

Stalingrad:

The Battlefield of History ...

The History of a Battlefield



Stalingrad:
The Fateful Siege 1942-1943
 by Antony Beevor
 Penguin, London, 1998

Enemy at the Gates
 A Film directed by
 Jean-Jacques Annaud
 2001

The Battle of Stalingrad, a titanic collision in the Second World War between Nazi Germany and the then socialist Soviet Union, has been the subject of countless studies, books, films and memoirs. However, two recent works, one a history by Antony Beevor, one of Britain's most important writers on military affairs, the other a major film from the French director Jean-Jacques Annaud, have helped acquaint a new generation with what is widely held to be the greatest battle in history. Not only was it a military clash on a giant scale, pitting millions of soldiers against each other, it was even more the key act in an unfolding drama in which two social systems – the capitalist-imperialist system in the form of German Nazis, and the system that had been born of the October Revolution and built up in two decades of socialist construction under the leadership of Lenin and Stalin – confronted each other in life-or-death combat. It was the turning point in the Second World War and the beginning of the end of Hitler's Germany, which,

Left: Red Army soldiers in the "Stalingrad Academy of Street-fighting".

Right: Red Army Divisional Commander at the front with his troops.

until taking on the USSR, had easily swept through almost all of Western and Eastern Europe.

In relation to the grandeur of their subject, both Beevor's book and Annaud's film fall far short indeed. The courage of the people in defending the USSR and the heroism of the Red Army in withstanding and eventually overcoming a much better equipped enemy is too towering an historical fact to be easily dismissed. However unfair it may seem to equate the scholarship of Beevor with the crude Hollywood-style fiction of Annaud, both works, though in different spheres and with different audiences, are efforts to explain the heroism of the proletariat from the world-view of the bourgeoisie. While both works are faithful to the "facts" (and one can learn a great deal from them once filtered through a revolutionary viewpoint), they swallow whole a gigantic lie – that the greatest military victory of all time somehow took place in spite of, or even in opposition to, the socialist system and the dicta-

torship of the proletariat. Ultimately, theirs is a hopeless mission. No matter how talented or well funded (Annaud's film had the biggest budget ever for a European film), the ultimate result of their work may boomerang and encourage a new generation to discover for themselves the real meaning of the word Stalingrad.

BACKGROUND TO THE SHOWDOWN

Having been defeated in the First World War and punished through the Versailles Treaty, the German imperialist ruling class had been increasingly intent on forcing a new imperialist division of the world. The vehicle they used for this was to be the National Socialist ("Nazi") Party led by Hitler. Coupled closely with their drive for world domination was a determination to wipe out the Soviet Union, the world's first socialist state.

The goal of destroying the USSR was shared by all of the world's imperialists. Britain, France and the United States had no less a hatred for the dictatorship of the proletariat. Indeed, one of the main "waraims" of Britain and the US throughout the Second World War was to point the Nazi juggernaut eastwards, hoping that it would destroy the USSR and weaken itself considerably in the process. Mao Tsetung called this policy "sitting on the mountain-top and watching the tigers fight".

In an effort to defuse this strategy, the Soviet Union had made efforts to reach an agreement with the Anglo-French imperialists for a collec-

tive defence against Hitler. After this failed, in 1939 the USSR entered into a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. During the next two years the German military machine won one victory after another – Poland, Denmark, Holland and Belgium. France was invaded and quickly capitulated (the large majority of its ruling class basically aligned with Germany for the duration of the war), whilst the British army in Europe quickly retreated across the English Channel.

The British then sat back with folded arms as Hitler consolidated his grip on continental Europe and prepared a mighty offensive against the USSR. On 22 June 1941 the German attack began. Amassing an invasion force of 5,500,000 soldiers (including forces from the satellite states of Romania, Bulgaria, etc.), 3,350 tanks and 2,000 aircraft, it was able to rely on the combined resources of occupied Europe. Germany attacked in three major directions: in the north towards Leningrad, in the centre in the general direction of Moscow and in the south towards Kiev and, beyond, Stalingrad and the Caucasus region. The Red Army was forced to defend a western front of 4,500 kilometres, including 1,100 kilometres of coastline. Furthermore, whilst, in a general sense, the USSR had been preparing for the inevitable military conflict, the move to consolidate its defences had not been completed and, in some important ways, the USSR was caught off-guard by the timing, magnitude and direction of the German onslaught. In the areas of its main attack, Germany was able to amass a superiority in the balance of forces of four or five to one. Furthermore, Germany had air superiority and its commanders more combat experience, especially with tanks. Germany was imposing its *blitzkrieg*, a lightning attack that had worked so well against its enemies up until now.

