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Geoffrey Roberts, *Stalin's General: The Life of Georgy Zhukov*. New York: Random House, 2012. Pp. xxii, 375. ISBN 978-1-4000-6692-6.

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The crucible of violence, war, and social upheaval that was early twentieth-century Russia gave rise to a generation of Soviet leaders who were born into pre-industrial poverty but lived to lead the world into the space age. Premiers such as Nikita Khrushchev (b. 1894) and Leonid Brezhnev (b. 1906) were young witnesses to the almost continuous turmoil that tore Russia apart starting in 1914. We often forget these earlier experiences of men who later led an inscrutable superpower and terrified the world with the prospect of thermonuclear war. Throughout the Cold War, secrecy and censorship veiled the personal lives of those at the top of the Soviet hierarchy. Since then, however, the opening of archives and the careful work of historians like William Taubman¹ have cast new light on the lives of the men who lived through the rapid social and technological changes of the last century. Georgy Zhukov rose from one of the poorest segments of society to become the most famous Soviet general of World War II by sheer will power and a canny use of social opportunity.

In *Stalin's General*, his seventh book on Russian and Soviet military history,² Geoffrey Roberts (Univ. College Cork) vividly chronicles Zhukov's remarkable trajectory through wars and purges, his career moves and family relations, from the fall of the tsarist Russian Empire to the dawn of nuclear warfare. This was a particularly challenging task, for "A personality profile does not reveal military prowess. Generating popularity or provoking hostility among peers cannot measure talent and skill. Comparisons are made even more difficult when it comes to Zhukov because, as Eisenhower noted, the Soviet general 'had longer experience as a responsible leader in great battles than any other man of our time'" (314).

Roberts draws on personal correspondence in newly opened archives and interviews with family members to illuminate the flesh-and-blood man behind the myth. He paints an extraordinary portrait, moving from Zhukov's childhood and upbringing in the tumultuous period of the Russian Civil War and World War I to his rise through the ranks of the Red Army, his successes in World War II, and his eventual fall from favor and later rehabilitation.

Born in 1896 to a poor peasant family, Zhukov was of prime fighting age when he was conscripted into a cavalry regiment in the Tsar's army to fight in World War I, during which he was wounded and decorated for bravery. In 1918, the Bolshevik army recruited and professionalized former tsarist army NCOs like Zhukov, whose primary affinities and aspirations always remained military rather than political: "Like many among that first generation of soldiers to serve in the Red Army, Zhukov's political convictions were the result of his military service rather than the reason he joined up" (23).

Stalin's General opens in June 1945: having successfully defended Russia and defeated Hitler's Third Reich, Zhukov returned home to Moscow to enjoy his accolades as the greatest general of the USSR's "Great Patriotic War." As Stalin's deputy supreme commander, Zhukov was a hero to the cheering crowds who greeted him. Newsreel footage familiarized the rest of the world with the victories of the man who had graced the cover of *Time* magazine (14 Dec 1942)³ as "Stalin's Favorite."

1. Khrushchev: *The Man and His Era* (NY: Norton, 2003).

2. The others are *The Unholy Alliance: Stalin's Pact with Hitler* (Bloomington: Indiana U Pr, 1989), *The Soviet Union and the Origins of the Second World War: Russo-German Relations and the Road to War, 1933-1941* (NY: St. Martin's, 1995), *The Soviet Union in World Politics: Coexistence, Revolution, and Cold War, 1945-1991* (NY: Routledge, 1999), *Victory at Stalingrad: The Battle That Changed History* (NY: Longman, 2002), *Stalin's War's: From World War to Cold War, 1939-1953* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2006), and *Molotov: Stalin's Cold Warrior* (Washington: Potomac, 2012).

3. *Time* archive image – www.miwsr.com/rd/1330.htm.

Why, then, was Zhukov shunted off to a remote military district less than three months later? Roberts's painstaking archival work and special expertise in the Soviet system of government and military operations yield an answer. His biography tells Zhukov's story from several angles; Roberts is at his best in discussing the man's place in the Soviet milieu, with all its political peculiarities. By placing his subject in the atmosphere of a particular stage in Russian and Soviet history, Roberts reveals the defining contributions of this context to Zhukov's full development of his potentials:

Zhukov's ambitious operations were not simply his own dreamed-up conceits. They were the shared vision of Stalin and Stavka and also reflected the Soviet tradition of grand projects of transformation. Zhukov's military comprehension had been formed in this tradition and although it could allow for creativity it was also highly authoritarian and hierarchical with an emphasis on discipline and conformity. Zhukov's reliance more on energy and vigor than on imagination to achieve his goals was consonant with the prevailing ethos of the whole Soviet system. So a particular component of Zhukov's great success was that he was a *Soviet* general and it is unlikely he would have been so effective a general in any other army. (313)

