



Stalingrad: The City That Defeated the Third Reich by Jochen Hellbeck.

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In the murderous cauldron of the German-Soviet war, the Battle of Stalingrad stands out as uniquely savage. The struggle on the banks of the Volga was one of the war's turning points; many historians have studied and recounted Germany's operations during the long battle and the ultimate destruction of its Sixth Army. Among these histories, some recent work¹ has restored to the Red Army the attention it deserves, but analyses of the Soviet rank and file remain rare. In *Stalingrad*, Jochen Hellbeck (Rutgers Univ.) reveals the mentalities of Soviet civilians and soldiers, by tapping a "massive collection of documents ... unique in military and social history research" (79).

The book is based on interviews conducted by historians working for the Soviet Commission on the History of the Great Patriotic War. In January and February 1943, they met with soldiers, political officials, and civilians who had participated in the Stalingrad conflagration. Their interviews were part of a larger project meant to highlight the USSR's extraordinary people's war against the German invaders. The "candor and complexity" (4) of the interviews, combined with an official postwar emphasis on the "Stalin cult" made "the voices of individual soldiers ... anathema to the regime" (437). However, the documents were not destroyed but consigned to dusty archives for several decades. Hellbeck believes that "regarded as a whole, the interviews convey a unity of place, time, and action, the likes of which are found only in literature The Stalingrad transcripts make it possible for the first time to hear voices of Red Army soldiers, hitherto virtually unknown, across a varied, nuanced spectrum" (5, 19).

Of the volume's five chapters, the first, "The Fateful Battle," presents a general overview of the battle and identifies the primary themes of the interview transcripts, while the last, "War and Peace," concerns the memory of the battle during the postwar era of the USSR. Chapters 2-4, "A Chorus of Soldiers," "Nine Accounts of the War," and "The Germans Speak," present the transcripts and scattered bits of commentary.

The interviews offer gripping and vivid accounts of the charnel house of Stalingrad. One soldier speaks of a "whole city that was on fire. From the other side of the Volga you could see the flames, the tongues of flames that all merged together to form one enormous ball of fire" (362). Another, having reached the Volga's east bank, saw a city that "looked particularly terrifying then. Everything was burning" (333). The transcripts capture the industrial nature of the combat. An infantry commissar states that the Germans "unleashed a constant barrage of fire from artillery, mortars, machine guns, submachine guns, and rifles; they scattered bombs like peas from the sky; and through this assault on both the physical body and spirit, the enemy was able to unhinge even the most battle-hardened of men. The soldiers said this was hell" (175). Yet, the Red Army did not break in Stalingrad; even when pushed into a few pockets on the west bank of the Volga, Soviet soldiers doggedly continued to fight and die. Why?

1. E.g., the *Stalingrad Trilogy* by David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2009-14).

Some historians have found an answer in the Red Army's brutal discipline. Hellbeck, too, acknowledges that "the penal culture in the Red Army was extremely—and by many accounts, excessively—violent" (59), but thinks its importance has been exaggerated. Noting that 169 soldiers were shot for indiscipline in Stalingrad between October 1942 and January 1943, he stresses the value of discipline as a means "to teach self-control [and] ... transform [the soldier] into a self-sacrificing warrior" (53, 61). He posits that this "didactic element" (51) of discipline helped ensure the army's cohesion.

The author extends his case for discipline as education in his most sweeping and provocative claim about the transcripts:

the interviews also reveal an element at odds with most western depictions: the Communist party's enormous effort to condition the troops. The party was an ever-present institutional force in the form of political officers and ideological messages.... Together with the secret police, the party placed the army in an iron yoke. But even when party officials doled out punishment, the intentions were corrective, seeking to instruct, motivate, and remake the troops. Historians in the west have overlooked the Communist party's mobilizing function. This is partly because their access has been limited to official documents from political headquarters, which offer little insight into the everyday working of the political apparatus. But it is also because they tend to understand the party as solely repressive in nature, regarding its ideological work as a mere demonstration of political power. (19)

This places the Red Army rank and file squarely in the context of the 1930s Stalinist Soviet Union. Adopting Stephen Kotkin's notion of "speaking Bolshevik,"² Hellbeck argues that Stalin's attempt to recast Soviet society was relatively successful, as millions of citizens adapted to the increasingly ideological nature of state and society and internalized the regime's message. He finds "classic Soviet character traits" in the transcripts of soldiers who were "willful, optimistic, collectively minded, and accepting of violence" (20). A cadre of party and political officers encouraged such qualities to instill a "unified worldview among Red Army troops" (22). Hellbeck observes that "the pervasiveness and effectiveness of political involvement in military units set the Red Army apart from other modern armies" (22). For him, Red Army units' regional homogeneity was less responsible for their battlefield effectiveness than ideology, "the cement that the Red Army command used to bind together diverse soldiers and motivate them to fight.... Preached incessantly and targeting every recruit, it was made up of accessible concepts with an enormous emotional charge: love for the homeland and hatred of the enemy" (22).