The results of the initial days and weeks of the war were nearly disastrous for the USSR. On every front the Red Army was pushed back and its disorganised and cut-off units were heavily mauled by the Germans. In the first three weeks of fighting, according to Beevor the Red Army lost 2,000,000 soldiers, 3,500 tanks, 6,000 aeroplanes and a good percentage of the officer corps. By September, German forces were already in the outskirts of Leningrad. In the south, Kiev, the



capital of Ukraine, the second largest Republic in the USSR, was in danger of being surrounded by overwhelming enemy forces. Stalin and the Soviet leadership, in what may have been their biggest military mistake of the war, called on the Red Army to defend Kiev at any cost. The Red Army put up a stubborn and heroic defence of the city, but, against such overwhelming force, defeat was inevitable, and as many as 500,000 Red Army soldiers were captured.

According to the scenario that had been played and replayed by the German war machine throughout Europe, the collapse of the USSR should have been imminent. In late September, a confident and arrogant Hitler gave orders to raze Leningrad after its capture and to replace Moscow with a large artificial lake. Indeed, the Allied powers also fully expected the imminent fall of Leningrad and Moscow. US Secretary of War Henry Stimson reflected the near unanimous view of US military chiefs when he wrote that German victory would require "...a possible maximum of three months".

Instead, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union led and organised an unprecedented military mobilisation of the whole country and waged what we would today call a people's war. The working class and general masses in Leningrad were able to keep the militarily superior forces of the Germans out of the city, including by mobilising 250,000 people, mainly women, to dig miles of anti-tank defences. The city's people then held out heroically in a siege that was to last 900 days, during which as many as a million citizens, again mostly women, perished. As for Moscow, the Soviet leadership seriously considered abandoning the city; Lenin's body was removed from its tomb to a more secure location. But instead of leaving, Stalin decided, against the advice of others, to hold a defiant military march in Moscow on the anniversary of the October Revolution, during which Red Army reinforcements marched directly from Red Square to the front to face the German fascist invaders.

Everywhere people mobilised. Communists were sent in huge numbers to the front to boost the fighting capacity and morale of the troops. Far and wide behind enemy lines communists organised partisan units to wage guerrilla warfare against the invaders.

The partisans survived in harsh conditions in the forests by relying on the masses, who gave vital support despite the genocidal policies of the Nazis to massacre the civilian population for every act of resistance. In the rear areas people worked night and day to transport whole factories out of the reach of the German invaders and to dramatically increase production of desperately needed war material.

By December 1941, as the severe Russian winter set in (with temperatures as low as -20°C), the German army had advanced to the gates of Leningrad and Moscow and all along a north-south line down to the Crimean Sea. But the offensive had been stopped, and some counter-attacks had even begun to take their toll on the German forces.

The German fascists had greatly underestimated the resilience of the Soviet Army and people. The arrogance born of their class viewpoint had let them feel they could attack in more or less equal strength in three directions at once. By the time the spring thaw had begun the German general staff re-adjusted their plans. They decided to focus the bulk of their forces on a massive assault towards the south-east, in the direction of the city named after the Soviet leader.

Stalingrad (now called Volgograd) is located on the Volga river, one of the principal rivers in Russia and a major transportation artery at the frontier between Europe and Asia. It is the gateway to the Caucasus, where many non-Russian nationalities lived in different socialist Republics united in the USSR. The German high command was hoping to make use of contradictions between the peoples of the Soviet Union to undermine their fighting capacity. For example, the Cossacks, many of whom had been fooled or press-ganged during the time of the Tsars into being a shock force against revolutionaries, were concentrated in the region between the Don and Volga rivers.

The oil fields of Baku in Soviet Azerbaijan, near the border with Iran, were a particularly important target for fuelling the German war machine. Capturing them would also deprive the Soviet forces of petroleum resources. In addition, the German army felt that by capturing Stalingrad and crossing the Volga they could at some later point move back north and encircle Moscow, which was still under attack

from the west. In short, the whole German war plan now hinged on conquering Stalingrad.

Whilst the communists, the class-conscious workers and the most advanced sections of the Soviet people were determined not to spare any sacrifice to defeat the fascist aggressors, there was a small section of counter-revolutionaries who welcomed the fascists as rescuers from the Bolsheviks. There were also significant numbers of people who were stunned by the early successes of the German army and had lost confidence in the possibility of victory. (The Soviets were later to sum up that this defeatism had been partly fed by overly simplified pre-war propaganda that tended to belittle the strength of the enemy, leading to shock and disbelief when the enemy proved a formidable foe. Mao summed up the correct orientation when he wrote that the imperialists and all reactionaries are "paper tigers, with real teeth", and that the people need to despise them strategically while taking them seriously tactically.) Within the Army and the Soviet Party itself, including at the highest levels, there were strong manifestations of defeatism and flightism.

