

*You Are Not Alone, Stalingrad:
Reflections on the 75th Anniversary*

VICTORIA DE GRAZIA

for Arno J. Mayer

Stalingrad: The City That Defeated the Third Reich, by
Jochen Hellbeck, translated by Christopher Tauchen
and Dominic Bonfiglio, Public Affairs.

THE FIRST TIME I heard a tribute to Stalingrad in my American homeland was at the family Thanksgiving in 1991. Our guest, a young Soviet statistician, had just been seated when my father unexpectedly raised his glass to “thank all the brave Soviet soldiers.” “If not for them,” he said, “maybe I, or one of my brothers, would have been killed or wounded.” The sight of Sergei in suburban New Jersey, arriving at the front door in his beaver ushanka and gray wool greatcoat looking battle frayed like many Soviet citizens in those times, had apparently jogged some memory.

It was back to Thanksgiving 1942 when my father, along with thousands of other young Americans about to deploy abroad, was anxiously following the great battle going on in Stalin’s namesake city at the river bend on the lower Volga. At the time, the United States and Great Britain were still dickering about when to launch the famous second front to relieve the Red Army as it faced the Wehrmacht’s seemingly unstoppable eastward surge. Meanwhile, the Soviet people bore the full brunt of Hitler’s war. What a relief, then, when on 23 November the headlines trumpeted that the Red Army, after breaking the siege, had encircled Germany’s Sixth Army in an invincible vise. The fighting would last ten more weeks before the last of the German forces surrendered on 2 February 1943. By then, the joint American-British forces had opened a second front against Hitler’s Fortress Europe, moving across North Africa and up through Italy.

The following May, my father, after being assigned to the cushy Psychological Warfare Unit at Camp Ritchie, Maryland, would embark for the Mediterranean theater to join in the invasion of Sicily. Meanwhile, the war had turned. The Germans would never recover.

Nevertheless, the Soviets continued to bear the major brunt. At the time the Western Allies launched their first direct assault against the Third Reich on 6 June 1944 from the Normandy beachheads, most of Germany's 3.5 million military casualties had occurred on the Eastern Front. By the war's end, the Soviet Union was estimated to have suffered 8 million military casualties and the loss of 17 or 18 million civilian lives. In the European theater, the United States suffered about 200,000 military casualties, and, of course, no civilian dead. Do the calculations: my father had good reason to be grateful.

After Sicily, he landed at Anzio, saw action at Monte Cassino, and occupied Rome, where he was put in command of Cinecittà. He was then redeployed to the south of France, liberated Dachau, and was photographed at Munich pushing Field Marshal Hermann Göring's fat behind into a military vehicle to take him off to prison. He came home after two and a half years with a slew of medals and ribbons, his service revolver, and snapshots of mounds of corpses, named his first-born after his return Victoria, and often recalled the war as the best time of his life.

In 1991, I greatly appreciated my father's Thanksgiving toast. As a student in 1960s Europe, I had become deeply immersed in the culture of the old left, for whom Stalingrad, as the site of the resistance à outrance to Nazi fascism, remained the most vivid symbol. In his toast, I thought I heard him invoking the spirit of fraternal solidarity of the 1940s antifascist Popular Front.

But in retrospect, I wonder whether his gesture wasn't of a piece with the American way of war: favoring whenever possible the outsourcing of combat through proxies and alliances, heavy on matériel, technology, and sheer firepower, and cautious about expending its own manpower. This way of war making was driven in 1942 by the strong consensus about the rightness of the all-out war on Nazi fascism. And in that respect, the Battle of Stalingrad *was* the anti-Axis military alliance's first important symbol. But this consensus was

always undergirded by calculations that the war's costs to the nation in destruction and loss of life were practically nil in comparison to the giant leaps in terms of world power, prestige, and the existential validation from being on the side of good. In time, as alliances changed, scarcely any Americans recalled that the Battle of Stalingrad had once been regarded as not just the military but also the human and social face of the resistance to Nazi fascism's global conquest.

That loss is the prism through which I want to reflect on the Battle of Stalingrad, prompted by reading Jochen Hellbeck's recently translated *Stalingrad: The City That Defeated the Third Reich*. Drawing on new archival sources, notably the interviews conducted over the course of the battle by the Russian Commission on the History of the Great Patriotic War, Hellbeck's book is at once an analysis and epic account on its own terms of the struggle between the two most formidable armies of World War II, each under orders to fight to the death. Reading Hellbeck moved me to reread Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate* (completed in 1960 and first published in Switzerland in Russian in 1980), the one truly great novel inspired by World War II, which pivots around the battle, and, then, to go back to Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich's *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II* (1985), only recently rendered in readable English in Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky's new translation, to recall how she remembered Stalingrad. And there I found her mini-memoir of one indomitable veteran, who as a teenager, to volunteer for duty at Stalingrad, walked with a girlfriend the sixty kilometers of icy roads from their village with only one pair of boots between them; their only food was the lard sandwich her mother had prepared. Hellbeck's book also reminded me that whenever I teach the history of contemporary Europe, I have the class view Elem Klimov's *Come and See* (also from 1985), maybe the most significant cinematic reflection on the war experience. We discuss why, even though they are inured to Holocaust imagery, the students are stunned at the atrocities committed by the German military against Byelorussian villagers (including their Jews). It is because they see them through the horrified eyes of a child partisan. And those eyes, it helps to know, were the director's own. Klimov had been born in Stalingrad, and nothing in his film,

he said, exceeded the horror he felt as a child of ten, when, with his mother and baby brother, he was evacuated from the city in flames by raft over the burning slicks on the Volga.

