rzhev, losing over a million men in the process.

Gorbachevsky, who was twice wounded, is understandably bitter about the unwarranted sacrifices imposed on him and his fellow infantrymen:

Our soldiers christened the battles for Rzhev the “Rzhev meat grinder,” into which Stalin, Zhukov, and Konev fed division after division. Forty-two mass graves in the Rzhev soil contain the remains of servicemen and women from more than 140 rifle divisions, 50 separate rifle brigades, and 50 tank brigades. The tragedy of this battle consisted not only of the unparalleled sacrifices but also of the lack of success of these operations.... The Germans at Rzhev had qualitatively better equipment, more experienced officers, much superior command and control over their forces, extensive combat experience, and professional soldiers.... To offset these German advantages, the Red Army had only numbers (432–33).

Another topic Gorbachevsky addresses is combat motivation. Regarding western, particularly American, troops, Paul Fussell has argued controversially that GIs simply fought for their buddies (i.e., to support close friends and avoid disgrace in their eyes) and that lofty ideological pronouncements like the Four Freedoms had little relevance.³ Gerald Linderman has countered that, while small-unit cohesion was an important element in combat motivation, so was dedication to humanitarian and democratic principles, even if often unspoken.⁴ Gorbachevsky has curiously little to say about the buddy phenomenon. While he produces a few examples of small-unit bonding, most of the soldiers he commanded were strangers to each other—separated by ethnicity, religion, ignorance, and fear. Appeals to fight for Stalin and communism fell largely upon deaf ears, especially among peasant conscripts with bitter memories of the unacknowledged civil war that had marked the collectivization campaign.

Initially, before the pivotal Stalingrad victory, defeatism was rampant among Soviet forces. Even Stalin himself feared for a time that the Germans would win. This led to massive desertions (half a million in 1942 alone), unforced surrenders to the enemy, and numerous self-inflicted wounds to avoid combat. The regime’s only partially successful measures to enforce discipline included draconian punishments for officers whose troops defected to the other side, blocking detachments to fire on soldiers fleeing battle, and Stalin’s famous “not one step back” order (of which the author strongly approved). The real turnaround in motivation and discipline among Soviet troops came after Stalingrad. The German “supermen” were clearly no longer invincible. Beyond a growing confidence in victory, another factor inspired Red Army men: by this point every soldier had seen, or at least heard of, the pervasive barbarity of the Germans—the deliberate destruction of towns and villages and the unprovoked slaughter of their innocent inhabitants. Hate replaced fear as the dominant emotion of Soviet servicemen. Regime propaganda skillfully exploited this, emphasizing defense of the motherland and the historic tradition of repelling Germanic, Polish, Swedish, and French invaders.

By 1943, a new Soviet Army was emerging, not only buoyed by the Stalingrad victory, but better armed and equipped, thanks to heroic Soviet production efforts and Allied aid (which Gorbachevsky readily acknowledges—his favorite examples being American canned stew and Studebaker trucks). Just as important, by 1943 the Soviet Army—both generals and front line troops—had learned how to fight the Germans. Knowledge which might have been acquired from a serious, if painful, study of the 1941 disaster, was gained only by bloody trial and error the following year. Yet, better morale, weapons, mobility, and tactics did not put an end to wasteful frontal assaults. Even late in the war, as the Red Army swept into Germany, Soviet troops were forced to storm enemy strong points that the Germans were defending to the death, though these bastions could easily have been isolated and bypassed.

Beyond the fighting itself, Gorbachevsky reports several significant attitudes and actions prevalent among Soviet troops, including a pervasive anti-Semitism among both ill-educated infantrymen in the trenches and professional officers in the command bunkers. As a Soviet Jew, he is especially sensitive to this

3. *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1989).

4. *The World Within War: The American Combat Experience in World War II* (NY: Free Press, 1997).

defect in the Marxist experiment. In addition, men of all ranks frequently complained about the continuing delay of an Allied second front in western Europe—Stalin and his Politburo henchmen were not alone in fearing that Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt might be willing to fight Hitler to the last Russian. Also, the author reports the common feeling that the Russian people deserved a better, more prosperous, and freer life after the war. Many believed the unparalleled sacrifices made by this generation had earned it a better future.⁵ Finally, Gorbachevsky admits that their experience of German savagery and Russian tragedy drove many Red Army men to seek vengeance in acts of pillage, vandalism, and rape as they overran eastern Germany.

Readers of this memoir should be aware that it is based largely on memory and hearsay. The author kept a diary in the first months of his military service, but was soon forced to burn it. He later saved a few documents (orders, reports, etc.), but his written evidence base is quite thin, making it difficult to distinguish which parts of the memoir are based on vivid personal memories (like some of the battle sequences), conversations with other soldiers, or later historical accounts. Gorbachevsky admits to “reconstructing” many of his quotations. Given the warnings of professional psychologists about memory and learning, that is a weakness, though not a fatal flaw.⁶

Those already familiar with the substantial existing scholarship on the Eastern Front will find few surprises here. Overall, however, *Through the Maelstrom* is a worthy installment in the soldier’s-eye-view literature on the Second World War and will be especially useful to western readers, who often know little about the Eastern Front, even though it was the decisive theater of operations in the struggle against the Third Reich.

5. These themes are fully developed in Amir Wiener, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 2000), and Elena Zubkova, *Russia after the War: Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945–1957* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998).

6. See, for example, Daniel L. Schacter, *Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).