In the early months of the southern campaign, the reconcentrated and focused German army again inflicted sharp defeats on the Red Army. Stalin and the Soviet leadership correctly understood the stakes of the upcoming campaign. On 27 July 1942 Stalin, in his capacity as the head of the Army, issued a key order, number 227, which said in part:

"The fighting goes on in the Voronezh area, on the Don, in Southern Russia, at the gates of the North Caucasus. The German invaders are driving towards Stalingrad, towards the Volga, and want to capture Kuban and the North Caucasus with their oil and bread riches, at any price. The enemy has already captured Voroshilovgrad, Starobelsk, Rossosh', Kupyansk, Valuiki, Novochoerkassk, Rostov-on-Don and half of Voronezh. Some units of the South front, following the panic-mongers, have abandoned Rostov and Novochoerkassk without serious resistance and without orders from Moscow, thus covering their banners with shame. The people of our country, who treat the Red Army with love and respect, are now starting to be disappointed with it, and lose faith in the Red Army, and many

of them curse the Army for its fleeing to the east and leaving the population under the German yoke. Some unwise people at the front comfort themselves with arguments that we can continue the retreat to the east, as we have vast territories, a lot of soil, and many people, and that we will always have abundance of bread. By these arguments they try to justify their shameful behaviour at the front. But all these arguments are utterly false and wrong, and work for our enemies. Every commander, soldier and political officer has to realise that our resources are not infinite. The territory of the Soviet Union is not a wilderness, but peopled with workers, peasants, intelligentsia, our fathers and mothers, wives, brothers, and children. The territory of the USSR that has been captured by the enemy and which the enemy is longing to capture represents bread and other resources for the Army and the civilians, iron and fuel for the industries, factories and plants that supply the military with hardware and ammo; it also contains our railroads. With the loss of Ukraine, Byelorussia, the Baltic Republics, the Donetsk basin and other areas, we have lost vast territories. This means that we have lost much in the way of people, bread, metals, factories and plants. We no longer have superiority over the enemy in human resources and in the supply of bread. Continuing to retreat means destroying ourselves and our Motherland. Every new piece of territory that we leave to the enemy will strengthen our enemy and weaken us, our defences, our Motherland. This is why we have to put a stop to talk that we can retreat endlessly, that we have a lot of territory, that our country is great and rich, that we have a large population and we will always have enough bread. Such talk is false and harmful, as it weakens us and strengthens the enemy. If we do not stop retreating, we will be left without bread, without fuel, without metal, without raw materials, without factories and plants, without railways. The conclusion is that it is time to stop retreating. Not one step backwards! This should be our slogan from now on. We need to protect every strongpoint, every metre of Soviet soil, stubbornly, till the last droplet of

blood. We must grab hold of every inch of our land and defend it as long as possible. Our Motherland is going through hard times. We have to stop, and face and destroy the enemy, whatever it might cost us. The Germans are not as strong as the panic-mongers claim. They are stretching their strength to the limit. To withstand their blows now means to ensure victory in the future...."¹

This combination of iron will and a remarkable perception of the basic situation reflects the kind of leadership Stalin gave to the Soviet people during the war. It is this that won him the lasting love and admiration not only of the masses of the land of socialism but also of the masses all over the world who, as Mao said, were watching every report of the unfolding drama with bated breath. The slogan "Not one step backwards!" became the rallying cry of the Red Army and a guiding principle for the Battle of Stalingrad.

Mao wrote that, "revolutionary war can only be waged by mobilising the people and relying on them." This is true not only for the front-line soldiers but also for every aspect of the war effort. Indeed, the entire Soviet population was mobilised and everything was subordinated to the war effort. Whereas about 6,000 tanks had been produced in 1941, 25,000 were produced in 1942, despite huge Soviet losses in territory and productive capacity.

The defence of the Soviet Union was indeed a people's war, but unlike most phases of the People's War in China or the people's wars we have seen in the last few decades, it was not, in the main, a guerrilla war. It was mobile and positional warfare involving huge numbers of troops and munitions and requiring the co-ordinated action of all the branches of the armed forces (infantry, tanks, aviation, artillery, navy, etc.). And this kind of war also has its own particularities, its own laws, which the political and military leaders needed to understand.

Mao stresses the "conscious dynamic factor of man" in warfare. While this may seem easier to see in the context of guerrilla war, in which so much depends on the daring, initiative, willingness to sacrifice and tenacity of relatively small units of soldiers, it is just as true in the kind of massive, highly co-ordinated fighting that was taking

place in the Soviet Union. And if ever proof of this were needed, it was the Battle of Stalingrad that provided it.