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When Sergei flew back to Moscow on New Year's Day, 1992, he traveled on a passport to a country that no longer existed. The Soviet Union had been dissolved. The Cold War was over. For European federalists, the hope was that this extraordinary turn of events would open the way for a Europe truly without borders, a prospect that had been decisively foreclosed when, at the onset of the Cold War, the Eurasian cape was split up into a Soviet-dominated Eastern bloc and an American-led Western one. According to this European federalist scenario, as the European Union extended eastward—and political democracy and free markets sped up the reforms started with glasnost and perestroika—the post-Soviet Russian Federation would eventually have joined it, together with the half-score of European states formerly under Soviet thrall. That was the brave hope going into the twenty-first century: that the new Europe originating out of the catastrophe of World War II would extend from the Ural Mountains to the Atlantic Coast.

Had that prospect come even close to being realized, united Europe's recently built memory palace would surely have welcomed a major retrospection on the grand alliance mounted in World War II to defeat the Axis. Such a retrospection would have taken stock of the annihilatory aims of the Nazi New Order's race war against the "Judeo-Bolshevik" Soviet Union, recognized that the attack on the USSR unleashed the genocide of the Jews, and acknowledged that the invasion accounted for a loss of life at least four times the numbers lost in the holocaust of the European Jews (circa three million of whom were also Soviet citizens). It would have taken stock of the immense mobilization undertaken to defend against the Nazi invasion, which included the largest number of women ever to go to war, and its human and political costs. And it surely would have reopened the question of reparations. The wartime Allies had concurred at their

final meeting at Potsdam in July-August 1945 that these reparations would be paid to the USSR for its incalculable losses, only to renege on the promise at the onset of the Cold War.

Finally, this retrospection, by foregrounding the remarkable meditation on the wartime experience in Soviet literature and film, would have substantially clarified the existential scope of the Axis war to remake the world, starting with the destruction of the Soviet Union. Understanding that experience would surely bring us closer not only to comprehending the nature of Germany's totalitarian war, and the individual and collective human and military struggle to defend against it, but also to grasping the political and psychic repercussions from the same war having been lived under such embarrassingly unequal terms in the United States and the USSR.

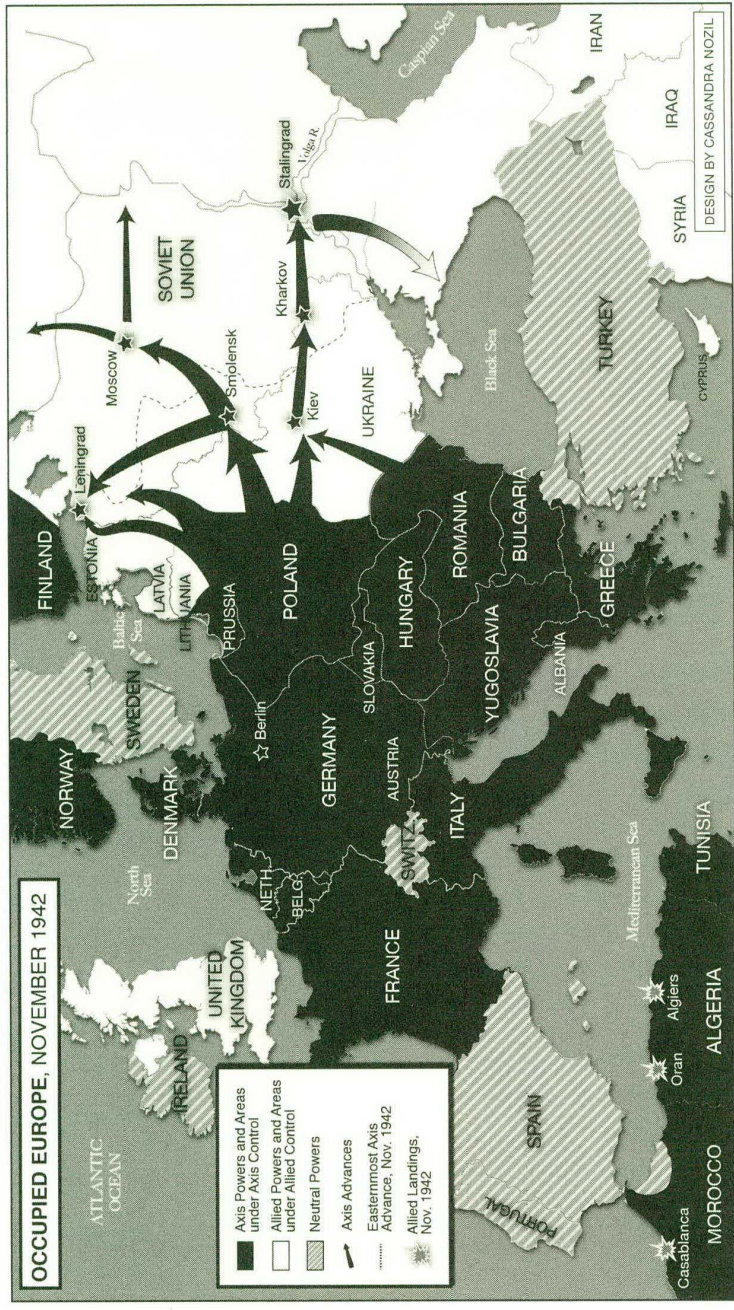
This rapprochement—and the retrospection—did not happen. As the United States emerged as the sole global superpower in the 1990s, the once formidable Soviet Armed Forces were dismantled, free-market experiments left the post-Soviet economy in shambles, and the European Union and NATO expanded eastward, but only to establish more and more distance between post-Soviet Russia and the West. Euro-optimists everywhere celebrated the newfound unity in the European Union as arising in reaction to the catastrophe of World War II and as a continuation, in some way, of the antifascist alliance. Yet the peoples who had sacrificed the most were as if Missing in Action. There was no hallowed shrine for the USSR's Great Patriotic War in the European Union's busy memory palace, no collective visits of German or French schoolchildren to Soviet battle sites, nor hardly any exhibition space devoted to the Eastern Front in war museums. From what most Americans know about our alliances in World War II, you might believe that the Allied War against Hitler's New Order had at some point turned into the Allied War against totalitarianism, with Germany and the USSR switching sides, the former to become the pillar of the US-led Atlantic Alliance and the latter, the Evil Empire, the mirror image of Hitler's Third Reich.

