

Russia's War

Review Number: 66

Publish date: Monday, 1 March, 1999

Author: Richard J. Overy

ISBN: 9781575000510

Date of Publication: 1998

Pages: 415pp.

Publisher: Penguin

Publisher url: <http://www.penguin.co.uk/nf/Book/BookDisplay/0,,9780140271690,00.html?strSrchSql=russias%20>

Place of Publication: New York

Reviewer: Evan Mawdsley

The war between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia remains a subject of great fascination. The campaign clearly had a vital effect on the outcome of the Second World War as a whole. It was an historical drama with unpredictable turning points. And it was fought on an vast scale and with a correspondingly vast scale of casualties. There are different ways of trying to comprehend the enormity of what the Russians still call 'The Great Patriotic War'. The book under review is a companion to an ambitious television documentary made in the mid-1990s. They share the same title (although the documentary had the subtitle 'Blood upon the Snow'). The documentary was an Anglo-Russian co-production and credited in Britain to Video Collection International. As far as this reviewer knows the series has not yet been transmitted on terrestrial television in the U.K. and is available only on video. There is no mention of the television series on the book's jacket.

The 'Russia's War' television documentary was a prestige production, with ten 52 minute episodes. Some of the episodes were introduced by Henry Kissinger. Nigel Hawthorne served as the narrator. The important Russian historians Dmitrii Volkogonov (Stalin's biographer) and Mikhail Semiriaga were credited as consultants, alongside Richard Overy; both Volkogonov and Semiriaga appeared on screen in various episodes.

The decision of the series makers to frame the history of the war within the longer context of the history of the Stalin years was a sound one. The source material was riveting. There were dozens of fascinating interviewees, from children of purged generals and admirals, to the singer Bulat Okudzhava and the maid who placed the bomb under Wilhelm Kube's bed. A kind of continuity was given by the nonagenarian political cartoonist Boris Efimov, who appeared in several episodes. The series is also worth seeing for a range of contemporary film extracts and still photographs that are not available anywhere else. Most of this appeared to be accurate and appropriate, as one would expect from a series produced in part for a knowing Russian audience. It is certainly a model compared to the modern British fashion of dumbed-down 'historical' documentaries, with reconstructed scenes using actors, excessive 'atmosphere', and ignorant use of contemporary film footage.

The 'Russia's War' documentary - for which Professor Overy presumably had limited direct responsibility - was not without its faults. It was difficult to see the relevance of Kissinger's involvement, and his presentation was frankly leaden. Nigel Hawthorne could not be taken completely seriously after 'Yes

Minister'. Some coaching in pronunciation of Russian and German names would have been effort well spent. The musical soundtrack was annoying, at least after ten episodes. There was sometimes a stress of mood over clear exposition, and as video military history PolyGram's 'The Battle of Stalingrad' (1994) is better. More to the point aspects of the editorial 'line' of the series were heavy-handed, with an all-powerful and consistently evil Stalin at the back of everything. It is not clear who was responsible for this interpretation; Genrikh Borovik and Konstantin Slavin are credited as the writers in all ten episodes. While not taking issue with the perception of Stalin's unredeemed badness, more is required than this to explain the nature of Soviet policy before, during, and after the war. Stalin also serves here as a lightning rod for the mistakes and crimes of others. The corollary is the perfection of the long-suffering Russian people and their glorious army. Episode 9 glosses over, in a sentence, the conduct of Soviet troops toward women civilians in Germany in 1945. (This is not, by the way, a shortcoming of the Overy book.) Although the interviews are excellent most of them are by 'outsiders' - victims of 'Stalin's policies' - rather than makers of victory. It is also notable that this is a 'Russian' perspective; there are no interviews on the enemy side and - less obviously - most of the interviewees are ethnic Russians or Russianised members of minorities.

Despite the fact that the ten chapter titles of Richard Overy's accompanying book correspond to the ten episode titles, the volume is effectively free-standing. It would be easy to make some facile criticisms. The book suffers from exaggerated claims - no doubt by the publisher rather than by author - on the jacket ('the first full-length account in English of the Soviet side of the conflict on both the battlefield and the home front'). As far as that particular claim is concerned, Alexander Werth produced such an account 35 years ago with the marvelous *Russia at War* (1964); this retains importance due to its scope and the fact that it was written by a - sympathetic - eyewitness. The campaigns themselves have been comprehensively dealt with by John Erickson and Earl Ziemke, albeit from different sides of the battlefield. The prolific David Glantz has produced a number of specialist military studies, and his comprehensive survey, written with Jonathan House in 1995, remains the best one-volume history of military operations, thanks to its manageable length and direct access to new Russian sources. The home front has recently received treatment by John Barber and Mark Harrison, both in general and more specialised works. And although Richard Overy is eminently qualified to talk about the German side of the war the fact that he presumably cannot directly use Russian language sources - and at any rate does not cite any in his bibliography - would seriously qualify a sense of completeness on 'the Soviet side of the conflict'.