From the beginning of the war the German army had been astounded by the fighting spirit of the Soviet soldier. The German General Halder wrote in his diary, "Everywhere the Russians fight to the last man, they capitulate only occasionally." Beevor observes that, "the biggest mistake by the German commanders was to have underestimated 'Ivan', the ordinary Red Army soldier." Clearly the Soviets fought as no others had against the German juggernaut. But as the first year of the war showed, courage and morale alone is not enough. To fully unleash "man's conscious dynamic role", correct strategy and tactics also need to be applied.

STALINGRAD

The actual Battle of Stalingrad as such can be said to have started on 21 August 1942, when the German army crossed the Don River, which in that part of southern Russia is only a few dozen kilometres from the Volga. Two days later intense aerial carpet-bombing unleashed savage destruction on the city of Stalingrad. Motorised Panzer tank divisions broke into the city and reached the banks of the Volga. Beevor claims that out of a population of 600,000, 40,000 men, women and children died in the first week of bombing. By 25 August 1942, most non-combatants had been evacuated from the city in launches across the Volga, whilst German aviation rained bombs down mercilessly.

Those who remained in the neighbourhoods and factories of Stalingrad were completely integrated into the defence effort. North of the city lay an industrial zone with a number of very large plants that had been converted to military production. The Dzerzhinsky Tractor Works, the Barrikady factory and the Red October plant now produced tanks that rolled off the lines right to the front, which by 30 September was only minutes from the edge of the factories. The main Soviet command was shifted to the Asian side of the Volga, to the east, which still remained firmly in Soviet hands. The Soviet Sixty-second Army dug in to their positions in a narrow stretch of the city centre, with only a few hundred metres separating the

¹ Stalin's order was read to every officer and political commissar in the Red Army. It was not published until the 1980s.

Volga from the front lines of the German Sixth Army. German forces stood between the Sixty-second Army and the Sixty-fourth Army, which had taken up defences in the southern part of the city. The previous commander of the Sixty-second Army had proven unequal to the task, having begun to withdraw across the Volga. General Vasili Chuikov was given the command and told to hold Stalingrad at all costs. At that time the Sixty-second Army had been reduced to the 20,000 men who bore the brunt of the German Sixth Army, which was under orders from Hitler to take Stalingrad at any cost.

In September, Stalin and General Zhukov, second in command of the Soviet armed forces, put together a grand plan that called for bogging down the German Sixth Army in the city of Stalingrad, whilst Soviet forces prepared a giant counter-offensive designed to encircle and trap the entire Sixth Army. The operation, which was given the code name Uranus, was kept a closely held secret. Stalin and Zhukov did not discuss it over radio or telephone conversations, even in code.

The Soviet forces put up a ferocious fight. It is said that not a single building was intact after the bombing, but the Soviets turned the rubble itself into a killing ground for the Nazi troops. Chuikov formed small units of six to nine soldiers to carry out street fighting. The central train station changed hands five times in the course of the battle. At one point, a key part of the battlefield was a single grain elevator, in which German soldiers held one floor while Soviet soldiers held the floor just above or below them. Chuikov ordered the Soviet forces to stay no more than fifty metres, the distance of a hand grenade throw, from the enemy front lines at all times.

By engaging in this kind of tenacious hand-to-hand fighting, the Soviet forces were using tactics that gave full play to the strengths of the soldiers — their courage, daring and self-sacrifice — and minimised the advantages of the Germans, especially their superiority in weapons and manpower. Keeping Soviet lines so close and intermingled with the enemy made it difficult for the Germans to call in artillery or air strikes without risking their own soldiers as well. Chuikov wrote that the German soldiers hated fighting at close quarters: “their morale did not stand it. They did not have the spirit to look an

armed Soviet soldier in the eye. You could locate an enemy soldier in a forward post from a long way off, especially by night; he would constantly, every five to ten minutes, give a burst on his machine gun, obviously to boost his own morale. Our soldiers could find such ‘warriors’ and finish them off with a bullet or bayonet.” (cited in the *Revolutionary Worker*, 15 April 2001) The imperialist war method of firing at everything, real or imagined, contributed to the German expenditure of 25 million rounds of ammunition in September alone, thus aggravating their supply problems. (It is no surprise that, after the Soviet Union was transformed into an imperialist country, its reactionary armed forces invaded and occupied Afghanistan with a massive expenditure of bombs and bullets, just as the US had done previously in Vietnam. It is the class nature of the reactionary beast that leads it to fight this way.)

The Soviet sniper movement, which popularised snipers such as Zeitov (“the hare”), who is featured in *Enemy at the Gates*, dealt sharp blows to the German fighting machine. Not only did snipers hiding in drainpipes and rubble knock out large numbers of German soldiers (Zeitov is credited with killing over 200 himself), they had the overall effect of, in Chuikov’s words, “making the Germans crawl, not walk”.

