

Introduction

Our appreciation for the strengths and weaknesses of the Red Army during the Great Patriotic War has increased significantly in recent years – and particularly since the end of the Cold War. The opening up of Soviet archives not only to Western historians, but even more so to those of Russia and the former Soviet Union, has fostered considerable enrichment of the historical literature on the subject. The Soviet military archives were for a number of practical and political reasons not opened up to the same extent as many other archives, and access for Western researchers is now arguably worse than it was during the 1990s. Nonetheless, the materials made available during the last years of the Soviet Union and beyond have added considerable colour and nuance to the picture of the Red Army that predominated during the Cold War in the West. That picture, of faceless hordes and overwhelming material might overcoming superior German tactical and operational capabilities, relied heavily on the memoirs of senior German commanders such as Heinz Guderian, Erich von Manstein and others. Although these figures acknowledged improvement in Red Army effectiveness due not only to quantitative but also qualitative factors, they nonetheless understandably focused on comparison between the Red Army and the Wehrmacht at a time at which the latter was at the peak of its capabilities. Such authors also tended to explain German defeat primarily in quantitative terms or in terms of poor leadership on the part of Hitler. In many ways the work of the late John Erickson foreshadowed recent scholarship on the Red Army in the West that has led to questioning of whether the Red Army could really have reached Berlin without significant qualitative improvement. As a teenager in the late 1980s I recall reading Erickson's *The Road to Stalingrad* and *The Road to Berlin* for the first time, and not only recall their richness then despite the relative limitations on his written sources, but looking at them now appreciate what he achieved with the materials available to him.¹ The work of John Erickson, who had access to at least some participants but relied to a considerable extent on a thorough examination of the Soviet memoir and wider published literature,

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dramatically increased our understanding of the functioning of the Red Army and changes in its organisation and leadership over time. Nonetheless the German memoir-inspired picture of faceless Soviet hordes being almost defeated by the Wehrmacht but for Hitler's meddling – before German forces were overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers – still coloured popular and even academic views of the war in the east at the end of the Cold War.

During the 1990s the work of David Glantz in particular did much in the English-language literature to shift the historiography of the war on what was Germany's Eastern Front away from Cold War perspectives. Glantz has and continues to highlight a development of the Red Army during the war that suggested that not only did it have increasing material resources after the debacles of the summer and autumn of 1941 saw the destruction many of those vast resources accrued before the war, but was increasingly able to make good use of them. More recently in the West historians such as Evan Mawdsley, Roger Reese, Geoffrey Roberts and David Stone in particular have built on the work that is still underway by David Glantz to add additional diplomatic, social and economic dimensions to our understanding of the development of the Red Army. They have also in many ways done for Stalin – the Soviet leader who held the reins of both the military and economic dimensions to the Soviet war effort – as they have done for the Red Army in highlighting that just as sheer weight of numbers alone does not explain Red Army successes, Stalin contributed more to Soviet victory than ruthless determination. In adding much to our understanding of how Stalin's Red Army became a more effective military machine as the war progressed, and indeed why things went so badly wrong during much of 1941 and 1942, these historians among others in the West have been able to draw on some excellent work undertaken by a new wave of popular and academic Russian military historians. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union many historians writing in Russian have offered a revisionist line critical of the Soviet historiography that glossed over many Red Army failings. Others have offered what might be described as a neo-Soviet view of the Red Army at war in which the focus on the role of the Communist Party as a driving force has been replaced in many ways by Russian patriotism, and in which the focus of work tends to be on successes rather than failures. Regardless of whether such historians are of a revisionist or neo-Soviet bent, they and their Western counterparts agree that the Red Army became a more effective fighting force as the war progressed. This assessment holds whether the benchmark is the increasingly poorly trained and far less combat effective mass of the German armed forces of the end of the

war, or the elite but at the end of the war rapidly diminishing core of the German armed forces that has dominated the popular literature on the war in the West. As well as acknowledging at least some improvement in Red Army performance, all would also agree that the Red Army was ultimately led by Stalin, who during the war became a more effective military leader than he had been when it started. The Red Army became a more capable army, but the devil is of course in the detail – just how far did qualitative improvement in the Red Army go and to what extent were those improvements down to human and organisational factors, and to what extent were improved capabilities down to equipment and material factors? To what extent did the bludgeon of 1941 become a sword handled with some skill, or was it that the bludgeon of the early war was by the end of the war still a bludgeon but much better balanced in terms of weight and being wielded with sufficiently improved skill to be far more likely to strike where it mattered? In many ways I have already started to place my cards on the table with this last and indeed slightly rhetorical question. Where the historiography of the Red Army has swung from portrayal of a rather crude and blunt instrument to highlighting the flaws in such a picture by paying attention more to development and strengths, this work certainly highlights that the Red Army was transformed into a more effective fighting force, but makes it clear that transformation could only go so far in the time available. That transformation was, as will be highlighted in this book, well underway by the summer of 1941 from what might be seen as the nadir of Red Army performance in Finland during late 1939. Given the numerical and material strength of the Red Army in the summer of 1941, the Red Army could perhaps even in its June 1941 state have halted the Wehrmacht well before the gates of Moscow had it not been for initial strategic and operational failures that set the Red Army up for mind boggling losses and the debacles of the summer and autumn of 1941. However, had the Red Army been deployed differently and been better prepared to meet the invasion in an immediate sense, halting the initial German advance sooner than was in fact the case would have been one thing – winning the war would still however have been another and a protracted process.