Roberts's stated purpose is to counterbalance the hero cult surrounding Zhukov. He skillfully uses new primary source material, particularly Russian State Military Archive documents and Stalin's personal calendar, as well as the memoirs of Zhukov's Red Army contemporaries and rivals, including Nikita Khrushchev, Konstantin Rokossovsky, Ivan Konev, and Aleksandr Vasilevsky, to dispel the myth, while admitting Zhukov's "incomparable contribution to the victory over Nazi Germany" (318).⁴ Roberts traces the Red Army's institutional development from its roots as a volunteer force in the Russian Civil War to its modernization after serious losses in the Finland campaign of 1939–40. These changes allowed Zhukov to foster innovations and the avoidance of past mistakes, one of his best qualities as a commander.

Roberts shows that Zhukov, by 1941 Chief of the General Staff, bore some responsibility for Moscow's inaction in the face of Operation Barbarossa. In his memoirs, Zhukov played down his role in the development of the MP-41 (*Mobilizatsionnyi Plan 1941*), the delayed mobilization of the Red Army in response to inaccurate estimates of Germany's troop buildup. But Roberts makes a cogent case that, like Stalin, Zhukov was caught completely off guard by Germany's preemptive strike. When the Wehrmacht invaded on 22 June 1941, the Soviets suffered millions of casualties within weeks and were forced to retreat to Leningrad and Moscow.

By March 1942, however, the Germans had suffered a reversal of fortune and sustained heavy losses of their own; Zhukov and his colleagues at Stavka headquarters began to develop Operation Uranus, the Soviet counteroffensive that eventually encircled and destroyed Friedrich Paulus's 6th Army in Stalingrad. The operation took the Germans by surprise and marked the first successfully executed grand envelopment maneuver by the Red Army. Germany's allied armies, charged with guarding 6th Army's flanks, were also routed, leading Italy to pull out of the alliance in 1943. Uranus showed a "breadth of strategic vision" that inaugurated the expulsion of German forces from the USSR in 1943–44. The Reich and its allies lost fifty divisions and sustained 1.5 million casualties. As the tide turned, Stalin appointed Zhukov to lead the invasion of Germany itself.

Zhukov had first caught the attention of the western news media and the public at large during the defense of Moscow. When Stalin appointed him commander of the Western Front, he had pictures of Zhukov printed in the newspapers—a first for a Soviet military commander. The purpose was to boost morale when all seemed lost. Hence a wartime myth was born, but so too were the rivalries that eventually led to Zhukov's postwar demotion, when, a month after the 1946 May Day Parade, he was "arraigned before the Higher Military Council and accused of egoism and disrespect for his peers" (244).

Stalin's General mostly concerns Zhukov's actions in World War II. Roberts is less interested in the threat that Stalin's purges posed for Zhukov and indeed all top Soviets officials before, during, and after the

4. He also credits the work of earlier biographers, esp. Albert Axell, *Marshal Zhukov: The Man Who Beat Hitler* (NY: Longman, 2003), William J. Spahr, *Zhukov: The Rise and Fall of a Great Captain* (Novato, CA: Presidio Pr, 1993), and Otto Preston Chaney, *Zhukov* (Norman: U Oklahoma Pr, 1996), though he faults their uncritical over-reliance on Zhukov's own memoirs, which are, of course, often patently self-serving.

war. Stalin's Red Army purges in 1937–38 removed over thirty-four thousand officers, including Rokossovsky, who was imprisoned but later reinstated. In 1941, after Operation Barbarossa, Stalin began another decimation of his top commanders, including Dmitry Pavlov, the commander of the Western Front, which had collapsed with the capture of 400,000 Soviet prisoners. Pavlov, sentenced to death and summarily executed, was scapegoated for the mistakes of senior leadership figures including Zhukov and Stalin himself. How did Zhukov and other leaders, notably Khrushchev, who survived this period avoid removal or outright execution? Naturally, Zhukov states in his memoirs that he expected to be arrested, but Roberts does not explore in detail how he came through the purges with his life and professional status intact. Did he collude in the elimination of some of his competitors? While he touches on Zhukov's response to Khrushchev's 1956 Party Congress speech denouncing Stalin, Roberts leaves this question unresolved.

Roberts's expert analyses of Zhukov's personal and professional achievements and failures will make compelling reading for both a general audience and military specialists.⁵ He succeeds in humanizing the man with details of his whole life story, from his service as a young NCO during the bloody birth of the Soviet Union, to his family ties, personal relationship with Stalin, and preservation of his reputation against the attacks of bitter rivals after the war. *Stalin's General* is a welcome, comprehensive, sober introduction to an important, often mythologized historical figure.

5. A particular enhancement is the inclusion of twenty-six maps illustrating Zhukov's campaigns, from the Battle of Khalhin-Gol in 1939 to the Berlin Operation in 1945.