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To reflect on the human and political as well as the military significance of the Battle of Stalingrad on its seventy-fifth anniversary is a first act of historical reparation. That is the sense in which I want to reflect on Jochen Hellbeck's sober and humane *Stalingrad*. An expert on Russia in Soviet times, and noted for his use of oral history, Hellbeck pivots his history around a vivid collage of the three thousand or so interviews of civilians and combatants conducted by the Russian Commission on the History of the Great Patriotic War between December 1942, while the battle was in full force, and March 1943, when the battle had just been won and the roughly ninety thousand starving, frostbitten German prisoners of war, shivering in their filthy scorched and tattered greatcoats, were being shuffled off to concentration camps, nearly all to perish from cold, disease, and hunger. It testifies to the trust that Hellbeck enjoys among his Moscow informants that they originally alerted him to the whereabouts of the long-misplaced transcripts in a basement archive. It testifies to his own belief in the reparative effects of German-Russian scholarly collaboration that he joined colleagues at the Institute of Russian History of the Russian Academy of Sciences and at the German Historical Institute of Moscow to cull the thousands of pages of testimony from the original transcripts. It testifies, as well, to his deftness as an oral historian that he summons his long-dead interlocutors to speak to the most basic of questions about making war, which is why men—and women—fight.

This question seems especially weighty given that the six-month-long battle, lasting from August 1942 to February 1943, was symbolically, if not strategically, the most important military confrontation of World War II. It was also the bloodiest, if the civilian casualties are summed together with the military casualties. It is estimated that from 1.25 to 1.8 million people lost their lives, and the Battle of Stalingrad surpassed the casualty count of the yearlong World War I Battle of Verdun, making it the single deadliest military engagement in history.

Hitler himself decided on the battle plan when he made the conquest of the onetime river port town of Tsaritsyn—renamed for Stalin in 1925 in honor of his civil-war feats and swiftly transformed over



the next decade into the region's largest industrial hub—a prerequisite to the Third Reich's final drive for control over western Eurasia. Having established Germany as the pivot point of a West European empire of allies, collaborators, and well-behaved neutral powers, in June 1941 Hitler reneged on his Non-Aggression Treaty with the USSR and invaded. The intention was to annihilate the USSR, subjugate its people, capture its resources, and populate it with Aryan settlements. After the Wehrmacht encircled entire Red Army divisions, took millions of prisoners, laid siege to Leningrad, and in October 1941 reached Moscow's outskirts, Hitler ordered the final push far south to capture the vital oil reserves on the Caspian Sea. In late July 1942, the Wehrmacht's Sixth Army moved against the heavily garrisoned city with its population of four hundred thousand swollen by one hundred fifty thousand or so refugees. By October, the German forces, after occupying half of the bombed-out city except for the sliver of riverbank along the Volga, launched their final offensive, only to meet unfathomably powerful resistance.

Stalin, in turn, made it a point of honor to recapture the city after his initial military flubs. Going on the offensive in November, the Red Army exploited the weaknesses of Hitler's command: namely, the Sixth Army had overextended its supply lines; its flanks were defended by Germany's much weaker and under-supplied Hungarian, Italian, and Romanian coalition partners; and it lacked the equipment to carry on for long in the frigid weather. Once the Soviet counterattack had entrapped the German forces, Operation Winter Storm (the Wehrmacht counteroffensive mounted in December) failed to break them out, and Hitler refused to contemplate their withdrawal, the Sixth Army with its quarter of a million soldiers faced annihilation. On 8 January 1943, the Soviet command delivered an ultimatum to General Paulus to surrender with honor, only to have the Führer forbid it. It took another three weeks before Paulus (whom Hitler had meanwhile promoted to Field Marshal) was located in his command post in the basement of the Univermag department store, lying in a rag-covered bed, unshaven, and surrounded by waist-high piles of rubble, garbage, and excrement. His abject surrender (instead of committing suicide, as Hitler intended) ended the myth of German invincibility.

The Nazi leadership, in turn, exploited the shocking defeat to justify redoubling the Third Reich's war of racial extermination and to give voice to it officially for the first time. Reich Propaganda Minister Goebbels spoke for the Führer on 19 February 1943 when he blustered that Germany had hitherto underestimated "the true scale of the Jewish world revolution" behind "the Bolshevik War," whose aim was to "destroy the European continent." Henceforth, "no measure was too radical," "nothing was too ruthless" against "terrorist Jewry." From February 1943 on, the Final Solution to the Jewish Question gathered momentum, and the Axis war against the Soviets grew ever more implacable in its atrocities against civilians and prisoners of war.

At the same time, the Soviet resistance at Stalingrad relaunched the antifascist alliance globally. It redeemed Stalin from the disgrace of having signed the August 1939 Non-Aggression Pact with Germany and, jointly with Hitler, having invaded and partitioned Poland in September 1939. Stalingrad became the rallying cry for antifascist and anticapitalist armed movements from Mao Tse-tung's Red Army to the Italian, French, Yugoslav, Greek, and Vietnamese resistances. Postwar cities had squares, avenues, and streets renamed to honor Stalingrad. In Pablo Neruda, the city found its universal bard. He was in Mexico City, where he had found refuge following the antifascists' defeat in Spain, when he wrote "A Love Song to Stalingrad." It was September 1942, and Hitler's fascist army appeared on the cusp of another victory. Still writing in his hermetic style, he agonized, "Where are they, Your allies in a giant battle?/New York dancing. . . and London immersed/In a treacherous thought. . . Oh shame!" And when the battle turned, in "A New Love Song to Stalingrad," Neruda found a new voice as lyric poet of the world socialist movement, as he saw "life's sunrise/born with the sun of Stalingrad." He wrote, "Now fighting Americans,/white and dark like pomegranates,/kill the snake in the desert./Ya no estás sola, Stalingrado. . . France returns to the barricades/You are not alone, Stalingrad."