Having said that, however, this is a remarkably good survey of the Soviet war. It lacks the visual impact of the television series, but in a number respects goes well beyond it. It is not only that text is a better medium for historical argument than visual material and interviews, a much more disciplined and historically subtle mind is applied to it. Overy shows impressive industry in the marshalling of the best English and German language material and this brings in, albeit second hand, much recent Russian documentation. He provides a comprehensive and understandable narrative of the most important engagements, avoiding excessive detail. Those who want operational history in English, with details of other parts of the front, will have to look elsewhere, but Overy's set-piece descriptions of the big battles, especially of Kursk, are excellent. His military judgements, as one would expect, from an outstanding historian of the Second World War in other theatres, are sophisticated and convincing. To take just one example, there is a striking comparison between Operation 'Bagration' and the simultaneous Normandy invasion. Overy's overall view is one that stresses the effectiveness of the Russian armed forces. This might seem unexceptional, but there is a contrary view which stresses the weather, the size of the theatre and Hitler's mistakes. (Adding peasant stoicism, Michael Cherniavsky wrote a wonderful critique of such apologies entitled 'Corporal Hitler, General Winter and the Russian Peasant'.)

This reviewer would argue with Professor Overy's judgement that 'the odds against the Soviet Union prevailing over Hitler's Germany were long even before the war broke out' (p. 327). The task of conquering Russia, without a political collapse, were immense due to the expanse of territory, the extremes of the climate, the paucity of the communications infrastructure, and the pre-war arms build-up of what has been called the 'Proletarian Sparta'. Another point of contention would be Russian losses. Overy discusses this crucial question at several points in the book, using newly released material. Unfortunately he slips up in

equating Russian military death rates in the two World Wars, suggesting this is an 'awkward fact which makes it difficult to accept that the Soviet system as such squandered its manpower' (pp. 214-215). Based on figures from the Amnon Sella's *The Value of Human Life in Soviet Warfare* (p. 72), Overy states that the Tsarist armies averaged 7,000 'casualties' a day between 1914 and 1917, while the 1941-1945 figure was essentially similar, at 7,950 a day. It is an interesting comparison which goes against accepted wisdom, but in this case accepted wisdom would seem to be right and Professor Overy wrong. First of all Overy's 1941-45 figure of 7,950 is roughly appropriate, but for daily Red Army dead, not casualties. Second, where the figure 7,950 comes from is not clear. It is not the result of any calculation by Sella on the page cited; the figure of 8,668,400 military dead (actually too low) which is cited by Sella would actually come out at about 6,200 a day. Third, 7,000 is Sella's daily figure for Russian military dead (not casualties) in the First World War. Finally, projecting that figure for the whole period of Russian involvement gives 8,400,000 military deaths in 1914-17, about five times the accepted actual number (which was in the region of 1,750,000). Daily Russian military dead in 1914-17 averaged about 1,500 a day, not an insignificant number, but less than a quarter that of 1941-45.

The accounts of the various battles are combined with a broad understanding of the home front, albeit less the role of production and more the anti-German partisan movement and the Soviet repression. Overy rightly points out that the worst aspects of Nazi racial extermination policy had been decided before the battle of Moscow, and was not precipitated by the onset of 'Total War'. The understanding of Soviet politics is generally good, although occasionally too much trust is placed in unsubstantiated anecdotal material from the likes of Edvard Radzinsky. There are some political misunderstandings. For example, it is stated that the idea that 'war was essentially a phenomenon of imperial rivalry' was first developed within the Central Committee in 1925 and expressed publicly in 1934' (p. 54). This was in fact bedrock Leninism. While avoiding the worst of the 'Stalinocentric' approach of the television series, the book still misses some of the structural determinants of Soviet behaviour. There is an unconsciously condescending comment at the very end about Russians, comparing the reasonable side of Stalin's behaviour to the Westernizers, and the murderous side to 'Russophiles' (by which is presumably meant Slavophiles) (p. 291). But 95 percent of the time Overy's political judgements are spot on.

Both for the battle front and the home front there is an abundance of new, post-Soviet, Russian-language material on the battle front and the home front. Glantz and House, the obvious comparison with Overy, are nearer the sources in this respect. But such sources involve nuances that are not relevant to the audience for which this book was intended, especially given the need to compress a very large subject into a medium sized volume. This Richard Overy has accomplished very well, and his book is another important contribution to the history of the Second World War.

Other reviews:

Gotterdammerung

<http://www.gotterdammerung.org/books/reviews/r/russias-war.html> [2]

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/66#comment-0>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/685>

[2] <http://www.gotterdammerung.org/books/reviews/r/russias-war.html>