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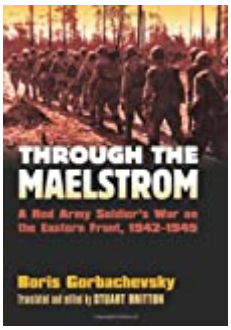

Boris Gorbachevsky. *Through the Maelstrom: A Red Army Soldier's War on the Eastern Front, 1942-1945.* Edited and translated by Stuart Britton. With foreword by David M. Glantz. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008. xix + 453 pp. $36.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1605-3.

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A Forgotten Soviet Soldier

Over sixty years after the end of World War II, western readers still search for the reality of Ivan, the average Red Army soldier. GI Joe, Tommy, and Jerry have all become familiar to us through a wealth of memoirs, published diaries, and collections of letters, as well as numerous scholarly studies. Ivan, though, remains elusive. The Red Army in our minds is as much based on literary metaphors as on any evidentiary basis: a dull mass of stolid, brown-clad soldiers rising out of the endless steppe of southern Russia; an army of mute peasants stoically enduring appalling hardships and brutalities; the "red horde" of Nazi propaganda bearing down on "civilized" Europe. With the collapse of communism, however, not only have historians published studies based on sources in previously closed archives, but memoirs of Soviet soldiers, until now inaccessible, have begun to appear in translation in the West as well. Boris Gorbachevsky's memoir is thus not groundbreaking in the sense that it reveals any startlingly new revelations, nor does it grip the reader with detailed, harrowing tales of combat. Although Gorbachevsky served as frontline infantry soldier and officer for three years, his memoir provides surprisingly little in the way of graphic descriptions of battle. It does include a valuable account of the fighting around Rzhev, one of the lesser-known, although still appallingly bloody, meat grinders of the eastern front, but this episode is not what gives his memoir its power. Rather, it is his relentless search for the truth of the war, for the reality of the system for which Ivan ostensibly fought but which treated him with callous disregard both during and after the war, for an understanding of the fear, hatred, and desire for revenge that dominated soldiers' lives for these horrible years that motivates Gorbachevsky. With its recreated dialogue and snapshot descriptions of life at the front, *Through the Maelstrom* is an almost Chekhovian chronicle of individuals caught in the grip of the ultimate inhumanity.

Gorbachevsky exemplifies well the contradictions and complexities of Soviet life: he was the Jewish son of a provincial Communist Party official in Ukraine and his wife, who had herself taken part in the revolution and civil war. His father, arrested in 1937 at the height of

the purge, survived the gulag to return to local administration during the war. The young Boris, a Komsomol member who also joined the party, was thrown into war while still in his teens; as a front soldier, junior officer, and regimental Komsomol organizer, he remained skeptical of the *politruk*s (political officers) at the front; he worked for forty years a professor, journalist, and editor in the Soviet Union before emigrating to the United States in 1994; and, like many others, he was proud of his accomplishments in helping to defeat Nazism, but troubled by the nature of the Stalinist system and its failure to create a better postwar life. His was, he claims, a lifelong quest to answer a question that had no simple answer: Why did the cost of victory turn out to be so unimaginably high?

In most respects, Gorbachevsky's story confirms other recent accounts of life in the Red Army. Working as an apprentice in a metalworking factory, the young Gorbachevsky was suddenly dispatched at the end of 1941 as a cadet to infantry school, where he was exposed to the usual petty harassment and harsh training. More troubling was the fact that, as would-be officers, he and his fellow cadets were forced to study field tactics and regulations that both they and their instructors knew were not merely outdated but suicidal. Worst of all, though, were the political classes, with their endless lectures and recitations of the speeches and orders of Comrade Stalin. The terror-inspiring specter of the Red Tsar, indeed, was never far removed from the minds of the men destined to be sent to slaughter at the front. Relentless political indoctrination and efforts to secure informants among the men, constant reminders of the impact of collectivization and the purges, and pervasive fear and suspicion that stifled initiative all left their mark on the Red Army. Some creeping appeals to nationalism were made, although they were mingled with a distinct political message, but most of his comrades seemed largely indifferent to both. More troubling, Gorbachevsky also notes a pervasive antisemitism in the Red Army, a theme that recurs throughout the book.