Regardless of whether the Red Army at the end of the war is represented by a swordsman, a bludgeon-wielding warrior or something in between in terms of finesse, in a simple sense the Red Army was by the end of the war effective – where the word effective carries with it the idea of accomplishment of some sort of aim or goal. If the aim was to repel the Nazi-German invader and its allies, and then defeat them, then the Red Army achieved the objective and was effective. In Soviet

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terms this required only a little help from the Western Allies, although the extent to which the defeat of Nazi Germany required Allied assistance is the subject of some debate. For neo-Soviet Russian-language historians Allied aid was a luxury item that was not required for victory, and even in the West most historians have tended not to go as far as suggesting that it was essential for Soviet victory. Whether the Soviet Union could have defeated Nazi Germany and her allies alone however is a moot point. The reality was that the Red Army did not defeat Nazi Germany alone, and the question becomes one of the relative contributions of the Western Allies and the Soviet Union to the defeat of Nazi Germany. Undoubtedly the Soviet Union played a major role in the defeat of Nazi Germany and those fighting along side her with assistance from her allies. The Red Army could quite reasonably claim to have destroyed the bulk of German field forces, even if the Western Allies can lay claim to the destruction of the bulk of German air and more limited naval power and managed towards the end of the war to undermine to a significant degree the German productive effort required to sustain the field armies. Recently historian Philip O'Brien has questioned the extent to which destroying German divisions on the Eastern Front made that theatre decisive, where he suggests that all the major powers with the exception of the Soviet Union overall invested more heavily in air and sea power than ground forces.² However, the Western powers would have struggled to overcome Nazi Germany without the Red Army slogging it out with the Wehrmacht and increasingly the Waffen SS from the summer of 1941, as the Red Army would have struggled much more had the Western powers not deflected a significant or even dominant proportion of German economic effort away from the German Eastern Front. The Red Army certainly fought predominately with Soviet-produced weapons, but the role of Allied and particularly US aid in sustaining their production and keeping the whole Soviet system going – and the Red Army moving forward – should not be ignored.

So in the context of the Allied war effort, the Soviet Union and the Red Army were in a crude sense effective in that they played a leading role in the defeat of the enemy – with a little help from their 'friends'. However, rarely do we consider effectiveness in terms of achieving a goal at any cost. Although the war against Nazi Germany had in many senses to be won – for it was a war that if lost would have resulted in the destruction of the Soviet Union as a geopolitical entity and horrendous suffering for many of its peoples – theoretically even in a *Vernichtungskrieg* or 'War of annihilation' one could imagine a point at which the cost exceeded the benefits. In the Soviet case that would probably have

resulted in defeat, but had the Red Army somehow managed to continue to sustain losses on the scale sustained during 1941 and into the spring and summer of 1942 and survive thanks perhaps to greater and earlier sacrifices on the part of her allies, then such a point might hypothetically have been reached. The Soviet Union might, as German general von Mellenthin postulated, have been fought to some sort of stalemate on the Eastern Front. The historical outcome of the Great Patriotic War – Soviet victory – in reality was achieved at a horrendous cost of more than nine million soldiers killed and total population losses of in the region of twenty-seven million.³ We can of course ultimately blame these losses on the Nazi invasion and the manner in which Nazi Germany conducted the war, although should not forget Stalin's propensity to sanction the killing or allow the death through wilful neglect of millions of Soviet people as indeed occurred in the 1930s. Arguably, some of the more than nine million soldiers killed could have been spared had the Stalinist regime not made some of the very significant mistakes it made prior to and during the war, and indeed had it not shown a far greater disregard towards the lives of its troops than its allies or even its principal opponent. Certainly the losses of 1941 and early 1942 were not sustainable, and the Red Army had to become more effective in its use of resources or lose. Stalin's early war assertions that the Soviet Union possessed limitless resources must have sounded hollow by the time of the infamous Order Number 227 of July 1942 that noted that further retreat for the Red Army was unacceptable if the resource situation was not to become critical.⁴ Fortunately, the losses of 1941 – and in particular losses as PoWs who would subsequently die in their millions due to neglect in German prisoner of war camps – would not be repeated even if combat losses and casualties remained relatively high throughout the war.