Although the battle ultimately involved two million soldiers, a tremendous amount depended on skirmishes, small units and even individuals. For example, the commanding heights of Stalingrad, called the Mamaev Kurgan, were defended during the siege by as few as a couple of hundred troops. These soldiers’ understanding of the importance of holding this position for the final outcome of the battle fired them with a determination to defend the heights, at any cost, despite a situation that often seemed impossible.

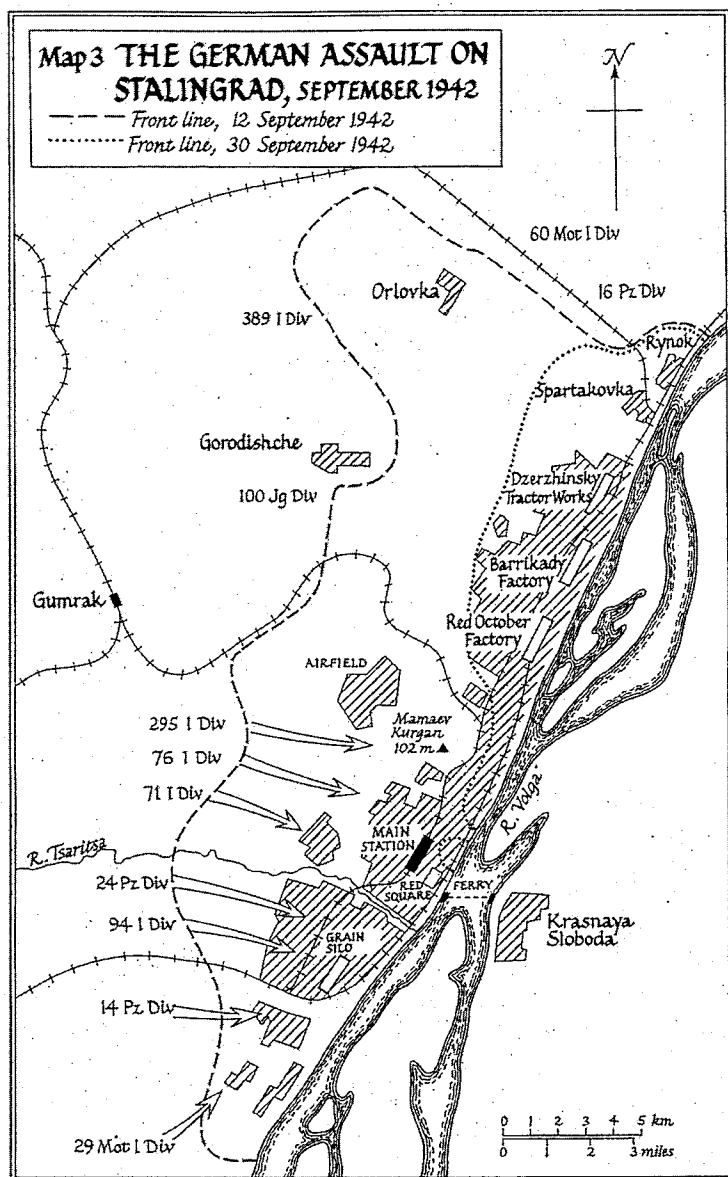
One of the celebrated feats of Stalingrad was the defence of Pavlov House. It is named after Sergeant Iakov Pavlov, who led a handful of soldiers in defending a building at a strategic position on the corner of a major avenue. For fifty days and nights, without rest, the soldiers beat off attack after attack by the Germans, including artillery, tank and air bombardments. It is noteworthy that the defenders of Pavlov House were a mosaic of the different nationalities of the Soviet peo-

ples: Russians, Ukrainians, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Tadjiks, Tartars and others. While Beevor arrogantly dismisses the role of the “uncultured” Asian fighters in Stalingrad, in fact non-Russian nationalities played a vital part in the defence and supply of the city, and in the subsequent counter-attack.

The Stalingrad defenders became expert at destroying or crippling German tanks, which had been so central to the Nazi success in the first phases of the Second World War. Their tactics often involved attacking tanks that were only a few metres away. Needless to say, this kind of heroism involved tremendous sacrifices: official Soviet sources record that 84 per cent of all mobilised men and women in Stalingrad were killed, wounded or captured.

Another feature of the defence of Stalingrad was the extremely close unity between the officers and rank-and-file, a fact that makes the portrayal in *Enemy at the Gates* of the Soviet commanders that much more infuriating. Chuikov described his decision not to move his command post to a relatively more secure area on a nearby island in the Volga River: “It would have had an immediate effect on the morale of the leaders of units, their staff and all of the combatants. We understood... the importance of not staying all the time at our headquarters and we would frequently go to the observation posts of the divisions and the regiments and even into the trenches themselves so that the fighters would see with their own eyes that the generals — members of the Military Council — were always with them.”