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Soldiers from Rodimtsev's Guards division
preparing an attack, September 1942.
Photograph by S. Loskutov. Courtesy of Jochen Hellbeck.

And the combatants, the people at the center of Hellbeck's history? In his didactic poem "The Worker Reads History," Bertolt Brecht, the other great bard of antifascism, asks, "Each page a victory./At whose expense the victory ball?" Here, Hellbeck addresses that question from two premises. The first is that Stalingrad's defenders have to be credited with an astonishing military feat. Not only did they hold the city against overwhelming forces, but once the Germans were encircled, they fought on for three more months from building to building, hand-to-hand, to secure the capitulation of what were perhaps the best-equipped, most expertly disciplined, and most ideologically motivated troops ever mobilized for battle. The Soviet forces were also confronting the first invasion intended to eliminate or enslave the inhabitants of a fully populated modern industrial city. Starting in August, hundreds of low-flying planes bombarded at thirty-minute intervals around the clock; together with the incessantly firing mortar batteries, coordinated with flame-throwing heavy tank and infantry incursions, they killed thousands of civilians before most of the rest were evacuated. By September, the life expectancy of a newly arrived Soviet army private had dropped to less than twenty-four hours, and of an officer to seventy-two. To replenish this manpower, the Red Army, having exhausted its vast pools of White Russian workers and peasants, had to draw upon and give discipline to what officers had traditionally regarded as poor military material, meaning the raw peasant recruits from among the Soviet Empire's eight million or so male Uzbeks, Kazaks, Tartars, and Latvians, in addition to Soviet women, three million of whom were eventually conscripted for the war, ten percent to serve in combat duty on one front or another.

Hellbeck's second premise is that Stalingrad's defenders have suffered not so much from being forgotten—there have been many books on Stalingrad, not to mention the innumerable online and video games about the battle—but from having been instrumentalized at every turn to make some larger, invariably tendentious or self-serving argument about the Russian people, the Soviet system, or Stalin.

The German invaders were only the first to be dismissive of the combatants. Once they got over their disbelief at the ferocity of the resistance, they marked the enemy, whom they already regarded as

semi-Asiatic *Untermenschen*, as primitive, unfeeling brutes, motivated only by instinct and thus unaffected by the season or terrain, and who were thrown into counterattacks by commanders indifferent to human life. Because they seemed guileless, they were also dangerously deceitful. That the Soviets mobilized women and used them on the front lines, and that the women, too, fought to the death, only made them more contemptible.

Then there were the Soviet authorities, starting with Stalin, who, notwithstanding the immense effort to win the battle in his namesake city, refused to celebrate the collective feats of wartime once World War II was over. To defend the USSR, the Soviet people couldn't rest on their laurels. Paying tribute to the Red Army both detracted from doing honor to Stalin's omniscient war leadership and, with the onset of the Cold War, distracted from the new mobilization against the fascist West. When Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev, relaunched commemorations of the Great Patriotic War, he approved plans for the enormous shrine on the Mamayev Kurgan heights overlooking Stalingrad, but only after the city had been renamed Volgograd to combat his predecessor's cult of personality. And when the giant complex opened in 1967—crowned by the statue of *The Motherland Calls*, which, at almost twice the height of the Statue of Liberty, eighty-five meters tall from her toes on the armored concrete plinth to the tip of her upraised steel sword, was the tallest female effigy ever built—it dwarfed the dead.

Western historians have been guilty of misrepresentation in another way, by treating Soviet soldiers as pawns of the Stalinist system, mobilized by the millions, thrown into futile battles, and prodded by political commissars, who, acting on Stalin's orders against retreat, forced them to choose between death from German machine-gun fire or execution at the hands of NKVD paramilitary detachments. "Ivan's War" was in every respect a no-win. If soldiers did express the conviction that they were part of the struggle to defend the Soviet Union from Nazi invaders, they were dupes of the totalitarian rhetoric of the times and of the monstrous Stalin, who would betray their every ideal at the return of peace.

