



RUSSIA: A HISTORY OF WORLD WAR II NOT OFTEN HEARD IN THE WEST

Posted on November 1, 2018 by Michael Jabara Carley



Every May 9th the Russian Federation celebrates its most important national holiday, Victory Day, *den' pobedy*. During the early hours of that day in 1945 Marshal Georgy Konstantinovich Zhukov, commander of the 1st Belorussian Front, which had stormed Berlin, received the German unconditional surrender.

The Great Patriotic War had gone on for 1418 days of unimaginable violence, brutality and destruction. From Stalingrad and the northern Caucasus and from the northwestern outskirts of Moscow to the western frontiers of the Soviet Union to Sevastopol in the south and Leningrad and the borders with Finland, in the north, the country had been laid waste.

An estimated 17 million civilians, men, women and children, had perished, although no one will ever know the exact figure. Villages and towns were destroyed; families were wiped out without anyone to remember them or mourn their deaths.

Ten million or more Soviet soldiers died in the struggle to expel the monstrous Nazi invader and finally to occupy Berlin at the end of April 1945. Red Army dead were left unburied in a thousand places along the routes to the west or in unmarked mass graves, there having been no time for proper identification and burial. Most Soviet citizens lost family members during the war. No one was left unaffected.

The Great Patriotic War began at 3:30am on 22 June 1941, when the Nazi Wehrmacht invaded the Soviet Union along a front stretching from the Baltic to the Black Seas with 3.2 million German soldiers, organised in 150 divisions, supported by 3,350 tanks, 7,184 artillery pieces, 600,000 trucks, 2,000 warplanes. Finnish, Italian, Romanian, Hungarian, Spanish, Slovakian forces, amongst others, eventually joined the attack.

The German high command reckoned that Operation Barbarossa would take only 4 to 6 weeks to finish off the Soviet Union. In the west, US and British military intelligence agreed. Besides, what force had ever beaten the Wehrmacht? Nazi Germany was the invincible colossus. Poland had been crushed in a few days.

The Anglo-French attempt to defend Norway was a fiasco. When the Wehrmacht attacked in the west, Belgium hurried to quit the fight. France collapsed in a few weeks. The British army was driven out of Dunkirk, naked, without guns or Lorries. In the spring of 1941, Yugoslavia and Greece disappeared in a matter of weeks at little cost to German invaders.

Wherever the Wehrmacht advanced in Europe, it was a walkover... until that day German soldiers stepped across Soviet frontiers. The Red Army was caught flatfooted, in halfway measures of mobilisation, because Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin did not believe his own intelligence reports warning of danger, or want to provoke Hitlerite Germany.

The result was a catastrophe. But unlike Poland and unlike France, the USSR did not quit the fight after the expected 4 to 6 weeks. The Red Army's losses were unimaginable, two million soldiers lost in the first three and a half months of the war. The Baltic provinces were lost. Smolensk fell and then Kiev, in the worst defeat of the war. Leningrad was encircled. An old man asked some soldiers, "Where are you retreating from?"

There were calamities everywhere too numerous to mention. But at places like the fortress of Brest and in hundreds of unnamed fields and woods, road junctions and villages and towns, Red Army units fought on often to the last soldier. They fought out of encirclements to rejoin their own lines or to disappear into the forests and swamps of Belorussia and the northwestern Ukraine to organise the first partisan units to attack the German rear.

By the end of 1941, three million Soviet soldiers were lost (the largest number being POWs who died at German hands); 177 divisions were struck from the Soviet order of battle. Still, the Red Army fought on, even forcing back the Germans at Yelnya, east southeast of Smolensk, at the end of August. The Wehrmacht felt the bite of the battered but not beaten Red Army. German forces were taking 7,000 casualties a day, a new experience for them.

As the Wehrmacht advanced, *Einsatzgruppen*, SS death squads, followed, killing Jews, Gypsies, communists, Soviet POWs, or anyone who got in their way. Baltic and Ukrainian Nazi collaborators assisted in the mass murders. Soviet women and children were stripped naked and forced to queue, waiting for execution. When winter came freezing German soldiers shot villagers or forced them out of their homes, dressed in rags like beggars, robbing them of hearth, winter clothing and food.