One of the most reactionary scenes in *Enemy at the Gates* shows Soviet soldiers being gunned down by their own commanders for retreating. Like most disinformation, an ounce of truth — an over-emphasis on the use of compulsion — is used to pass a mountainous lie. In fact, one law of war is that no army, of any class, can tolerate desertion under fire. Self-serving cowardice can never be allowed to jeopardise the lives of the other soldiers and the final outcome of a battle. War is the ultimate “compulsion”, and the interests of any individual are and must be subordinated to the whole. It is true that the Soviet Red Army, like armies generally, had standing orders to shoot anyone deserting under fire. But to imply from this that the great exploits of the Red Army could in any way be



Map from Antony Beevor's *Stalingrad*.

explained by some kind of fear or "terror" is quite patently ridiculous. Nevertheless, there are weaknesses in Stalin's understanding of this question of dealing with deserters and cowardice, which reflected errors Mao was later to criticise Stalin for.

In a later part of the above-mentioned "Not One Step Backwards!" order, Stalin gives undue emphasis to enforcing discipline through military means. He even openly lauds the German system of forming penal battalions, in which those who had deserted would be given a chance to "redeem themselves" by fighting on the most difficult parts of the front, and calls for

a similar system to be set up in the Soviet Army. Here Stalin overemphasises the similarity between the two armies and their need to enforce discipline and thus blurs their fundamentally different character. While every army requires iron military discipline, how that discipline will be obtained and secured has everything to do with which class rules and which social system is reflected within the army. This is part of the meaning of Mao's concise summation of military strategy, "You fight your way, we'll fight ours."

In fact, armies led by the proletariat can and do have a basically different approach to assuring discipline than

do reactionary armies. Whilst a socialist state can and must use different forms of compulsion at times (for example, conscription), ultimately it must rely on the justness of its cause, the consciousness of its soldiers and the solidarity between the leaders and led as the sources of its discipline. Mao stressed that, "political work is the lifeblood of the army". In the main and overwhelmingly this is what Stalin practised, by arousing the masses and ensuring their unity and discipline. In sending the most resolute communists at all levels to handle the most important and dangerous tasks at the front, the Party set a resounding example that was far more powerful than the fear of court martial could ever be.

It is also true that the Army itself is composed of advanced, intermediate and backward forces. Whilst proletarian ideology is a powerful motivating factor for the advanced, it would be naïve to think that appeals to a higher consciousness will alone overcome the backwardness of other sections of the soldiers who are frightened for their lives. Clearly, compulsion or force will play a role in any military organisation, and all the more so in battle, but even here what kind of compulsion and what policies are adopted will vary greatly depending on which class is in the leading position. In this respect, it is interesting to note the policy on desertion carried out by the Vietnamese revolutionary armed forces during the war against US imperialism. Deserters, even repeat offenders, were reintegrated into their original units after being subjected to sharp criticism by the masses in their home villages. The Soviet policy of emphasising execution of deserters and cowards seems to give stress to the wrong aspect (and declaring that the families of deserters would be punished is utterly wrong). Furthermore, Stalin's suggestion of initiating penal battalions on the model of the German army makes no sense — concentrating the backward together and having them led by even more backward officers cannot possibly create the most favourable conditions for genuine remoulding to take place.

ON THE
 "GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR"

Both Beevor and Annaud have the same basic explanation for the undeniable heroism of the Soviet fighters that

shines through despite the slanders and distortions in the book and film. And that explanation is *patriotism*. In other words, the Soviet soldier is supposed to have accomplished that which no other army in Europe could simply out of hatred of the foreign aggressor and instinctive love of the "homeland". In fact, every state in Europe tried to rally its troops with appeals to patriotism. Is there any nation more "patriotic", or, for that matter, any army more chauvinistic, than that of French imperialism? Yet the soldiers and army of France covered themselves in disgrace during the Second World War.

Or is it to be understood that there was something particular about *Russian* patriotism that had some magical quality that made it more powerful than that of other nations? It should be enough to recall the course of the First World War, when Russia was also invaded by German imperialist troops, to show just how hollow such an argument is. It is certainly true that the Tsar and the Russian bourgeoisie tried to rally the Russian masses, especially the peasants, with appeals to "defend the Fatherland". But as we know, the Russian army suffered defeat after defeat at the front and was extremely demoralised. Lenin's call to *oppose* the defence of the then-imperialist "Fatherland" and to turn the imperialist war into a revolutionary civil war played a decisive role in rallying the soldiers to the banner of the Bolsheviks. His call for an immediate end to Russia's involvement in the First World War was part of the famous "land; bread and peace" slogan of the October Revolution.