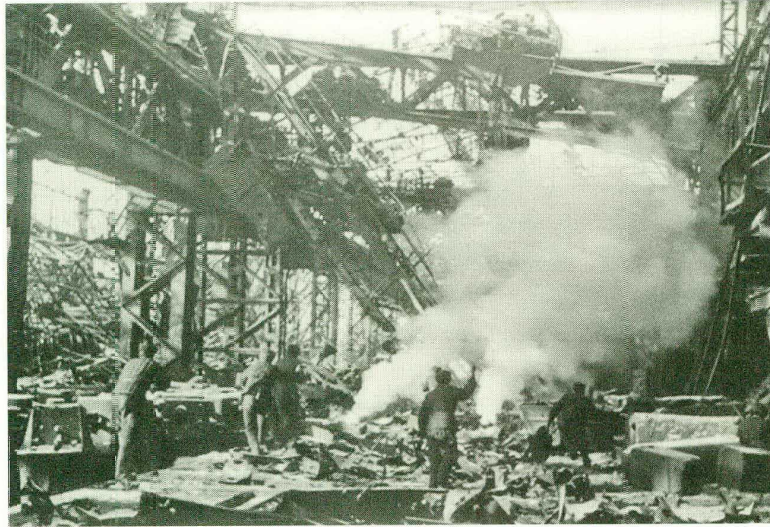
Hellbeck keenly contests the latter contention, namely, that the combatants fought mainly under duress. Here, Stalin's mastery over making revolution and war mattered hugely. He mobilized the whole state and party—born out of the revolution, civil war, five-year plans, and the anti-kulak campaigns, purges, and cultural struggles of the 1930s—against the German invasion. As part of the patriotic revolutionary calls for struggle, he issued Order No. 270 in August 1941, which denounced any Red Army soldier captured alive as a traitor to the country. Said traitors' families could be deprived of military benefits and the wives of captured officers sent to labor camps. As the Wehrmacht launched its first assault against Stalingrad on 28 July 1942, Stalin issued Order No. 227: "Not One Step Back!" The order commanded the military to hold the lines, keep workers in the factories to churn out war matériel, and bar any retreat across the Volga, the only way out of the bombarded, burning city. Hellbeck's witnesses testify that, to enforce the orders, NKVD squads were deployed to prevent the panicked flight of civilians and soldiers. Commanders boasted that they had ordered the executions of officers as well as of soldiers who fled, and the military detained at least forty-one thousand deserters. General Rodimtsev, the popular commander of the Thirteenth Guards Rifle Division, especially relished one platoon commander's handling of "bad soldiers": after he had sent out his scouts and sappers to prepare the assault against a German position, ordered his Uzbek troops to attack and seen them freeze under the withering German firepower, leaving his scouts and sappers to be killed, he "just lifted them up by their collars and shot them." Even if Hellbeck has found no evidence of mass executions, it is perfectly plausible that Red Army commanders shot refractory troops. In the trench warfare of World War I, it was common practice, and not only in autocratic Russia. It happened on occasion among the World War II Allied forces. And Stalin had hundreds of thousands executed for less.

Hellbeck's point here is, rather, that by October of 1942, the resistance against the Germans had evolved into a people's war, the first ever to be fought in an industrial city. Faced with German military doctrine that operated combined arms assault teams—close

coordination between tanks, infantry, artillery, and air bombardment—the Soviet forces developed the strategic expedient of what Lieutenant General Chuikov of the Sixty-Second Army called “hugging the enemy.” By keeping the front lines as close together as physically possible, they forced the Germans either to fight on their own or risk casualties from their supporting fire. Chuikov didn’t mince words about how this strategy worked: “People think that urban warfare is a matter of walking down a street and shooting. That’s nonsense. The streets are empty, and the fighting is going on in the buildings, in structures and courtyards where you’ve got to pluck the enemy out with bayonets and grenades.” And with knives and spades and fists. “They face each other and flail at each other.” The Germans, in turn, called it “Rat Warfare” (*Rattenskrieg*). They bitterly joked that, after struggling to take every street, factory, house, basement, and staircase, “even when they captured the kitchen they still had to fight for the living room.” Chuikov’s summation: “The Germans can’t take it.”

Fighting this way had to be highly motivated. Political commissars worked day and night to overcome their soldiers’ fear and distress at dying—and killing. They circulated among the troops, giving lectures on the wartime situation, carrying agitprop suitcases with supplies of brochures and books, and promoting collective discussions of *Red Star*, the armed forces’ daily. They distributed checkers and dominoes, and occasionally chocolate and citrus fruit, to raise morale. And they engaged soldiers in personal conversations, especially at night, as one commissar testified, when “the fighters are more inclined to speak openly, and one can crawl inside their souls.” This attention surely raised morale enough to hold the lines: “Pull yourself back together, get ready to fight, and even if you’re half dead, if you’ve only got one good arm, use it to shoot the enemy. Deal with that first one coming on the attack. Just deal with that first one. Your first shot will encourage your comrades.”

More than that, the Communist Party military commissars introduced the Red Army to the same kinds of incentives that their peacetime counterparts, the factory commissars, had introduced to meet the production quotas of the five-year plans, namely, worker shock brigades, prizes, and incentives. The “new idea,” as party bureau



Fighting in Stalingrad's industrial district, October 1942.
Photograph by Georgy Samsonov. Courtesy of Jochen Hellbeck.

secretary A. F. Koshkarev of the 339th Rifle Regiment described it, was that “every soldier had to start a personal account of how many Germans he’d killed. . . . We would check these accounts, and if a comrade didn’t have any dead Fritzes, we’d have talked with him, make him feel shame.” The Red Commissars named Heroes of the Day from among the troops and made their families proud by sending home their photographs and citations. They awarded the Order of the Red Banner, the Order of the Red Star, and the coveted guards’ status to battalions and whole divisions. Applying for the party card was more than a rite of passage; it promised to open the doors to a Socialist heaven. Going into combat, Junior Sergeant A. S. Duka, Mortar Team, Second Battalion said, “The one thing I wanted to know was that if I died, I’d die a Bolshevik.” Together with eight other men from his gun battery, he had applied on the eve of battle. Since getting the card was conditional on surviving, he went into battle “determined to prove himself.” He survived. Two of his fellow candidates were killed.

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The really remarkable aspect of these testimonies is that they were recorded during the battle itself, and that they were intended to yield the documentary evidence for a work of world literature equal in stature to Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Isaak Mints, also called "the architect of Stalin's conception of the past," was the cultural impresario here. He was one of those uniquely Soviet academic-intellectual activists. An old-time Bolshevik, he had distinguished himself as a red commissar during the civil war, so much so that the Communist Party, overcoming the bias against his Jewish-merchant roots that earlier had blocked him from attending Kharkov University, assigned him to complete his historical studies at the party's new Institute of Red Professors. From the early 1930s, he worked with the Soviet intellectual grandee Maxim Gorky to author the so-called *Collective Autobiography of the Soviet People during the Civil War*. Monumental in scope, and including scholarly analysis, documentary texts, memoirs, photographs, and artwork, this history by the people and for the people was intended to bear testimony "to the Human Being in capital letters, who showed others how to become more human than they already were." When the work finally came out in all of its fifteen volumes in 1935, it met the fate of other utopian projects intended to create Soviet culture's New Man and New Civilization: the political authorities pulped it practically immediately and many of its protagonists disappeared in Stalin's Great Purges. If Mints was daunted, as he must have been, having barely escaped himself, he rebounded at the opportunity to chronicle socialism's next epochal struggle, the Great Patriotic War. With full backing from the party, he arrived in Stalingrad in December 1942 to document the "joy, and grief, leisure and combat, home front and war front."

