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1.

Stalingrad and Researching the Experience of War

Stalingrad was one of the most monstrous and inhuman battles ever known. It was further dehumanised by both sides in their propaganda. The point of researching the subject was to find a way to describe accurately the true physical conditions of this battle, and the terrible psychological pressures on the soldiers. These included not just fear of the enemy, but also fear of execution by their own side. Soldiers and civilians were crushed pitilessly between the two totalitarian regimes. Red Army snipers at Stalingrad, for example, were ordered to shoot starving Russian children, who had been tempted with crusts of bread by German infantrymen to fill their waterbottles in the Volga.

This is why history from above – the decisions of Stalin or Hitler and their generals – needs to be combined with history from below. It is the only way to demonstrate the direct consequences of their decisions and the consequent suffering of those trapped in the terrible maelstrom created by their dehumanizing propaganda.

The attempt to recreate the experience of battle can come only from a wide range of sources which naturally vary in validity and in reliability. They include war diaries, reports of prisoner interrogations, officers' and soldiers' letters home, doctors' accounts, chaplains' reports on morale, private diaries, accounts by war correspondents, reports by evacuees written a few weeks after the event, accounts written years later, interviews with survivors and so on. In the case of Stalingrad, one can even learn a good deal from certain novels, but this is a question I will come back to.

The basic reason for researching in breadth as well as in depth is the way personal accounts can often explain things which appear inexplicable in the official documents. Another good argument for a broad approach, especially in the Russian archives, is that you are likely to find material in one archive which in another is still classified as secret and closed. For example, the GlavPURKKA files of the Red Army political department in the old Party archive or Marxist-Leninist Institute, and now called RGASPI, is rich in documents material which are completely inaccessible in the Central Archive of the Ministry of Defence – TsAMO – out at Podolsk.

The list of sources is almost endless, and the only general point to be made is that very little can be classified in terms of reliability and validity, except in the most general terms. An officer's evidence on the overall situation will probably be worth more than a soldier's because he usually had a better opportunity to gain accurate information. And a staff officer's account is likely to be even better informed, but he will of course know less about the true state of conditions at the front and he may well have more to hide. Letters from soldiers, on the other hand, are very important for other reasons. They offer a good indication of levels of morale at different moments, assuming that there are enough of them. They also provide just about the only evidence of what officers have been telling their men. Of course, one always has to bear in mind how much the letter writer may have worried about censorship. All one can say is that up until 1943, it seems that German Feldpost censorship was a lot less vigilant than its Soviet counterpart.

In many ways one has to be even more cautious about the interrogation reports of prisoners, for the obvious reason that a frightened prisoner is likely to tell his interrogator what he wants to hear. It was very noticeable, both in the Russian and German archives, to find how ready soldiers were to speak. This may be because the interviews with those soldiers who refused to answer were not recorded. On the Eastern Front there was no Geneva

Convention nonsense of sticking to name, rank, and number. I will never forget one protocol of interrogation by the chief of intelligence of the 62nd Army at Stalingrad working through an interpreter. At the bottom of the page there was a scribbled note to say that the interrogation had been terminated because the subject had died of his wounds.

Many of those who refused to answer were almost certainly shot, but much depended on the time and circumstances. On the basis of the five hundred or so interview reports of prisoners selected by the interrogators from the Seventh Departments of Stalingrad Front and Don Front, it appeared that most German prisoners were keen to talk, partly out of fear, but also — especially towards the end of the battle — out of disillusionment and a sense of betrayal. A number of German officers, including the first battalion commander to surrender, provided very useful testimony as to the physical and psychological state of their men.

Double-checking on many sources is often impossible. So one often has to rely on one's own nose for what is true and what might be false. If still unsure, then you can resort in your text to an implicit code of likely veracity, almost like an auctioneer's catalogue — with 'it is said that' being roughly equivalent to 'school of'.

Academics are naturally suspicious of using interviews with veterans and eye witnesses long after the event. This is absolutely right when it is a matter of dates or locations. Yet general impressions and some personal details are seldom forgotten, even after sixty years. Old men, who can hardly remember what happened two weeks before, retain extraordinarily vivid memories from wartime, partly because they were so unforgettable, but also because the war, and especially a battle like Stalingrad, was the most intense experience of their whole life. I was struck by the way that Soviet veterans who had been in both the battle of Stalingrad and the fight for Berlin, retained much clearer memories of Stalingrad. At the end of the war, they remembered events like

crossing the German frontier for the first time and the moment of victory, but much less of the battle itself.

