

Book review

Stalingrad: The Fateful Siege 1942-1943

By Antony Beevor



Romanian POWs after Battle of Stalingrad

Stalingrad, perhaps the least-appreciated battle of modern times, represents a rich, complex set of events. The topic is a treasure trove for both the general reader and the military-minded. No recent book does more to bridge the gap than Antony Beevor's outstanding "Stalingrad: the Fateful Siege: 1942-1943." Written almost in the form of a non-fiction novel, the narrative follows a clear storyline amid the sprawling landscape of this most epic and fateful of encounters.

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For Americans, especially young Americans, both the true nature of the Battle of Stalingrad and the extent of its legacy are hard to understand. Stalingrad changed two nations forever. It was an air battle, a tank war, an infantry battle, an invasion that turned into a siege and devolved into slaughter. It tipped the scales against Germany and essentially ended the war. The gigantic losses eviscerated an entire generation of German and Russian males, a loss of manpower that decimated each nation's economy for decades after.

Stalingrad was the centerpiece of Operation Barbarossa, the code name for Germany's ill-considered invasion of the Soviet Union. Its sheer scale is overwhelming -- over four million soldiers of the Axis powers invaded the USSR along a 2,900 kilometer front. It is sometimes referred to as "the largest invasion in the history of warfare" since it absorbed some over a thousand aircraft (on either side), 1500 tanks, 600,000 motor vehicles and 750,000 horses. The overly ambitious German invasion of the Soviet Union generated an incredible rate of fatalities: 95% of all German Army casualties that occurred from 1941 to 1944, and 65% of all Allied military casualties from the entire war, occurred along this Eastern front; these huge metrics are passed over by many American histories since so few American soldiers were involved.

The battle of Stalingrad remains such an ideologically charged and symbolically important subject that the last work will not be heard for many years.

Antony Beevor's book is most valuable for a general reader like me, while detailed and incisive enough to satisfy some of my military-history cadets. Beevor knows which details to include and which to skip over. He clearly has voluminous research but elects to show us only that which suits his streamlined narrative, leaving us to infer the greater spectacle (For an approach that is more encyclopedic, a serious Stalingrad scholar wants to dig into American military historian David M. Glantz's boy of work. Colonel Glantz, a former U.S. Army War College instructor and editor of the *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, has dug deep into Soviet and German documents and produced over a dozen books on various topics

related to the war on the Eastern Front, a trove which scholars will be mining for decades to come. Here is how Beevor begins the book:

‘Russia,’ observed the poet Tyuchev, ‘cannot be understood with the mind.’
The Battle of Stalingrad cannot be understood through a standard examination. A purely military study of such a titanic struggle fails to convey its reality on the ground, rather as Hitler’s maps in his Rastenburg *Wolfschanze* isolated him in a fantasy-world, far from the suffering of his soldiers.
(xi, *Introduction*)

True to his word, Beevor proves resourceful in his telling of the epic story. He breaks down this massive chain of events into five main sections. In the first, “The World Will Not Hold Its Breath,” we see the grand outlines (and dubious logic) of the Third Reich’s bold scheme

The false underpinning of Hitler’s grand scheme was logistics: the insistence by the



Diorama scene from “Complex of Heroes” museum at Stalingrad Photo: Dr. John E. Jones.

German command that supply lines could be maintained all the way from Berlin to Stalingrad was revealed to be a delusion. In his second section we get a hint of the debacle to come, even in the initial successes of Operation Barbarossa. With a potential dramatic cast of hundreds on both sides of the encounter, Beevor wisely limits himself to a handful that can lead his readers through the series of plot twists and turns. The third section helps explain the breakdown in chain of command which came into play on both sides. Stalin’s brutal decision to rope the civilian population into Stalingrad rather than evacuating them (his logic was that it would make his soldiers fight harder, knowing that their families’ fates hung in the balance) proved tragic. The title of Part Four, “Zhukov’s Trap,” is, to me, somewhat misleading since it was not so much the ingenuity of anything the Russian commander Zhukov did but the inexorable failure of German logistics that turned the tide. The final section, “The Subjugation of the Fifth Army,” details the hellish ending of

Stalingrad, when Russian factories produced waves of the T34 tanks, overwhelming the smaller corps of more sophisticated Panzers.

His chapters that are short (10-12 pages on average) and focused. Illustrations and maps guide us through the complicated topography. Over and above all its depth of research and command of the timeline, Beevor's narrative has readability. Here is how he begins chapter introducing Paulus, the doomed protagonist of the German armies:

The curious chain of events which brought General Friedrich Paulus to command the Sixth Army began with Hitler's angry disappointment towards the end of 1941.

A reader-friendly sentence like this, to me, is an author's signal that he is writing for the non-expert reader. Here is another example of Beevor's clean prose:

During the conference, Hitler hardly mentioned Stalingrad. His obsession was with the oilfields of the Caucasus. 'If we don't Maikop and Grozny,' he told his generals, then I must put an end to the war.' At that stage, the only interest in Stalingrad was to eliminate the armaments factories there and secure a position on the Volga. The capture of the city itself was not considered necessary. (p. 70)

This wonderful account of Stalingrad is a repository of critical thinking challenges – cultural as well as moral. As Beevor himself concludes,

The battle of Stalingrad remains such an ideologically charged and symbolically important subject that the last work will not be heard for many years. (xiii)