What is striking is how much affection the testimonials express for, say, the Tractor Factory or the Red October Steelworks, the sites of some of the cruelest fighting. Employing tens of thousands of workers, they were the pride of Soviet machine manufacture, and the hub of nearby mechanical workshops, engineering schools, medical centers, cafeterias, and housing that served many more thousands of people. Their principals stood in their rubble while they were being

interviewed, ruthlessly factual about still standing in the main line of battle, yet wholly confident they would rebuild.

How much nuance of character emerges from ordinary men, tasked to perform horrible feats. The sniper Anatoly Chekhov recalled how he shot his first German: "I felt terrible. I had killed a human being. But then I thought of our people—and I started to mercilessly fire on them. I've become a barbaric person, I kill them. I hate them." When he was interviewed, Chekhov had already killed forty Germans—most of them with a shot to the head. "One sees the young girls, the children, who hang from the trees in the park," said another renowned sniper, Vassily Zaytsev. This "has a tremendous impact," he added, alluding to the marauding German soldiery who, as they settled into life in the ruins, would at whim enslave, rape, pillage, and murder the civilians who had been left stranded after the evacuation.

The true hero here is the city itself. Hellbeck preserves the collective voice of the testimonials, adding to its chorality with interviews and diaries from German combatants, whose ordinariness as common soldiers—they were terrified at capture and desired only to get warm, eat a hot meal, and go home—make them no less hateful as invaders. Vasily Grossman shows up here, in his vest, as the well-known war correspondent attached to the *Red Star*. Later, in *Life and Fate*, he would describe the new city "born out of the flames." This had "its own layout of streets and squares, its own underground buildings, its own traffic laws, its own commerce, factories, and artisans, its own cemeteries, concerts, and drinking parties." For that phase of the war, it had emerged as the "world capital," "its inhabitants living their lives only more intensely, heroically, because the conditions were so extreme."

In *Life and Fate*, Grossman captured the fleeting quality of their fame. The city had been open to the coming and going of journalists, foreign correspondents, and photographers, including peerless reporters for the *Boston Globe*, *Herald Tribune*, and the *New York Times*. Almost all, while they were there, believed they were in the midst of a world-historical battle pitting the forces of crisis-shaken capitalism spearheaded by the Nazi-fascists against the forces of rising communism spearheaded by the USSR, the homeland of socialism. Yet as



After returning to Stalingrad, refugees sit on the ruins where their home once stood, March 1943.
Photograph by N. Sitnikov. Courtesy of Jochen Hellbeck.

Grossman brought his own immense work to a close, he wrote that newspapers all over the world had barely reported the details of the German surrender before “Hitler, Roosevelt and Churchill were looking for new crisis points in the war. Stalin was tapping the table with his finger and asking if arrangements had been completed to transfer the troops from Stalingrad to other Fronts.” As that happened, the city’s occupants faced the depressing realization that the “capital of the war against the Fascists was now no more than the icy ruins of what had once been a provincial industrial city and port.” The Stalingrad “full of generals, experts in street fighting, strategic maps, armaments and well-kept communications trenches” had ceased to exist. It “had begun a new existence, similar to that of present-day Athens or Rome. Historians, museum guides, teachers and eternally bored schoolchildren, though not yet visible, had become its new masters.”

In actuality, preserving the memory of this people’s war turned into a political minefield. Mints himself was uninterested in shaping his testimonials into the story of Soviet humanity waging war for its own purposes—from fear, out of hatred, for the love of comrades, to do right by their commanders and men, to survive, to go home. Mints wanted a grand narrative of the Great Patriotic Struggle, unfolding as one with the teleology of the Communist Party’s long march toward world socialism. But that, too, was too radical a vision for postwar Stalinism. Mints’s own career would be derailed in 1949 after Stalin’s antic cosmopolitan campaign targeted him as a prominent academic historian and Jew. Thereafter, the Historical Commissions offices were disbanded, and the thousands of pages of stenographic notes were boxed up and forgotten until they were recovered, transcribed, translated, and published under Hellbeck’s supervision as *Die Stalingrad Protokolle* (The Stalingrad Protocols).

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We can’t imagine Hellbeck’s own act of retrospection without considering the Germany of the mid-1980s in which he began his university studies. Hellbeck’s father had begun to pick up Russian in 1943 before being drafted into the Wehrmacht at age seventeen, only to be sent to the Eastern Front in early 1945 to fend off the

fast-advancing Soviets. At his father's urging, Hellbeck chose to study Russian, which was an unusual choice for a West German student at the time. However, East-West relations were opening up on the civil society level, if not on the level of the Cold War blocs. In the 1970s, Western Europe, the Federal Republic in the lead, had made overtures to the Soviet bloc, overriding American opposition. However, détente had ended with a new standoff over arms limitations, which had led the United States under Jimmy Carter to try to outmaneuver the Soviets by installing nuclear-armed Cruise and Pershing missiles on European soil, and then, under Ronald Reagan in 1983, to advance the Star Wars initiative, with its fantasy of a total defense shield. The launching of this new Cold War brought anti-arms-race activists, pacifists, women's groups, and environmentalists to join forces across Europe in fear that if the two great powers pursued their "exterminist" strategies, they would unleash another, this time apocalyptic, nuclear war. In socialist, especially Soviet, culture, these fears prompted a huge burst of interest in thinking about the Great Patriotic War in a new key. *Life and Fate*, after being censored until long after Grossman died in 1964, was finally published in Switzerland in 1980, first in Russian, then in French, garnering huge attention. Alexievich's *The Unwomanly Face of War*, after coming out in book form in 1985, sold over two million copies before the USSR fell apart at the end of the decade. In sum, well before glasnost or "openness" became official doctrine under Mikhail Gorbachev in 1986, Soviet culture had begun the deepest, richest retrospection on the war anywhere.