In the west those who predicted a speedy Soviet collapse, the usual western Sovietophobes, looked stupid and had to eat their forecasts. Public opinion understood that Hitlerite Germany had walked into a quagmire, not another campaign in France. While the British everyman cheered on Soviet resistance, the British government did relatively little to help. Some Cabinet ministers were even reluctant to call the Soviet Union an ally. Churchill refused to let BBC play the Soviet national anthem, "the Internationale," on Sunday evenings along with those of other allies.

The Red Army still retreated, but kept fighting desperately. This was no ordinary war, but a struggle of unparalleled violence against a murderous invader for home, family, country, for life itself. In November the Red Army dropped a pamphlet on German lines, quoting Carl von Clausewitz, the Prussian military theorist: "It's impossible either to hold or conquer Russia"

That was real bravado in the circumstances, but also true. Finally, in front of Moscow, in December 1941, the Red Army, under Zhukov's command, threw back the spent forces of the Wehrmacht, in the south by as much as three hundred kilometres. The image of Nazi invincibility was shattered. Barbarossa was

too ambitious, the blitzkrieg had failed, and the Wehrmacht suffered its first strategic defeat. In London Churchill agreed, grudgingly, to let BBC play the Soviet national anthem.

In 1942 the Red Army continued to suffer defeats and heavy losses, as it fought on nearly alone. In November of that year at Stalingrad on the Volga, however, the Red Army launched a counteroffensive, which led to a remarkable victory and the retreat of the Wehrmacht back to its start lines in the spring of 1942... except for the German Sixth Army, caught in the Stalingrad kotel or cauldron.

There, 22 German divisions, some of Hitler's best, were destroyed. Stalingrad was the Verdun of the Second World War. "It's hell," a soldier said. "No... this is ten times worse than hell," someone else corrected. At the end of the winter fighting in 1943, Axis losses were staggering: 100 German, Italian, Romanian, Hungarian divisions were destroyed, or mauled. The president of the United States, Franklin Roosevelt, reckoned that the tide of battle had turned: Hitlerite Germany was doomed.

It was February 1943. In that month there was not a single British, American, or Canadian division fighting in Europe against the Wehrmacht. Not one. It was sixteen months before the Normandy landings. The British and Americans were then fighting two or three German divisions in North Africa, a sideshow compared to the Soviet front.

Western public opinion knew who was carrying the burden of the war against the Wehrmacht. In 1942, 80% of Axis divisions were arrayed against the Red Army. At the beginning of 1943 there were 207 German divisions on the Eastern Front. The Germans tried one last hurrah, one last offensive against the Kursk bulge in July 1943. That operation failed. The Red Army then launched a counteroffensive across the Ukraine which led to liberation of Kiev in November. Further north, Smolensk had been freed the month before.

The spirit of the Soviet people and their Red Army was formidable. War correspondent, [Vasili Semenovich Grossman](#), captured its essence in his personal journals. "Night, Snowstorm," he wrote in early 1942, "Vehicles, Artillery. They are moving in silence. Suddenly a hoarse voice is heard. 'Hey, which is the road to Berlin?' A roar of laughter."

Soldiers were not always brave. Sometimes they fled. "A battalion commissar armed with two revolvers began shouting, 'Where are you running you sons of whores, where? Go forward, for our Motherland, for Jesus Christ, motherfuckers! For Stalin, you whores!'"

They went back to their positions. Those fellows were lucky; the commissar could have shot them all. Sometimes he did. A soldier volunteered to execute a deserter. "Did you feel any pity for him?" Grossman asked. "How can one speak of pity," the soldier replied. At Stalingrad seven Uzbeks were

found guilty of self-inflicted wounds. They were all shot. Grossman read a letter found in the pocket of a dead Soviet soldier. "I miss you very much. Please come and visit... I am writing this, and tears are pouring. Daddy, please come home and visit."