The great advantage of personal testimonies is the way they can explain otherwise mystefying details in official reports. For example, when studying the Soviet reports on the invasion of East Prussia in January 1945 for the Berlin book, I was mystefied why so many German women, attempting to commit suicide after being gang-raped failed to cut their wrists properly. It was only after a German woman wrote to me about the book just after publication, and I rang her back, that she told me how her first cousin had tried to slit her wrists after suffering multiple rape. From what she told me, it was clear that the vast majority of women had assumed that you should cut straight across the wrist, but that did little more than sever the tendon. Most, like the cousin of this woman, managed only to cripple their hands. To sever the artery you needed to cut diagonally.

In the German archives in Freiburg, the Bundesarchiv-Militararchiv, I found that the most interesting reports were those of doctors and priests attached to the Sixth Army. They were outsiders within the military community, as well as naturally acute observers of the human condition. The letters of Kurt Reuber who was a priest serving as a doctor with the 16th Panzer Division, were particularly perceptive. I will never forget the image of Reuber's eccentric commanding officer deep in his earth bunker under the steppe, playing an abandoned piano obsessively 'even when the walls trembled from bombardment and soil trickled down'.

When describing the fighting, there were two realities. Life out in the steppe was very different, of course, to the street-fighting in the city. For a start, fighting in the steppe was no cleaner than in Stalingrad itself. 'We squat together', wrote Kurt Reuber, 'in a hole dug out of the side of a gully in the steppe. The most meagre and badly equipped dugout. Dirt and clay. Nothing can be made of it. Scarcely any wood for bunkers. We're surrounded by a sad

landscape, monotonous and melancholic. Winter weather of varying degrees of cold. Snow, heavy rain, frost then sudden thaw. At night you get mice running over your face.’ In fact things were much worse, but presumably Reuber did not want to distress his family. Mice even started to eat the frost-bitten toes of sleeping men who could feel nothing in their feet. Trench foot and frost-bite became a major problem. Often up to half of the men were suffering from dysentery. ‘The plague of lice was frightful’, a corporal wrote, ‘because we had no opportunity to wash, change clothes or hunt them down.’ And a deadly combination of hunger, cold and stress greatly reduced its powers of resistance to infection. Soon typhus, diphtheria, scurvy and a whole range of diseases gained a hold.

The fighting out in the Don-Volga steppe was in many ways like the trench warfare of the First World War, but with modern variations. Russian patrols went out at night to snatch sentries for interrogation — they called them ‘tongues’. Reconnaissance groups or snipers would go forward in snow suits and lie out in snow hides in no man’s land. Loudspeakers units broadcast tango music and messages recorded by German Communists for Don Front’s 7th Department for propaganda. Leaflets were also dropped. These had little effect when they had been written in heavy Stalinist clichés by Soviet officers, but when the German Communist writer and poet Erich Weinert took over, the effect was much greater. Weinert exploited German sentimentality and a desperate homesickness, with poems such as *Denk an dein Kind!*, illustrated with a picture of a little boy crying over a dead German soldier, and crying out ‘*Papa ist todt!*’. Many soldiers broke down weeping when they picked this leaflet up. It brought home to them the hopelessness of their situation far better than all the politico-military bombast from the Soviet authorities.

It is, however, images from the fighting in the city that will endure most in the memory. This represented a new form of warfare, concentrated in the ruins of civilian life. The detritus of war — burnt out tanks, shell cases, signal wire and grenade boxes

— was mixed with the wreckage of family homes — iron bedsteads, lamps and household utensils. Vasily Grossman wrote of the ‘fighting in the brick-strewn, half-demolished rooms and corridors of apartment blocks, where there might still be a vase of withered flowers, or a boy’s homework open on the table.’ In an observation post, high in a ruined building, an artillery spotter seated on a kitchen chair might watch for targets through a convenient shell-hole in the wall.

