

**Interview with Author Antony Beevor**

# A Victory Of Courage And Coercion: British Historian On Stalingrad's Legacy

*Reprinted by permission Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty  
Interview Conducted August 2012 by Coilin O'Connor*

August 2012 marks the 70th anniversary of the start of the Battle of Stalingrad, a ferocious and brutal siege that proved to be a major psychological and military tipping point in World War II.

RFE/RL correspondent Coilin O'Connor talks to the prominent British historian Antony Beevor -- author of "[Stalingrad](#)" -- about how this engagement between two



**Statue at chapel near the site of the Battle of Stalingrad**

totalitarian armies helped turn the course of the global conflict. Beevor also discusses the enduring legacy of Stalingrad seven decades after the event and looks at some of the popular misconceptions associated with this famous battle.

**RFE/RL: Do you think books like yours have helped reclaim the narrative of the Second World War to a certain extent, i.e., until the 1970s the “history” of the war in the anglophone world focused heavily on the Western Front, whereas the Eastern Front was not given the attention it deserved? Do Western attitudes to the war have to be readjusted somewhat?**

**Antony Beevor:** I think very much so. And it’s not just a question of the Eastern Front, which I think has been scandalously neglected by Western historians. But this was also partly due to the secrecy that had been maintained throughout the Cold War by the Soviet Union and it not allowing any access to the archives for Western historians.

**RFE/RL: How would you rank the Battle of Stalingrad in terms of its importance to how the Second World War progressed and its eventual outcome?**

**Beevor:** The point about the Battle of Stalingrad was that it was the psychological turning point of the war. It became quite clear both to the Red Army and also to the German Army

that from now on there would now be a movement toward the West and eventually Berlin would suffer the same fate as Stalingrad.

---

## The Eastern Front ... has been scandalously neglected by Western historians.

---

I think that it's highly significant that even today on the Reichstag you can see the graffiti of Russian soldiers with the words "Stalingrad-Berlin." The two cities were very much linked in their mind.

I remember one of the things that struck me the most was how an old Russian colonel started yelling at German prisoners who were shuffling out of Stalingrad with frostbitten feet in a column after the victory and he yelled at them, pointing to the ruins around, "This is how Berlin is going to look!" I think the Stalingrad-Berlin link became absolutely clear in everybody's minds. Stalingrad signified that Germany was definitely going to lose the war.

**RFE/RL: Did the ferocity and brutality of the fighting in Stalingrad have a lot to do with the fact that it was effectively two totalitarian armies squaring off against each other, i.e., battle fatigue, surrender, etc., were simply not things that could be countenanced?**

**Beevor:** I don't think that any Western army would have survived Stalingrad. It required a really brutal form of discipline to keep the troops in place, especially during the early period of the battle when it really looked as if everything was going to fall to pieces.

Altogether, it transpired that some 13,500 [Soviet troops] were executed by their own side, by the Red Army -- in fact, usually by SMERSH (counterintelligence) or special divisions of the NKVD (secret police) -- during the course of the battle. There were blocking groups behind the troops to prevent them retreating.

---

## Stalingrad ... was the psychological turning point of the war.

---

It was an extraordinary mixture of both courage and coercion. There were terrifying reports of the way soldiers were executed. Sometimes they weren't even shot properly because the firing party was partly drunk or whatever it may have been. They would then dig themselves out of the shell hole into which their body had been thrown, reappear, and then be shot again. So there were some really terrible sides to it.

[But] one saw this extraordinary contrast and that's why one must never generalize. You can't say that the soldiers at Stalingrad only held on because of the brutal discipline. There was a very genuine idealism and a very genuine determination to fight on -- and an astonishing level of self-sacrifice. As I say, I don't think any Western army -- be it British, French, or American -- would ever have survived at Stalingrad or have held on to the west bank of the Volga there -- unlike the Red Army, which did.

**RFE/RL: When I read your book on Stalingrad I was surprised to learn that there were many Russians fighting on the German side...**

**Beevor:** Altogether around a million Russians -- or those of Soviet nationality -- served on the German side in one form or another. Now the majority of these, one must remember, were called "Hiwis" -- Hilfswilliger [German for "one willing to help"] -- or auxiliary volunteers. They weren't actually volunteers in many cases. They had been more or less recruited by force from prison camps because they were starving and they were offered some food. They were used basically as draft animals in many cases, or to dig trenches.

A number of them -- knowing that they were going to be killed by their own side as the Stalingrad kessel (cauldron) was being crushed -- then did take up arms and often fought against their own side. And their fate is one thing, obviously, that has certainly not been revealed in the archives. I heard that many of them were in fact not even shot afterwards but that orders were given for them to be beaten to death because bullets should not be wasted on them. Some were said to have been forced to lie down in a road and have tanks run over them.

Of course, the revenge on them was really brutal. And this was not just a question of the Soviet authorities. It was also the feeling of most Red Army soldiers who had served at the time. They saw them as the most appalling traitors imaginable. And that's why they would have happily taken part in the killing of the "Hiwis" and of the Russians in German uniform.

**RFE/RL: Given that Stalingrad's war industry had been more or less destroyed and Germany already controlled vast swaths of Soviet territory by 1942, what prompted the Germans to invest so many resources into taking the city? Did their desire to conquer Stalingrad actually make military sense?**

**Beevor:** No, absolutely not.... It was only when Hitler started to have doubts that he was going to achieve his objective of seizing the oil fields in the Caucasus that he, in his rather typical way, started to switch his attention very much toward a symbol of victory rather than a genuine -- if you like -- military objective. And Stalingrad, because it bore Stalin's name, could at least symbolize a form of victory.

---

Orders were given for them to be beaten to death because bullets should not be wasted ...

