

New Light on the Eastern Front – Contributions from Russia to the 70th Anniversary of the Victory in Europe in World War Two

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*Interesting results of the post-Soviet research on the Second World War are now presented in 12 imposing volumes, *Velikaia Otechestvennaia Voina 1941–1945 (Great Patriotic War 1941–45)* written by specialists in military, political, international and economic history. Each chapter reflects the research frontier. Their style contrasts positively against Soviet works during the Cold War, and also against renewed anti-Russian historical campaigns in the West in recent years. Open archives, abolition of censorship, freedom of print as well as joint projects with Western scholars are the preconditions for progress in the historiography of Russia in the 20th century in general and of the Eastern Front during World War Two in particular.*

On the eve of Victory Day May 9, a remarkable book presentation shall take place at a conference in Kolomna, near Moscow, organized by the Institute for Russian History of the Academy of Sciences. The conference is devoted to the 70th anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War 1941–45. The German historian Jochen Hellbeck, whose father himself was a soldier at the battle of Stalingrad, will present the Russian version of his remarkable *Die Stalingrad-Protokolle*. The book is based on the hundreds of interviews that were taken in 1943, only a short time after the epic battle over the city at the Volga River, by historians engaged by the renowned professor Isaak Mints. Mints' idea was that the narratives of officers, commissars, soldiers and nurses should form the basis for a true history of the people's war against the Nazi invaders. When the manuscript idea was presented to 'the authorities' after the war, however, these

frank interviews were not in line with how Stalin wanted the battle scenes to be described. By chance, the primary sources were hidden away by Mints. In the 2000s, Jochen Hellbeck, now at Rutgers University in the USA, decided to investigate the untouched sources that had been out of reach even for Russian researchers.

The result is *Die Stalingrad-Protokolle* that has been published in German, Swedish, English and other languages. Everywhere the book aroused vivid debates on 'What we actually know of the war on the Eastern front?'. Now, in 2015, the turn has come for the Russian readers to hear the voices of general Vasily Chuikov (1900–1982) – the commander of the famous 62d Division that stopped the 6th German army from taking Stalingrad – of numerous other officers and commissars, of the renowned sniper Vasily Zaitsev (1915–1991), as well as of civilians who survived the

German assault on the city. Suffice it to say, military historians in Germany and elsewhere in the West debated if the combat spirit in the Red Army was actually upheld, not so much by the infamous blocking units – as alleged in the West – but much more by genuine fighting training and strong motivation to revenge the invaders. The morale of the troops was upheld, as the interviews show, by daily talks to the soldiers by their commanders and commissars, who constantly updated them on events on other fronts and of the perspectives ahead.

This book serves as a good example of how the professional historians deal with the history of the Second World War, in general, and the German-Soviet clash 1941–45, in particular. Since 1992 many individual researchers as well as international cooperative projects have advanced our understanding of the Soviet past. The two fundamental preconditions for progress were, first, the access to archives that were closed in the Soviet era, and second, the de-ideologization of history writing in Russia. The federal state archives in Russia (abbreviated GARF, RGAE, RGVA and RGASPI) declassified most files for the state organs, the economic planning commission Gosplan, and the industrial, financial and industrial ministries. Therefore, formerly schematic views predominated how the Soviet state apparatus and the Soviet economy not only could withstand Operation Barbarossa and the catastrophes of 1941–42, but also could turn the tide into a series of crushing defeats for the German war-machine in 1943, 1944 and finally the conquest of Berlin. Today, outdated communist party-line explanations have been replaced by analyses based on primary sources concerning real problems, failures, and extreme pressure on workers and peasants on the home front.

Several new source collections can be mentioned in this respect. Let me point to the joint German-Russian project that makes accessible the so-called Trophy Wehrmacht

Archive, captured by Soviet archivists in Germany in 1945 and thereafter kept secret in Moscow until 1992. Sergey Kudriashov and Mathias Uhl, both at Deutsches Historisches Institut in Moscow, on 29 April 2015 opened the Internet portal that contains all these thousands of German Army archival files in computerized form.¹ Thereby, researchers anywhere in the world can scrutinize Wehrmacht orders and field reports and intelligence surveys, many of which are not to be found in archives in Germany. A sensation is the hitherto unknown diary of the SS Reichsführer, Heinrich Himmler that sheds new light on the extermination campaigns in the East. Kudriashov, who is the editor of the journal *Istochnik* (The Source) that publishes documents for the Presidential Archive (AP RF), has edited *Voina 1941–1945* (The War 1941–1945) with over two hundred documents on crucial events, decisions or surveys from the highest decision-making circles, i.e. orders signed by Stalin or letters sent to him.