The Red Army played a leading role – possible the principal role – in the defeat of the Wehrmacht and its allies but at terrible cost thanks to the fact that even allowing for greater German ideological fervour and barbarity on the Eastern Front than the West it was not as effective as its allies in doing what was necessary to win relatively economically. To some extent this was because the Soviet Union could not attack the German capacity to wage war from afar, where it was stuck on the same continent and locked in a sustained and costly ground war. Soviet resources could not be spared for example to develop a strategic bombing capability beyond promising beginnings in part because of this reality, but in part however because within this context it was, and particularly early in the war, inefficient in turning investment and lives expended into results. From strategic miscalculation in the summer of

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1941 that contributed to the loss of military resources built up over the previous decade, to an at times one might want to say criminal disregard for the lives of its troops in hammering away at German forces in ill-conceived operations, the Soviet leadership squandered resources that were expended for often less gain that might otherwise have been the case.

From broader societal issues down to the decisions of one man – Stalin – there are many reasons why the Red Army is often perceived as having been a somewhat crude instrument and particularly so earlier in the war. By the end of the war however, it had, as the new historiography of the Red Army suggests, been transformed – even reborn. As overall German effectiveness declined at the tactical and even operational levels the Red Army was often much better matched to its opponent in terms of capability than it had been earlier in the war. This was the case not just for material reasons – the Red Army functioned better as an organisation and was able to ‘adapt to the actual conditions of combat’.⁵ After the ‘wake up call’ of the debacle in Finland in late 1939, the wheels had been set in motion to focus attention on preparing for combat – not showpiece manoeuvres. The disastrous strategic deployment of the summer of 1941 resulted in a situation that could easily have paralysed the Soviet military machine, but nonetheless the Red Army rapidly learnt much from and adapted to actual war against specifically Nazi Germany and her allies. The Red Army learnt much from the Wehrmacht – and adapted what it learnt so that it worked in a Soviet context. However, Soviet losses were all too often horrendous through to the very end of the war, and not just because of stubborn resistance from the enemy. Late in the war Stalin and the Soviet leadership arguably drove the Red Army on for reasons beyond the immediate defeat of the enemy – looking to postwar territorial acquisition and influence for which many Red Army troops were sacrificed. In terms of Marxist-Leninist logic, spreading revolution may have been ultimately the only way to guarantee Soviet security, but even this does not explain, for example, the lives squandered to capture what perhaps epitomizes the throwing away of lives at the end of the war – the capture of the fortress city of Königsberg in April 1945. Here Stalin arguably over asserted political goals – at the expense of thousands of Soviet lives. Ultimately much comes down to the personality of one man – Stalin – whose influence as in the case of his German rival Hitler – be it directly or in terms of the sort of people he chose to lead on his behalf – was considerable and perhaps even greater in the case of Stalin. His strengths and weaknesses are a significant factor in explaining both why the Red Army was ultimately effective, and why effectiveness in getting

the job done proved so costly. Why so much was expended – and indeed how so much could be mobilised to be expended to first hold off and then push back the enemy – is an important focus of this book.

This work in many ways not only sits between post-Cold War Western revisionism and the Western Cold War literature in its portrayal of the Red Army and its development, but also endeavours to take from both the old and the new in terms of sources. In contemporary academic history there is, despite the rise of ‘history from below’, something of a fetishisation of archival sources. Such sources should be central to most serious historical works, and this case is no exception. Although Soviet archival sources preserved in Russian military archives are far from easily accessed by Western researchers, I was fortunate to gain access to many such materials or to be provided them by Russian colleagues in the 1990s and the first years of the new millennium. Many valuable documents for 1941 and 1945 were published online by the Russian Ministry of Defence on the *People’s Victory* website, and subsequently collated by Russian historians and military history enthusiasts.⁶ These sources are used in this work alongside the many documentary sources that have been published in Russian since the latter phases of Gorbachev’s *glasnost*’ and *perestroika*. Also available since the late 1980s and early 1990s are a range of until then unpublished Soviet memoirs of the war, and indeed some memoirs first published in the Soviet period in very heavily edited form and now available as written by the author. These memoirs span from the post-Soviet release of Marshal Georgii Zhukov’s three-volume memoirs with much material that was not published until the post-Soviet period, to many rich memoirs by participants at the grass roots level written towards the end of their lives in a post-Soviet climate of greater frankness or written earlier but only deemed acceptable for publication during the late 1980s and beyond. These rich sources – as any source – have to be used with care but have their own unique strengths and weaknesses in the case of the memoirs. These memoirs certainly add colour and nuance to a work such as this, and are complemented by interviews conducted after the collapse of the Soviet Union, where particular credit has to go to the work of Artem Drabkin and his colleagues who have done so much to preserve the testimonies of hundreds of Soviet veterans.