Their time at the infantry school cut short by the demands of war, the half-trained cadets in May 1942 were sent on a seemingly endless journey through the vast expanse of Russia. Their destination would be Rzhev, to the northwest of Moscow, a place not as well known as some other sites of the war, but just as bloody. Poorly fed and equipped, given indifferent combat training just behind the front, and still forced to endure endless political indoctrination, Gorbachevsky's unit was finally thrown into battle in late August. His baptism by fire evoked the usual emotions of fear, hatred, exhilaration, confusion, and frenzy, but what troubled him the most were the obviously senseless charges into the stout German defenses, the profligacy with which Red Army soldiers were squandered, the piles of dead littering the ground, and the seeming unconcern of higher Soviet commanders for their troops. Rzhev marked Gorbachevsky for life, but not just because of the trauma of battle. His honesty forces him to admit that he and his mates were fearful of two things: being taken prisoner by the Germans, and the *osobisty*, the agents of the Red Army Special Department. Stalin's famous Order No. 227 ("Not One Step Back"), issued in late July 1942, had intensified the already harsh, punitive measures common at the front, where the severest punishments were meted out on a whim or for the merest suspicion of disloyalty. Now a new terror confronted the men: fear of the penal battalions, the deadly, soul-destroying punishment units in which over four hundred thousand soldiers served a virtual death sentence. The reader can feel the turmoil, the confusion of emotions, and the mixed feelings that gripped Gorbachevsky and other front soldiers: many clearly hated Stalin and his brutal regime, but German atrocities, the evidence of which lay all around, drove them to fight.

Life, as the Red Army soldier quickly came to understand, was cheap at the front. With the costly failure of the Soviets to break German resistance at Rzhev, the front during the winter of 1942-43 settled into a dreary trench warfare reminiscent of World War I. As men in the ranks increasingly despaired at the huge losses and the distant prospect of victory, they sought escape in other ways. Gorbachevsky, wounded in the late-summer fighting, had already been stunned by the high incidence of self-inflicted wounds being treated in the field hospitals. Now, back at the front and a company commander, he had to confront another dilemma: the shockingly high rate of desertion and the savage measures taken against front officers to stop it. In one of the most interesting chapters in the book, Gorbachevsky details the assiduous German efforts to entice Soviet soldiers to desert, and the astonishing number who did just that, some five hundred thousand in 1942 alone. A combination of better food and living conditions trumpeted by the Germans with severe morale problems on the Soviet side fueled the nightly forays across no-man's-land. For Soviet front officers, though, these desertions were more than just a drain on manpower, since the Red Army sought to stem the flow by imposing draconian punishments on them, including sentences to penal battalions and prison camps. Political

officers also stepped up their indoctrination efforts, but faced the unremitting hostility of peasant soldiers toward the regime in the wake of the collectivization measures sponsored by the party in the 1930s. Interestingly, although he mentions efforts to build bonds between men and officers, the notion of camaraderie as a primal force binding front soldiers together is conspicuously absent from Gorbachevsky's account, especially in comparison with German memoirs. Despite his efforts, even Gorbachevsky cannot overcome the deep suspicion that Ivan has for his officers: Stalinist terror and oppression have insured a nearly unbridgeable gulf. Two things, not necessarily independent of each other, eventually began to stanch the flow of desertions: front propaganda increasingly substituted "fatherland" for "party," and a string of Soviet victories touched off by the great triumph at Stalingrad finally persuaded men in the front ranks that they might yet win the war for Russia, not Stalin. Still, as Gorbachevsky notes, in 1943 the triumphs at Rzhev and in Belorussia came largely as a result of the application of brute force, with the front troops paying an awful price.