The number of party members in the Red Army grew during the war from 654,000 to nearly 3 million. And the Soviet youth organization—the Komsomol—tripled to some 2.4 million. A Deputy Commander for Political Affairs in the 308th Rifle Division stated that "the party committee worked right in the trenches, where they accepted new members into the party. We didn't make comrades on the front lines recite the Party's formal rules and program. Acts of heroism were enough to prove your faith in the party and receive your card" (183). The chief of the same division's political section noted that "we admitted people into the party on the march, without slowing down.... In October and November we admitted about 360 new members in Stalingrad. Usually we took people who had shown real heroism" (186). One soldier exclaimed "the one thing I wanted to know was that if I died, I'd die a Bolshevik," later adding that "it was our duty to crush them [the enemy]. When I became a party candidate I thought: I must prove myself in this battle. It all happened so fast" (227–28). Another member of the 308th stated that, in a three-day period in late October, "I killed 25 Fritzes myself. I was given

2. *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism As a Civilization* (Berkeley: U Calif Pr, 1995) 198–225.

the Order of the Red Banner.... After the battle on October 29, I submitted my application to the party and now I'm a member" (181).

Gen. Vasily Chuikov, commander of the Sixty-Second Army defending the ruins of Stalingrad, believed that "the soldiers had an exceptionally high level of political consciousness" (289), and other officers claimed "the influence of political workers" was necessary to hold a threatened position (186). For this reason, the army strove to ensure that political programming continued throughout the battle; this meant "discussions, lectures, reports" (149), and history lessons on Stalin's defense of Tsaritsyn during the Russian civil war. The 308th's Deputy Commander for Political Affairs said "that was how the meetings went, always on a high ideological and political level, and the soldiers came forward and swore that they would defend Stalingrad to the very end" (164). Hellbeck concludes that

a reading of the Stalingrad transcripts invalidates any claim that the public statements of Red Army infantry consisted of Soviet clichés, isolated from the reality of war. Rather, one finds a language shared by foot soldiers and officers alike, informed by the same ideas and horizons of experience. At the same time, it is apparent that political officers emphasized specific modes of speech for talking about both oneself and the enemy. The language of the interviews was thus twofold: a description of the battle and a mark of ideological conditioning. (83)

Hellbeck's understanding of ideology is too broad to provide a cogent explanation of the Red Army's effectiveness. He himself notes that "as the war raged on, the party extended its influence by tailoring its political efforts to circumstances on the battlefield. Retaliation for the suffering inflicted by the enemy and the will to victory constituted a common denominator among the soldiers" (36). While commissars at Stalingrad may indeed have cited German atrocities to motivate their men, this does not amount to a specifically *communist* agenda. The transcripts show that Red Army soldiers were well aware of brutal German occupation practices, especially on the Eastern Front, long before the actual fighting in Stalingrad.

Hellbeck also puts the killing of Germans into a "socialist" context by stressing the links between the Stakhanovites of the 1930s industrialization surge ("excellent people") and snipers with more than forty kills ("excellent shooter[s]") (357). "In the war years the idea of a good party comrade was quite simple. A successful candidate had to prove that he had killed a German soldier, shot down an enemy plane, or taken out a panzer.... The ideal communist in wartime was occasionally described as blood-thirsty" (35). A party bureau secretary in the 339th Rifle Regiment explained how this worked in practice: "We introduced a new idea: every soldier had to start a personal account of how many Germans he'd killed. This was essentially a stimulus for socialist competition: to see who could kill the most Germans. We would check these accounts, and if a comrade didn't have any dead Fritzes, we'd have a talk with him, make him feel shame" (188).

Again, this is not especially communist behavior; the violence seen in the civil war generation in the Soviet Union had earlier permeated the Russian peasantry of the Tsarist Era. The army certainly sought to channel this violence to its own ends, but the existential nature of the German-Soviet war ensured its virulence quite apart from any official stimulation.

The interviews shed light as well on German policies and attitudes. Generally remembered as a sacrificial victim of Adolf Hitler's policies, Sixth Army's role in the Third Reich's war of annihilation emerges clearly from the transcripts. German anti-partisan policies, from mass shootings to the destruction of villages allegedly supporting guerrillas, were well known to the interviewees.

We found shocking things ..., things that summed up the nature of German plundering only too well.... I get that the logic of victory and the logic of war might lead someone to take a feather bed or some warm things, maybe a mirror. But why on earth would you bring a child's stroller down there? And to top it off,

the nearest village was ten kilometers away. Or baby clothes—I've seen them myself, in a bunker. It's like something out of the Bible. The clothes you can at least send back to Germany, but what are you planning to do with a stroller? (388)

Hellbeck includes several interviews conducted with Sixth Army soldiers following the German capitulation: “judging by the reports, the Germans who continued to fight on in the face of hunger, exhaustion, and mass death did so out of a mixture of spite, obedience, and ideological conviction. An especially strong motivating factor was the fear of capture” (401). Interestingly, officers expressed surprise at the surrender—“we knew we were doomed. But despite this most of us didn't even think of surrendering” (403)—but both NCOs and enlisted men cited rapidly deteriorating morale and discipline, as well as a pervasive war weariness. One German soldier lamented in his diary, “let us have peace again. That way we may go home soon, go back to a human life” (424).

Stalingrad: The City That Defeated the Third Reich offers a salutary fresh look at the pivotal battle of the Second World War through the eyes of its Soviet protagonists. While its author's claims about ideological zealotry are overstated, the interviews he collects here are an invaluable contribution to the historiography of the battle and a compelling testament of the Red Army's experience of war.