So what was the difference between Tsarist Russia during the First World War and the Soviet Union during the Second World War? A world of difference. During the latter, the Soviet Union was a dictatorship of the proletariat, a state in which the working class, in alliance with the peasantry and other labouring people, ruled society. The old exploiters had been overthrown and were kept down by force. Giant steps had been made in building a new socialist economy, not based on exploitation. Freed of capitalist wage slavery, the productive power of the labouring masses was unleashed as never before and was producing miracles that never ceased to amaze any outside observers of the time. (Note: It was only much later, after the revision-

ist betrayal of the Soviet Union, following the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, that the bourgeoisie dared to broadly propagate the lie of a society "terrorised" by Communist rule. During the period of socialist construction before the Second World War, the vibrancy of society, the revolutionary enthusiasm of the people and the vast support the USSR had from the world's oppressed was too strong and too evident to allow such propaganda. We can note a similar "historiography of slander" of socialist China as well — it was only after the defeat of socialism there that it was really possible for the imperialists to paint night day and day night.)

So when Hitler attacked the Soviet Union in 1941 the masses there, unlike everywhere else in Europe, did have something very precious to defend — the socialist state that they had wrested from the bourgeoisie through the October Revolution, and into which they had poured their energies and hopes for a generation. What a far cry from the nationalist jingoism of the other so-called Great Powers, who certainly opposed German imperialism, but only to protect (as in the case of the British Empire) or expand (as in the case of the up-and-coming US imperialism) their own blood-soaked exploitation and oppression of people all over the world.

At the same time, a number of measures taken by Stalin and the Soviet leadership did make it more possible for the enemies of socialism to hide the class character of the people's war waged by the Soviet Union. From the first hours of the conflict, the Soviets called it the "Great Patriotic War". This was a conscious recalling of what is known in Russian history as the "Patriotic War", when in 1812 Napoleon invaded Tsarist Russia at the head of France's armies and was eventually driven back from the gates of Moscow. The Internationale was replaced by a new anthem at state gatherings. Great effort was made to bring out and emphasise *Russian* patriotic sentiments. The world-renowned Soviet filmmaker Eisenstein made a powerful film glorifying Alexander Nevsky, a figure from medieval Russian history credited with uniting the nation against Teutonic invaders. Another interesting example is Order Number Four, signed by both General Yeremenko, the military leader of the whole south-west front, and Nikita Khrushchev, who was then serving as

the main political commissar of the South-west army. Applying Stalin's directive "Not one step backwards!", the order refers to "the Bolshevik party, our nation, and our great country". In other words, Khrushchev and Yeremenko are equally evoking the *nation*, i.e. Russia, as well as the country (USSR). This is particularly ironic given the strategic location of Stalingrad, linking Russia with much of the non-Russian Republics, and the large number of non-Russian soldiers and civilians directly involved in the fight.

In general, in the Soviet political line of that time there was an effort to combine the understanding of the need to defend the socialist state with appeals to Russian nationalism. No doubt the Soviet leadership was facing a serious compulsion to unite the broadest possible section of the population. One can hardly fault them if they were able to make use of some patriotic sentiments, even of sections of the population whose attitude toward socialism ranged from lukewarm to outright hostile. Some characters in *Enemy at the Gates* represent these kind of backward forces, taking part in a united front-type of effort with the Soviet regime against the fascist invaders.

But there can be no denying that the heart and soul of the Soviet war effort were the communists, and the class-conscious proletariat. It was they who leapt into every breach and, through their example, led others forward. Beevor reports, for example, that during the Battle of Stalingrad a factory safely located to the East in the Urals was producing the renowned T-34 tanks. It was decided to ask for volunteers among the workers in the plant to accompany the tanks to the front as part of the Soviet army. Although the extreme dangers were known to all, within 36 hours 4,363 had signed up, of whom 1,253 were women.

During the war a number of changes were made in the army itself that tended to strengthen bourgeois forces and methods. Ranks had already been restored, and Red Army commanders hitherto addressed as "comrades" were now to be addressed by the pre-Revolutionary term "officer". The system of dual command between military commander and political commissars was abolished (apparently to the delight of old-school officers who resented "meddling" by the communist commissars). Beevor writes:

 WOMEN

“Red Army generals were conspicuously rewarded. Shoulder boards, symbols of privilege that some Bolshevik lynch mobs [sic] in 1917 had nailed to the bodies of their tsarist wearers, were reinstated.... One soldier in a Guards division heard news about shoulder boards from an old man polishing boots in a railway station. “They’re starting those gold shoulder boards once more,” the man told him in angry disbelief. “Just like in the White Army.” His fellow soldiers too were amazed when he told them on returning to the train. “Why in the Red Army?””