Women fought along side the men as snipers, gunners, tankists, pilots, nurses partisans. They also kept the home front going. "Villages have become the kingdom of women," wrote Grossman, "They drive tractors, guard warehouses and stables... Women are carrying on their shoulders the great burden of work. They dominate... send bread, aircraft, weapons and ammunition to the front." When the war was being fought on the Volga, they did not reproach their men for having given up so much ground. "Women look and say nothing," wrote Grossman, "... not a bitter word." But in the villages near the front, sometimes they did.

In the meantime, the western allies attacked Italy. Stalin had long demanded a second front in France, which Churchill resisted. He wanted to attack the Axis "soft underbelly", not to help the Red Army, but to hinder its advance into the Balkans. The idea was to advance quickly north up the Italian boot, then wheel eastward into the Balkans to keep out the Red Army. The way to Berlin however was north northeast. Churchill's plan was a failure; the western allies did not get to Rome until June 1944.

There were approximately 20 German divisions in Italy fighting against larger allied forces. In the East, there were still more than two hundred Axis divisions, or ten times those in Italy. On 6 June 1944 when Operation Overlord began in Normandy, the Red Army stood on Polish and Romanian frontiers. A fortnight after the Normandy landings, the Red Army launched Operation Bagration, a huge offensive which stove in the centre of the German eastern front and led to an advance of 500 kilometres to the west, while the western allies were still held up on the Normandy Cotentin peninsula. The Red Army had become an unstoppable juggernaut.

It was just a matter of time before the destruction of Nazi Germany. When the war was over in May 1945, the Red Army had accounted for 80% of the losses of the Wehrmacht, and that percentage would have been far higher before the Normandy invasion. "Those who never experienced all the bitterness of the summer of 1941," wrote Vasily Grossman, "will never be able fully to appreciate the joy of our victory." There were many [war hymns](#) sung by the troops and the people to keep up morale. *Sviashchennaia voina*, "Sacred War" was one of the most popular. Russians [still stand](#) when they hear it.

Historians often debate about when the decisive turn of battle came in the European theatre. Some propose 22 June 1941, the day that the Wehrmacht crossed Soviet frontiers. Others point to the battles of Moscow, Stalingrad, or Kursk.

During the war western public opinion seemed more supportive of the Red Army than some western

leaders, Winston Churchill, for example. Roosevelt was better, a more pragmatic political leader, who easily recognised the preponderant Soviet role in the war against Nazi Germany. The Red Army, he said to one doubtful general in 1942, was killing more German soldiers and smashing more German tanks than all the other allies put together.

Roosevelt knew that the Soviet Union was the linchpin of the great coalition against Nazi Germany. I call FDR the godfather of the "grand alliance". Nevertheless, in the shadows lurked the usual haters of the Soviet Union, who were only biding their time before emerging again. The greater the certainty of victory over Nazi Germany, the more vocal and strident became the naysayers of the grand alliance.

Americans can be touchy about the memory of the Red Army playing the lead role in the destruction of the Wehrmacht. "What about Lend-Lease," they say, "without our supplies, the Soviet Union could not have beaten the Germans." In fact, most Lend-Lease supplies did not arrive in the USSR until after Stalingrad.

Red Army soldiers facetiously called the Lend-Lease food tins the "second front" since the real one was late in coming. In 1942 Soviet industry was already out-producing Nazi Germany in major categories of armaments. Was the T-34 an American, or a Soviet tank?

A polite Stalin always remembered to thank the US government for the jeeps and Studebaker trucks. They increased Red Army mobility. You contributed the aluminum, Russians famously replied, we contributed the blood... the rivers of blood.

No sooner was the war over than Britain and the United States started to think about another war, this time against the Soviet Union. In May 1945 the British high command produced Operation "Unthinkable", a top secret plan for an offensive, reinforced by German POWs, against the Red Army. What bastards, what ingrates.

In September 1945, the Americans contemplated use of [204 atomic bombs](#) to destroy the Soviet Union. The godfather, President Roosevelt, had died in April, and within weeks American Sovietophobes were reversing his policy. The grand alliance was only a truce in a Cold War which had begun after the Bolshevik seizure of power in November 1917, and which resumed in 1945.