All the main belligerent states in World War Two have published their so-called official histories in dozens of volumes: Great Britain, the United States as well as Germany and Japan. The USSR launched two such multi-volume projects in the 1960s and then in the 1970–80s. However, already at the time, it was obvious to the military and the serious scholars that the Communist Party leadership, first, Nikita Khrushchev and then Leonid Brezhnev, had imposed a Procrustean Bed-framework of political imperatives that actually distorted the historical perspective, if not outright falsified the past. Suffice it to say that after Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956, the authors of these projects hesitated on how to write the war's history if Stalin could not be mentioned by name, at least not too often!

¹ See further: <http://www.dhi-moskau.org/de/institut/aktuelles/details/news/detail/News/bislang-unveroeffentlichte-wehrmachtsakten-jetzt-online-zugaenglich.html?lp=1&cHash=2daeaba43b1ed5514551fbc3546d4b69>

Military disasters in 1941 and 1942 had to be described as minimal as possible. No major decision errors by the High Command or Party leaders were analyzed. No figures of Soviet troop losses could be mentioned. The situation changed on all these matters with Gorbachev's glasnost in the 1980s and the freedom of print since 1992. Several military-historical works published in the mid-1990s, written by specialists at the Institute of Military History of the Ministry of Defense, set the record straight for the strict military campaigns by Wehrmacht and the Red Army.

Since the breakdown of the USSR, the earlier history view as dictated by the Communist party has been changed to a pluralism of interpretations and approaches to the country's past, varying from Leftist to Conservative ideological presumptions and with connections to most of the dominant history paradigms that are common elsewhere (modernization, path dependence, everyday history, gender history, etcetera). All these history trends have taken the place of the former Marxist-Leninist ideology. Historians at many universities and institutes all over Russia have investigated the state of the Soviet economy, the industry and agriculture during the war years. Others have scrutinized correspondence between the front soldiers and their relatives to better understand the changing mentalities and attitudes during the war.

It was decided that time was ripe for summarizing the new historiography of the German-Soviet war 1941–45 in a grand collective publication. The result – the 12 volumes *Velikaia Otechestvennaia Voina 1941–1945* (Great Patriotic War 1941–1945) with over 800 pages in each – has been completed recently. The editorial committee led by the Minister of Defense assembled the elite of Russian historians; its deputy chairman, Major General Vladimir Zolotariov was scientific advisor to the whole work. Each volume is written by 20–30 authors. The first four volumes deal with the origins of World

War Two, the 1938–39 international crises, the failure of appeasement towards Germany, and the outbreak of the world war. No subjects that were taboo in the USSR (for example, the Soviet-German non-aggression treaty 'Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact' and its secret protocol) are avoided or hushed up. Instead they are openly analyzed. The Polish campaign of the Red Army in September 1939 as well as the war on Finland in 1939–40 is described. Every major stage in the war against the German invasion is the subject of a separate chapter. The Soviet war economy, the evacuation of industry to the Urals and Siberia and the results of the defense industry are described in another volume. Many revelations are found in the volume on the Soviet military and political intelligence, the counter-intelligence and state security organs. The importance of Lend-Lease supplies from Great Britain and the USA is outlined in great detail. Several volumes deal with the home front – the changing attitudes of the civilian population, and the various forms of voluntary or forced collaboration with the German occupation forces.

Few will probably have time or purpose to read these volumes from A to Z; thus, interested persons are recommended first to study the comprehensive and unsurpassed historiographic survey – over 100 pages! – in volume 2 that touches upon most of what was written on this war, both during the Cold war and since 1992. The reader will find most reflections and discussions in the concluding, 12th volume *Results and Lessons of the War*. Here, the authors summarize what can be considered as the most credible explanations of the Soviet victory over Germany. The chapters deal with the ideological and propaganda campaigns launched by Nazi Germany on the population of the USSR and how the Soviet authorities, the Communist party as well as the Orthodox Church could withstand this information warfare. Two chapters present contemporary military historians' appreciation of the German as well

as the Soviet military doctrines before and during the war. The origins of the Cold War can be found already before 1946–48, in the diverging approaches by the former Allies to the peace settlements and the German question in particular. In this volume the authors also sum up many of the present controversies between Russian historians, on the one side, and historians, politicians, and publicists in East and West Europe and the USA, on the other hand.

As the Dutch historian Pieter *Geyl* wrote in *Debates with Historians* (1958) ‘History is *argument without end*’. The here mentioned contributions by historians and archivists deserve to form the basis for future exchanges and for projects of fruitful scientific cooperation; an area where no doubt the role of the professional historians even in our troubled times cannot be underestimated nor ignored.

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Samuelson’s research in Russian economic history re-started when the archives opened in 1992. His major research topic is the development of the Soviet military-industrial complex from the 1930s onwards. He has participated in several research projects on Soviet agrarian history of the 1930s, on the Great Terror 1937-38 and the Gulag camp system, and also on Sweden’s relations with the Soviet Union in the Cold War period. His research results have been rewarded by several institutions. The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities rewarded its prestigious Rettig Prize in 2014 to Samuelson for his fundamental research and innovative grasp of the Russian archival materials.