Yet the heating up of the new Cold War ensured that this retrospection was contained. Ronald Reagan took the first step to building a practicably impassable memory wall when in 1984, in order to signal the United States' endeavor to firm up military support for the Atlantic Alliance in Europe (as well as to launch his campaign for reelection), he seized on the celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the D-Day landing. Previously, the Allied invasion of Normandy, on 6 June 1944, had been only spottily celebrated. With the Channel at Pointe du Hoc as his backdrop, standing high and giving a smart salute

before European and US veterans and heads of state, Reagan paid tribute to the platoons of Rangers — “the boys of Pointe du Hoc” — as they pulled themselves up over the cliffs, as if they were cowboys rappelling up their lassoes, to deliver Europe from savagery and evil. Of course, Germany was not present. But neither were the Soviets, except in Reagan’s clichéd rhetoric, as he lamented that the Soviets had gone on to reoccupy some of the European countries that had been liberated, then recalled “the great losses also suffered by the Russian people — 20 million perished,” only to exhort the Soviet leadership — if it truly “shared with the United States the goal of peace” — to “give up the ways of conquest.”

In the coming year, however, Reagan reached out to the German Federal Republic to reinstate it symbolically as well as militarily within the Western alliance. Helmut Kohl, the conservative Christian Democratic Chancellor, was determined to have Germany recognized as a “normal country.” His government risked unpopularity by supporting placing US Cruise and Pershing Missiles on the continent; and if it flexed its muscles in foreign affairs, say, in Eastern Europe, he didn’t want to be labeled a rabid nationalist, nor have his people, most of whom were born after the Third Reich, be forever stigmatized for Nazi deeds. With that intent, Reagan agreed that upon the earliest occasion, meaning the upcoming G7 Conference at Bonn in early May 1985, the two statesmen would gather at a conveniently located war cemetery where they could jointly pay honor to their war dead. Unfortunately, the closest convenient cemetery, at the Rhineland town of Bitburg by the Luxembourg border, was not only the final resting place for Wehrmacht soldiers but also held the graves of Waffen SS troops. What a political gaffe the event turned into when it was revealed that, after being transferred from the Eastern Front where they had committed atrocities against Soviet civilians, the SS had committed similar reprisals against French citizens. The public was duly reminded that the two leaders were there to honor, not the SS, but the regular Wehrmacht troops. But it was well known by then, having been documented by German and other researchers, that the

Third Reich's onslaught against the Soviet Union was conducted as a race and ideological war as well as a military operation, and that the Wehrmacht was equally involved in committing atrocities.

That discovery was already feeding into the furious public debate going on in the Federal Republic over Germany's collective guilt—which Kohl was tapping into for nationalist ends. Just a couple of weeks after the Bitburg blunder, Ernst Nolte, the eminent historian-philosopher, a conservative, published an opinion piece in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* titled "The Past Which Will Not Pass." So long as the Germans continued to obsess about their collective guilt, he argued, they would never be able to build a healthy national identity. To that end, the Nazi dictatorship had to be rethought as only one moment in a long history, arising in a century rife with horrific violence. The true source of horror lay in "Asiatic" deeds, meaning the Armenian genocide, the Soviet Revolution, and Stalin's purges. In that light, Hitler's Operation Barbarossa was a preventive war to block Bolshevik expansion westward. To go forward, Germans had to remember the great positives in their past: beautiful Weimar, the birthplace of Goethe and the First Republic, and stately Potsdam, home of the Soldier-King Frederick William I and Frederick the Great, later the capital of the German Empire.

For Jürgen Habermas, West Germany's leading contemporary philosopher, a man of the left, Nolte's arguments were "specious NATO philosophy colored with German nationalism." After the Third Reich, he replied, the Germans, whenever they remembered Weimar and Potsdam, also had to remember Auschwitz.

For Hellbeck, Germans will have to remember both Auschwitz and Stalingrad. Fittingly, his own way to Stalingrad came via his father, who made him a gift of Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate*. Grossman's novel was the *War and Peace* that the Soviet intelligentsia had long awaited. Grossman placed the embattled city at the center. In the figure of Viktor Shtrum, the physicist turned writer, Grossman interwove his own story as he bore witness to the battle as a war correspondent, before moving westward with the Red Army to liberate the Ukraine. He then passed through his hometown, Berdichev, from

where his mother had been deported. Eventually, he reached Poland and Treblinka, where she had been murdered in the gas chambers. Writing the “ruthless truth” about war was Grossman’s vindication of human life—“the occasion to look into individuals’ heads, one full of dire forebodings, another singing, one trying to identify a bird on a tree—soldiers dreaming of girls’ breasts, dogs, sausages and poetry.” In fascism, he saw a concept that “operates only with vast aggregates” in total denial of “separate individuality, of the meaning of ‘a man.’ The battle against this de-humanization,” Grossman believed, came down to “the struggle for life [which] lies in the individual, in his modest peculiarities and his right to these peculiarities.” Out of the debris of Stalingrad, then, arose the most fierce and compelling account of the totalitarianism of war imposed upon individuals, complicated by the arbitrariness of the Soviet political system, and only alleviated by acts of individual human kindness.