The combination of continuing sacrifices on the part of the average soldiers and the increasing prospect of victory now raised a frightening prospect to Stalin. According to Gorbachevsky, a new spirit, a new mood, and a new sense of freedom (if that term is not an oxymoron when used in conjunction with Stalin's Russia) now infused the front ranks. War was changing attitudes, as among themselves front soldiers increasingly expressed the expectation that they would return to a freer and more democratic society and that they would be rewarded for their sacrifices and hardships with a better way of life. Ominously for the future, though, fear of the *osobisty* and the influence of the political officers hardly abated. As the Red Army surged westward into Germany, the danger, from Stalin's point of view, grew ever greater, as peasant soldiers began to see how things might be different and better. Red soldiers, amazed at the wealth of their enemy, struggled to understand why Adolf Hitler had coveted Soviet territory. "Now tell us, Captain," one inquired of Gorbachevsky, "why did the stinking German come crawling into Russia with war, especially when his pigs live better than our peasants? It makes a man furious to see the wealthy way they live" (p. 374). Gorbachevsky tried to convince his men that the German people were not responsible for Hitler's crimes, but they knew better, having seen evidence of German atrocities spread over countless villages and hundreds of miles.

These two emotions, resentment and revenge, were now mingled in an explosive brew. As Soviet troops scrambled to send packages filled with German goods home, plundering everything in their path, they also began exacting an understandable, if no less brutal, vengeance. Was this retribution fanned deliberately by Stalin to distract Soviet troops from their troublesome questions? The answer from the front, as Gorbachevsky notes, is inconclusive. Even as orders were issued urging officers to restrain their men, Soviet propaganda continued to blare a message of hate, as best summarized by Ilya Ehrenburg's famous injunction to Red Army soldiers to "Kill the German! Kill the German! That is your mother's request. Kill the German!... Nothing will bring you so much joy as a German corpse" (pp. 361-362). And Red troops did just that, as well as engage in an orgy of rape, even as German soldiers fought savagely and continued to inflict astonishingly high casualties on the Russians. Not until mid-April, though, when it was apparent that the actions of Soviet troops were alienating the German population and endangering any sort of good relations, did Stalin finally act definitively to stop the violence. The bitterness of the last weeks and months of fighting, perhaps, ensured frosty relations between conquerors and conquered, but Germans themselves, their attitude marked by fear, hostility, and a stubborn unwillingness to see Soviet soldiers as anything but backward and primitive, evinced little willingness to cooperate. Too much had happened and Gorbachevsky's efforts as a local town commander to promote even minimal interaction largely failed although, ironically, he, a Soviet Jew, had a brief fling with a young German woman. Nor, in retrospect, would his efforts have amounted to much, even had they succeeded, since by mid-August the German population of Lower Silesia was expelled to make way for Poles. The era of border alterations and great migrations was well underway by the time Gorbachevsky and his men left, in American Studebaker trucks, for Hungary.

Gorbachevsky ends his memoirs with a short, bitter reflection on the meat grinder at Rzhev, a fitting conclusion, since this bloody battle, more than any other experience, marked the beginning of his lifelong quest for understanding. Professional historians will perhaps be troubled somewhat by the lack of any documentary evidence for Gorbachevsky's accounts. He evidently kept no diaries or journals, or made use of any letters; instead, he recreated his story from memory, a claim that will be amazing to some, especially given the detailed dialogue among soldiers recounted in the book. Given the furor over the veracity of Guy Sajer's autobiography, *The Forgotten Soldier* (1976), despite the fact that Sajer had filled

numerous journals shortly after the war, the reaction to *Through the Maelstrom* should prove interesting. Like Sajer's work, it is also a compelling account that rings with authenticity, even if it does lack the comfort of citations. More importantly, Gorbachevsky reminds us that the Soviet soldier was not just an abstraction, part of the brown mass. Rather, he was an individual acted upon by the great forces of history, who also sought to influence his situation, whether through escape or by meting out revenge to his tormentors. Ivan, at bottom, was a human being just like all others, subject to despair, confusion, hope, anger, fear, and the desire for something in which to believe. In the end, Gorbachevsky suggests, all he and other soldiers can do is attempt to cut through the myth and cliches and give an honest account of what happened. This he has done in admirable fashion.