Where this work perhaps differs most in terms of sources from other recent work in the West in particular is the extent to which it has sought to make use of the Soviet published sources so effectively mined by John Erickson when alternatives were unavailable – both Soviet era memoirs and academic works that in the light of post-Soviet archival releases and other publications have a new lease of life. These Soviet

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works – be they journal articles from the premier Soviet military history publication *Voенно-istoricheskii zhurnal*, academic monographs or some of the thousands of memoirs published during the Soviet period – can now be mined much more effectively in the light of new information than they could prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The issue with Soviet-era publications was often not typically willful misinformation on the part of authors although there were certainly polemical works, but editorial attempts to censor information that might tarnish the reputation of the Red Army and ultimately the Communist Party. Nonetheless, within what were fluctuating confines of acceptability that were noticeably less constrained during the ‘thaw’ of the early-mid 1960s and again in the late 1980s, there were still attempts to analyse, explain, understand and set the record straight that led to meaningful discourse and serious academic research. In many ways materials available since the collapse of the Soviet Union are a key to unlocking the value in these sources, of which I have made significant use. This work also makes arguably more use than most of recently published memoirs – typically post-1991 – that add the aforementioned colour and nuance to the picture one can obtain of the Red Army from archival sources and many academic works. I would like to stress here that these contrasts with the existing literature are relative rather than absolute, and that many of my colleagues in the field have put these sources to good use already, although not necessarily using as many of them in a single work and to the extent to which they have been used here.

In this work, as well as using a different blend of sources than used in many others on the Red Army, I have sought to focus attention on certain factors contributing to military effectiveness that overall have perhaps received less attention in the literature on the Red Army to date than they arguably deserve. For example, I have tried to highlight and examine in some detail the role of communications and communications failure and indeed broader issues of command and control in military failure, and developments in these areas contributing to improved Red Army effectiveness. Similar attention has been paid to reconnaissance, logistics, education and training, and more nebulous factors such as organisational culture. I have tried where possible, and in particular for self-contained conflicts prior to the Great Patriotic War and major campaigns and operations during it, to make it such that chapters dealing with them can be read alone without having read the preceding chapters. Here I hope that for those reading the book from cover-to-cover the at times nuanced change over time in Soviet practice in key areas such as reconnaissance, and alternative examples used in

making a similar point to one presented earlier, prevent any feeling of repetition. In order to keep something of the flavour of different time periods considered within this work I have kept Soviet ranks for the time period concerned, meaning that there is considerable variation in the terms used over the course of the book. Approximate equivalents over time are provided in the relevant table. I have anglicised words such as general and colonel where it makes sense, although kept the Russian word order in ranks such as general-colonel in part to keep a Russian flavour and further differentiate them from German ranks that I have kept in German. On translation, where there is any scope for significantly different interpretation of a translation than that offered here, I have provided the original Russian in parentheses after the translation concerned.

I certainly spent significant time selecting the photographs for this book, and have attempted to cover the full range of campaigns, battles and themes considered within it in the pictures. Many of the photographs are here published for the first time in the West. To some extent I tried deliberately not to present a sanitised view of war in the photographs – as I have also sought to avoid in the text. It can be all too easy for the historian and subsequently their readers to hide from the death and horror of war behind statistics and top-down description – a criticism I hope cannot reasonably be levelled at this book. The aim here is conversely not to wallow in the misery of war but to analyse and explain how the Red Army evolved over time as a military machine, albeit one run by flesh and blood.

In this work, the varied English- and Russian language sources that have been consulted have been used – along with German archival sources and other materials where appropriate and where space constraints allow – to present a picture of change and continuity within the Red Army from the start of the breakneck industrialisation of the Soviet Union in the late 1920s through to the end of the Great Patriotic War in Europe in May 1945. This change is addressed from Stalin and the upper echelons of the leadership, where possible down through the middle command ranks and at times all the way down to the rank and file. This work does not offer a detailed narrative overview of the war, even if it does examine most of the key operations in chronological order along with analysis of key themes in the development of the Red Army at appropriate points. It is assumed that readers of this work will have read at least one of the many sound overviews of the war, be that the two volumes of John Erickson's seminal history noted earlier, David Glantz and Jonathan House's *When Titan's Clashed*, Evan Mawdsley's *Thunder in the East* or Chris Bellamy's *Absolute War*.⁷ This attempt to

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present the development of the Red Army from top to bottom, providing traditional military-historical analysis of strategy, operations and tactics alongside elements of the ‘new’ military history and economic history, seeks to provide a wide ranging overview of factors contributing to Red Army success and failure on its long road to Berlin, victory and peace. I hope that it provokes much thought on the nature of Soviet military success and failure, and the human tragedy that was the Great Patriotic War.