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How to commemorate Stalingrad in today’s world? Grossman once said of a nation that “the longer [its] history, the more wars, invasions, wanderings, and periods of captivity it has seen, the greater the diversity of its faces.” Stalingrad is analogous, and the complexity of the memory politics it has already generated is practically boundless. Almost immediately, its memory became central to the myth of anti-fascism. But how was that myth nurtured, and how did it wane as the lodestar of the Popular Front, hand in hand with the waning of the other symbols of the old left? Stalingrad was central to the way the Axis thought about the finale of its struggle for the New World Order: Milan, if Mussolini could have had his puerile last wish, would have been turned into a Stalingrad against the Allied invaders. Stalingrad was, of course, central to the memory of the war for any individual who fought there. That went for Alexievich’s women orderlies, nurses, and female sharpshooters. Surely, that would hold equally in an utterly different key for the surviving relatives of the “bad Uzbek soldiers,” collared by their platoon commander in 1943 and shot when they balked at dying for the Soviet homeland.

For most of the years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the annual commemoration of the battle, held on 2 February, the day that Field Marshal Paulus surrendered, has been a lackluster affair. Year after year, the temperature hovering around twenty degrees Fahrenheit, officials trudge up the marble steps to the Mamayev Kurgan Memorial to lay wreaths and salute the dead. In a public reenactment where the Univermag Department Store once stood, Sixth Army commanders surrender to Red Army officers. The most popular event sees women traffic police outfitted in Soviet-era uniforms parading in tribute to their predecessors, who in 1942 directed military vehicles and supply chains toward the front line. A giant fireworks display closes the day. It did not change much that in 1993 Volgograd was granted permission to rename itself Stalingrad for the day of commemoration.

The year 2015 saw a real innovation when, on the occasion of the European Union's commemoration of the seventieth year since the end of World War II, Germany's Foreign Minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, visited Volgograd alongside his Russian counterpart. At the same time as he was paying homage to the dead at the Soviet War Cemetery and laying a wreath at the Mamayev Kurgan memorial, President Putin received Chancellor Merkel at the Kremlin. This was a signal that, despite the sanctions that the European Union and the United States had imposed to protest Russia's annexation of the Crimea in 2014, the Federal Republic was prepared to restore good relations. Assuming Russia showed good faith, Merkel held out an olive branch. Germany admitted guilt to the atrocities committed against Soviet prisoners of war during World War II and was prepared to offer reparations.

Clearly, Chancellor Merkel's gesture was calculated to placate Russian nationalism. To retaliate against the sanctions, the nationalist bloc in the Duma (the Russian Confederation's parliament) had mounted a task force to compile its World War II war losses and bill Germany for reparations. The final bill used the estimate of €600 billion in damages made immediately after the war, and added to that sum the calculation that, if Germany had paid Israel €60 billion for



The Motherland Calls, Mamayev Kurgan,
Volgograd, May 2015.

Photograph by shinobi/Shutterstock.com

the murder of six million Jews during the Holocaust, and Germany killed twenty-seven million in the USSR (sixteen million of whom were peaceful civilians), then Germany owed reparations of no less than €3 to 4 trillion. And that was without calculating wasted human capital: if the present-day Russian population were reckoned at being 300 to 400 million, instead of its current 143 million, then reparations should be calculated for the notch of 200 or so million in the population, and Germany charged for paying out another trillion or so in compensation.

If the sums the German government paid out turned out to be derisory (about 2500 euros each for the four thousand surviving prisoners of war), the words accompanying the gesture clearly spelled out Germany's responsibility for war crimes. While Steinmeier was at Stalingrad and Merkel at the Kremlin, the German President, Joachim Gauck, who under the German Constitution is responsible for gestures of contrition and magnanimity, visited the Soviet war cemetery near the Stalag 326 Senne camp, where three hundred thousand Soviet prisoners had been held between 1941 and 1945. In his address, Gauck recognized that half of the 5.3 million Soviet prisoners in German hands had perished, compared with only a couple of hundred thousand British and American POWs. "They succumbed miserably to disease, they starved to death, they were murdered," Gauck admitted, and he added that "the mass murder of six million Jews overlay other crimes," and that "unlike in the West, the war in the East was planned from the very start by the Nazi regime as an ideological war, a war of 'extermination and eradication'" against peoples who were "defamed as inferior."

And in the United States? It would take a geopolitical earthquake to see an American president bounding up the two hundred marble steps of the Mamayev Kurgan monument alongside President Putin to lay a wreath before the dead. And it would amount to a symbolic act of war against the European Union unless the ceremony of repacification was conducted multilaterally with EU and NATO representatives at his side.

In compensation, the Anglophone academic study of commemorative politics will surely turn its giant firepower on Stalingrad, to explode the national—and in the case of Stalingrad also the international—myths, much as it has shot down self-serving myths about the war in Japan, Italy, Germany, and France. Whether this endeavor could help to explode America's own almost universally accepted war myths is the question.

In that vein, I began this retrospection close to home by recalling, and now by reinterpreting, my father's Thanksgiving 1991 toast to "the brave Soviet soldiers." Would it be too harsh to conclude that he, too, was instrumentalizing the dead of Stalingrad to relish his memory of having fought the good fight? Could it be that, subconsciously, he was also seeking to mollify Sergei, who in his ushanka with his great height and soft big mustache, looked like a Red Commissar? After all, Captain A. J. de Grazia Jr., for all of his bluster about the good fight, was no different from millions of other Americans who valued the Soviet people as a wartime ally, only to recoil from them in horror once the Cold War started.

And what if Sergei, instead of simulating gratitude with his battle-worn smile, had sighed and said, quoting from Svetlana Alexievich's speech at her Nobel ceremony: "Suffering is our capital, our natural resource. Not oil or gas—but suffering. It is the only thing we are able to produce consistently." Or if, after the toast, at the risk of spoiling the Thanksgiving cheer, somebody had mused that the United States won every one of its twentieth-century wartime victories elsewhere and overwhelmingly at the expense of other peoples' lands and other peoples' dead. When will we reckon with that history honestly and systematically?

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