German infantrymen loathed house-to-house fighting. They found such close-quarter combat, which broke military boundaries and dimensions, psychologically disorientating. During the last phase of the September battles, both sides had struggled to take a large brick warehouse on the Volga bank, near the mouth of the Tsaritsa, which had four floors on the river side and three on the landward. At one point, it was ‘like a layered cake’ with Germans on the top floor, Russians below them, and more Germans underneath them. Often an enemy was unrecognizable, with every uniform impregnated by the same dun-coloured dust from pulverised brick and masonry.

German generals do not seem to have imagined what awaited their divisions in the ruined city. The decision to assault Stalingrad had deprived them of their great Blitzkrieg advantages and reduced them to the techniques of the First World War, even though their military theorists had argued that trench warfare had been ‘an aberration in the art of war’. The Sixth Army, for example, found itself having to respond to Soviet tactics, by reinventing the ‘stormwedges’ introduced in January 1918: assault groups of ten men armed with a machine gun, light mortar and flame-throwers for clearing bunkers, cellars and sewers.

The close-quarter combat in ruined buildings, cellars and sewers was soon dubbed ‘Rattenkrieg’ by German soldiers. It possessed a savage intimacy which appalled their generals who felt that they were rapidly losing control over events. ‘The enemy is invisible’, wrote General Strecker to a friend. ‘Ambushes out of

basements, wall remnants, hidden bunkers and factory ruins produce heavy casualties among our troops.'

German commanders openly admitted the Russian expertise at camouflage, but few acknowledged that it was the relentless bombing by their own aircraft which had produced the ideal conditions for the defenders. 'Not a house is left standing', a Lieutenant wrote home. 'There is only a burnt-out wasteland, a wilderness of rubble and ruins which is well-nigh impassible'.

The plan of the Soviet commander, General Chuikov, was to funnel and fragment German mass assaults with 'breakwaters'. Strengthened buildings, manned by infantry with anti-tank rifles and machine guns, would deflect the attackers into channels, where camouflaged T-34 tanks and anti-tank guns, waited half-buried in the rubble behind. When German tanks attacked with infantry, the defenders' main priority was to separate them. The Russians used trench mortars, aiming to drop their bombs just behind the tanks to scare off the infantry while the anti-tank gunners went for the tanks themselves. The channeled approaches would also be mined in advance by sappers, whose casualty rate was the highest of any specialisation. 'Make a mistake and no more dinners', was their unofficial motto.

Much of the fighting, however, did not consist of major attacks, but of relentless, lethal little conflicts. One of Chuikov's officers wrote that the battle was fought by assault squads, generally six or eight strong, from 'the Stalingrad Academy of Street Fighting'. They armed themselves with knives and sharpened spades for silent killing, as well as sub-machine guns and grenades. (Spades were in such short supply, that men carved their names in the handle and slept with their head on the blade to make sure that nobody stole it). The assault squads sent into the sewers were strengthened with flame-throwers and sappers bringing explosive charges to lay under German positions.

A more general tactic evolved, based on the realisation that the German armies were short of reserves. Chuikov ordered an emphasis on night attacks, mainly for the practical reason that the

Luftwaffe could not react to them, but also because he was convinced that the Germans were more frightened during the hours of darkness, and would become exhausted. The German *Landser* came to harbour a special fear of the Siberians from Colonel Batyuk's 284th Rifle Division, who were considered to be natural hunters of any sort of prey.

'If only you could understand what terror is,' a German soldier wrote in a letter captured by the Russians. 'At the slightest rustle, I pull the trigger and fire off tracer bullets in bursts from the machine gun.' The compulsion to shoot at anything that moved at night, often setting off fusillades from equally nervous sentries down a whole sector, undoubtedly contributed to the German expenditure of over 25 million rounds during the month of September alone. The Russians also kept up the tension by firing flares into the night sky from time to time to give the impression of an imminent attack. Red Army aviation, partly to avoid the Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs by day, kept up a relentless series of raids every night on German positions. It also served as another part of the wearing-down process to exhaust the Germans and stretch their nerves.

But what of the civilians? Soldiers at least had some sort of purpose and fairly regular rations to keep them going. The civilians trapped in Stalingrad had nothing. How over ten thousand civilians, including a thousand children, were still alive in the city's ruins after over five months of battle, is still the most astonishing part of the whole Stalingrad story.