---

Because Stalingrad lay on the Volga, because Stalingrad bore Stalin's name, Hitler was determined to seize it at any cost. And this carried on and on. I mean, the most disastrous moment, which basically sealed the fate of the [German] Sixth Army, was when in November [1942] Hitler ordered [General Friedrich Wilhelm] **Paulus** to make a last attempt at seizing Stalingrad and even ordered him to use Panzer crews on their feet as infantry. Well, this was absolute madness...

**RFE/RL: Did Stalingrad push Hitler over the edge psychologically?**

**Beevor:** It was a psychological turning point for everybody, I think. One saw the way Nazi propaganda changed suddenly from having sort of, you know, promised final victory to actually threatening the Germans with the consequences of defeat. It was quite clear that, because of what had been done to the Soviet Union, the revenge would be terrible. And so for that reason Germany had to fight on to the very end.

**RFE/RL: Another aspect of Stalingrad that I found particularly interesting was the involvement of women combatants on the Soviet side, with many of them seemingly right on the front line. Is that something that is pretty unique to that battle?**

**Beevor:** No, it wasn't unique to that battle. In fact, funnily enough, many more women served later in subsequent battles.

[...]

At Stalingrad, there were a large number of women who were serving with incredible bravery. These were mostly young girls straight out of high school who were acting as medical orderlies and literally dragging men out of the firing line. Many of them were killed. They showed astonishing bravery for young women of their age.

Others fought as fighter pilots -- the so-called "night witches," as the Germans labeled them. These were young women in a regiment which flew these little biplanes. They would cut out their engines and glide in over the German trenches, drop bombs, turn on the engines again, and fly off.

There were also a certain number of women -- very few in fact -- who served in tanks.

But there weren't women snipers at Stalingrad. I'm afraid the film "Enemy at the Gates," which implied women were acting as snipers, as in the case of [actress] Rachel Weisz, was simply not the case.

The women snipers came in later. The first women's sniper school was set up in February 1943, just after the Battle of Stalingrad. And then there were large numbers of women snipers who served on many fronts indeed.

**RFE/RL: Are you irked by how Stalingrad has been commandeered by popular culture in recent years as in films like "Enemy at the Gates" or the hugely popular computer game "Call of Duty," which claims to go to great lengths to re-create the battle conditions of Stalingrad? Do you think they distort the public perception of the battle? Or perhaps they at least help foster interest in the subject...**

**Beevor:** Well, I think Stalingrad has become a very important symbol. I hate to use the word iconic, but there has been an element of that, partly because it was one of the most desperate battles with inner-city, urban fighting. And I suppose that has an appeal for its cinematic potential and also in terms of popular culture with the whole question of snipers and all the rest of it.

[...]

Stalingrad has become a tremendous sort of myth. In fact, Jean-Jacques Annaud, the director

of *Enemy at the Gates*, said to me once, “But Antony, who can tell where myth begins and truth ends?” And all the rest of it...I don’t know whether that’s an excuse for playing around with history and sort of saying that history is totally elastic. I’m afraid it’s one of the problems that basically the needs of Hollywood and the entertainment industry and the needs of history are totally incompatible.

---

They showed astonishing bravery for young women of their age.

---

**RFE/RL: Are there big differences between how Stalingrad is perceived in Russia and how it is seen in Germany and elsewhere?**

**Beevor:** Well, I think both sides will agree on the outline and developments of what happened, and on what particular dates. I don’t think there’s any major disagreement there. But, obviously, there’s a huge difference in analysis and approach to the morale of their own troops and attitudes and so forth. Inevitably, every country will look at a particular aspect of the Second World War through their own spectacles rather than anybody else’s.

The main emphasis on the Soviet side will be on the heroism. [As for] the compulsion, the forced discipline, the blocking groups, and all the rest of it -- you won’t find very much of that in any Russian history of the battle.

On the German side, you won’t find very much about what was done to the civilian population and the way that the Russian civilians trapped on the German side of the lines were treated.

So, inevitably, there will be tender points, shall we say, which will be ignored on each side. [...]

From the Russian side, [Stalingrad] is the great symbol of Russian heroism and the great Soviet contribution to the defeat of the fascist beast, and all the rest of it. In that way, Russian propaganda differs very little from Soviet propaganda on that particular aspect... I think the legacy on the German side was to see it much more as a tragedy. Almost every German book on the subject has the word “tragedy” somewhere in the subtitle. And, of course, from the German point of view it was a tragedy inflicted on the German people by Hitler through his obstinacy and his obsessions. And that it was a totally unnecessary defeat.

**RFE/RL: This is perhaps a pretty glib question, but what in your opinion are the lasting legacies of Stalingrad 70 years after the event?**

**Beevor:** I don’t think the legacy, if you like, is necessarily very instructive, because it’s become such a symbol. Like many other historical parallels, it tends to be misused. I mean, before the Iraq war, I was contacted by almost every newspaper in [Britain]. It was astonishing -- one after the other ringing up and asking would I write an article on why the battle of Baghdad was going to be like the Battle of Stalingrad. And you had to explain time and time again that it wasn’t going to be anything like it. But this is the way, I’m afraid, that, quite often, legacy actually becomes a liability, because people become obsessed with the

past and somehow think that history is going to repeat itself. History never repeats itself.

I think we've seen how -- with certain political leaders like George Bush comparing 9/11 to Pearl Harbor or [British Prime Minister] Tony Blair trying to compare [Iraqi leader] Saddam Hussein to Hitler -- that the danger of the Second World War is that it's become such a dominating reference point that it's actually truly dangerous, both in political terms, because it influences strategy, but also because the media tends to follow it.

In a curious way, newspapers like to think of easy, straightforward parallels, which they can then instruct their readers with, which in fact are always completely misleading and usually very dangerous.