It is beyond the scope of this review to try to discuss which concessions made by Stalin to bourgeois strata and methods were required by the realities of the war. Certainly some adjustment of past policies was both necessary and possible. But it is important to see that such adjustments, both those that were probably correct and others that seem questionable, were not free of consequence. They had concrete and serious negative effects. The advanced were left confused and disoriented, whilst greater rein was given to backward tendencies. It is very difficult, for example, to see how appeals to Russian nationalism could possibly have helped strengthen the solidarity of the different nationalities of the USSR, which had proven to be such a bedrock of strength for the war effort.

Furthermore, some of Stalin’s own incorrect understanding of the contradictory nature of socialism made it easy for him to fall into certain errors. The bourgeois methods that were being introduced greatly strengthened the bourgeoisie in the Party and undermined the strength of the proletariat at the very time it was winning its greatest military victories. A good percentage of those who were subsequently to seize power and restore capitalism in the USSR were involved in the war effort, including Khrushchev himself. As Soviet Defence Minister in the mid-1950s, Marshall Zhukov played a key role in supporting Khrushchev’s coup. For this bourgeoisie in the party, it is true, it was Russia that was being defended and not the accomplishments of socialism, which they themselves were itching to overthrow. Later, the revisionists in the USSR worked overtime to wrap themselves in the uniforms of the Great Patriotic War in an effort to legitimise their rule.

One common feature of people’s wars is the massive participation of women. This was stirringly true of the Battle of Stalingrad as well. *Enemy at the Gates* shows one heroine of the Red Army, a young Jewish woman whose family had been the victim of early Nazi extermination raids. But she is portrayed as an intermediate element and not an advanced communist fighter. Yet the Soviet Red Army was distinguished for the heroic front-line role that thousands of class-conscious women played.

It is true that even the Allied imperialist powers, such as Britain and the US, were forced, by the necessity of the war effort, to mobilise women in various war-related activities, just as the US army is doing today. But a reactionary army reflecting a bourgeois, patriarchal society can never unleash the potential of women. On the other hand, a people’s army, as the Red Army most certainly was, cannot exist *without* releasing the revolutionary energy of the female half of the population. A people’s war defeats the enemy by mobilising the masses and relying on them, by knocking aside the obstacles of oppression, tradition and habit that prevent the people from mastering society. Even if the Soviet leadership was making concessions to traditional Russian values, the women of the USSR were mobilised in the spirit of the Paris Commune, and not that of Catherine the Great.² By the war’s end, there were over 246,000 women in uniform at the front, including the 467th Guards Women’s Night Light Bomber regiment, which was run entirely by women, from the pilots to the armourers and mechanics.

Not only did the women of Stalingrad wipe out many of the fascist soldiers by fighting in the front ranks, but their very presence was also very disconcerting to the Germans. Beevor quotes one letter from a German soldier to his father: “You kept telling me, ‘be faithful to your standard and you’ll win.’ You will not forget these words because the time has come for every sensible man in Germany to curse the madness of this war. It’s impossible to describe what is happen-

² Catherine the Great was the 18th century Tsarina of Russia, who expanded Russia and sponsored a kind of “enlightenment”.

ing here. Everyone in Stalingrad who still possesses a head and hands, women as well as men, carries on fighting.”

The staunch defence of the city of Stalingrad succeeded. The German Army took enormous casualties and was beginning to suffer seriously from a lack of supplies as winter drew closer. Widespread demoralisation was reported among the troops, who had been expecting an easy victory.

On 10 November 1942, after careful but urgent preparation, the Uranus counter-attack was launched. The entire German Sixth Army was encircled. According to Beevor, many Soviet soldiers remember the start of the counter-attack as the greatest day of the war. The Red Army was able to deal powerful blows to the German forces and their allies. The trap was sprung. For more two months, reinforced by air-drops, the German Sixth Army held out. Its commander, Paulus, rejected an ultimatum by the Soviet government to surrender his hopeless position. Final surrender only took place on 31 January 1943, when Paulus, recently promoted Field Marshal by Hitler, and the main officers were captured. Some 80,000 survivors were taken prisoner. All over the world, people rejoiced. Although the German war machine remained a vicious foe for several more years, the tide had shifted. As Mao wrote, Stalingrad was “the turning point of the Second World War”.³

Stalingrad remains one of the greatest experiences of revolutionary warfare. The proletariat of the whole world has good reason to be proud of what our predecessors accomplished on the banks of the Volga. We must never let our enemies denigrate or distort what was achieved during those fateful months when the course of world history was being decided. And certainly we must not fail to absorb all of the lessons of earlier battles, so that we will be able to fight more resolutely and effectively in the battles looming on the horizon. ■

³ US imperialism along with Britain has worked overtime to cover over the role of the USSR in defeating Hitler’s Germany. In fact, by the time of the US-British invasion of continental Europe in May 1944 the fate of the Nazi regime had already been decided on the Eastern front. At that point the main concern of the US and Britain was to rush their soldiers toward Berlin before the Red Army arrived, to better position themselves for the post-war situation.