In that year the US and British governments still had to contend with public opinion. The everyman in Europe and the United States knew very well who had carried the load against the Wehrmacht. You could not resume the old policy of hatred against the Soviet Union just like that without blotting out the memory of the Red Army's role in the common victory over Hitlerite Germany.

So memories of the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression in August 1939 were brought out of the closet, although the memories of prior [Anglo-French opposition](#) to Soviet proposals for collective security

against Nazi Germany and especially of [the betrayal](#) of Czechoslovakia were omitted from the new western narrative. Like thieves in the night, Britain and the United States burgled the true account of the destruction of Nazi Germany.

Already in December 1939, the British planned to [publish a white paper](#) blaming Moscow for the failure of Anglo-Franco-Soviet alliance negotiations during the previous spring and summer. The French objected because the white paper was more likely to persuade public opinion that the Soviet side had been serious about resistance to Nazi Germany while the British and French were not.

The white paper was shelved. In 1948 the US State Department issued a collection of documents attributing the blame for World War II to Hitler and Stalin. Moscow fired back with its own publication demonstrating western affinities with Nazism. The fight was on in the west to remember the Soviet Union for the non-aggression pact and to forget the Red Army's preponderant role in smashing the Wehrmacht.

How many of you have not seen some Hollywood film in which the Normandy landings are the great turning point of the war? "What if the landings had failed," one often hears? "Oh..., nothing much," is the appropriate reply. The war would have gone on longer, and the Red Army would have planted its flags on the Normandy beaches coming from the east.

Then there are the movies about the Allied bombing campaign against Germany, the "decisive" factor in winning the war. In Hollywood films about World War II, the Red Army is invisible. It is as if the Americans (and British) were claiming laurels they didn't earn.

I like to ask students in my university course on the Second World War, who has heard of operation Overlord? Everyone raises a hand. Then I ask who has heard of Operation Bagration? Hardly anyone raises a hand. I ask facetiously who "won" the war against Nazi Germany and the answer is "America" of course. Only a few students—normally those who have had other courses with me—will answer the Soviet Union.

The truth is uphill work in a western world where "fake news" is the norm. The OSCE and European Parliament put the blame for World War II on the Soviet Union, read Russia and President Vladimir Putin, as the subliminal message. Hitler is almost forgotten in this *tohu-bohu* of evidence-free accusations.

Behind the bogus historical narrative are the Baltic states, Poland, and the Ukraine, spewing out hatred of Russia. The Baltics and the Ukraine now remember Nazi collaborators as national heroes and celebrate their deeds.

In Poland, for some people, this is hard to swallow; they remember the Ukrainian Nazi collaborators

who murdered tens of thousands of Poles in Volhynia. Unfortunately, such memories have not stopped Polish hooligans from vandalising monuments to Red Army war dead or desecrating Soviet war cemeteries. Polish "nationalists" cannot bear the memory of the Red Army freeing Poland from the Nazi invader.

In Russia, however, the west's mendacious propaganda has no effect. The Soviet Union produced its own films, and the Russian Federation also, about World War II, most recently about the defence of the Brest fortress and of Sevastopol, and the battle of Stalingrad.

On 9 May every year Russians remember the millions of soldiers who fought and died, and the millions of civilians who suffered and died at the hands of the Nazi invader. The veterans, fewer each year, come out wearing uniforms that often do not fit quite right or threadbare jackets covered with war medals and orders. "Treat them with tact and respect," Zhukov wrote in his memoirs: "It is a small price after what they did for you in 1941-1945."

How did you manage, I wondered to myself observing them on Victory Day some years ago, how did you cope, living constantly with death and so much sorrow and hardship?

Now, each year on Victory Day the "immortal regiment", the *bessmertnyi polk*, marches; Russians in cities and towns across the country and abroad, march together carrying large photographs of family members, men and women, who fought in the war. "We remember," they want to say: "and we will never forget you."

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The [photo](#) shows, "Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya Before Execution," by Konstantin Nikitich Shchekotov, painted, 1947-1949.