The sight of pitiful civilians could produce strange and illogical emotions in Wehrmacht soldiers. 'Today I saw many refugees coming from Stalingrad,' a sergeant wrote home. 'A scene of indescribable misery. Children, women, old men — as old as grandpa — lie here by the road only lightly clothed and with no protection from the cold. Although they're our enemy, it was deeply shocking. For that reason we can't thank our Führer and the Good Lord enough, that our homeland has still been spared such

terrible wretchedness. I have already seen much misery during this war, but Russia surpasses everything. Above all Stalingrad. You won't understand this quite like me, one has to have seen it.' The German confusion of cause and effect emerges here with striking clarity. The invasion of the Soviet Union to destroy the bolshevik threat, was in fact to bring Communist domination to the centre of Europe for nearly half a century.

The many thousands of women and children left behind in the city sought shelter in the cellars of ruins, in sewers and in caves dug into steep banks. There were apparently even civilians cowering in shell-holes on the Mamaev Kurgan during the worst of the fighting. Many, of course, did not survive. The writer Konstantin Simonov, on his first visit, was astonished by what he saw. 'We crossed a bridge over one of the gullies intersecting the city. I shall never forget the scene that opened out before me. This gully, which stretched to my left and right, was swarming with life, just like an ant-hill dotted with caves. Entire streets had been excavated on either side. The mouths of the caves were covered with charred boards and rags. The women had utilized everything that could be of service to keep out the wind and the rain and shelter their children.'

Simonov wrote of the 'almost incredible' suffering of all those in Stalingrad, whether soldier or civilian, but then quickly dismissed any notion of sentimentality — 'these things cannot be helped: the struggle being waged is for life or death'. He then went on to describe the body of a drowned woman washed up on the Volga shore holding on to a charred log 'with scorched and distorted fingers. Her face is disfigured: the suffering she underwent before death released her must have been unbearable. The Germans did this, did it in front of our eyes. And let them not ask for quarter from those who witnessed it. After Stalingrad we shall give no quarter.'

A large element in research depends as much on luck as on instinct, and I was indeed very lucky. When, in 1995, I set off for

the major archives in Germany, Austria and Russia, I was not optimistic because I did not imagine that I would uncover what I really sought. I expected to find vast quantities of reports devoid of human element, but little in the way of first-hand accounts. I was less interested in details of strategy and manoeuvre, although they also had to be covered so as to set the experience of soldiers in a proper context.

At the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv at Freiburg-im-Breisgau, I expected little more than statistics and a dry record of events from the surviving war diaries and files. These had been flown out before the airfields of Paulus's encircled Sixth Army were overrun by the Russians. But even the quartermaster's statistics — the ration returns — brought out a less well-known aspect of the battle. The Sixth Army's front-line divisions had over 50,000 Soviet citizens serving in their ranks, many armed and fighting in the front line against their fellow-citizens. There may, according to some sources, have been another 20,000 or more with army troops and auxiliary units. Some had been brutally press-ganged through starvation in prison camps; others were volunteers. During the final battles, German reports testify to the bravery and loyalty of these 'Hiwis' fighting against their own countrymen. Needless to say, Beria's NKVD became frenzied with suspicion, when it discovered the scale of the disloyalty.

In 1995, a tabu still lingered at that time over the subject in Russia. An infantry colonel with whom I happened to share a sleeping compartment on the journey down to Volgograd (the former Stalingrad), refused at first to believe that any Russian could have put on German uniform. He was finally convinced when I told him of the ration returns in the German archives. His reaction, for a man who clearly loathed Stalin for his purges of the Red Army, was interesting. 'They were no longer Russians', he said quietly. His comment was almost exactly the same as the formula used over fifty years before when Stalingrad Front reported on 'former Russians' back to Moscow.

Also in the Freiburg archives, along with the reports from doctors and German military chaplains, there was a thick file of transcripts from over a hundred letters written to wives or parents in mid-January 1943. The soldiers and officers writing these letters knew that this would be their last one likely to reach home, because the Russians were closing in on Pitomnik airfield. These letters were intercepted and seized on Goebbels's orders, because he wanted them to be used as the basis for a heroic account of German sacrifice. This material, which serves as an interesting indication of the different currents of emotion — the contrast between the modest and the bombastic is striking — has still been surprisingly little used by German historians, except perhaps to show that the letters quoted in that great bestseller of the 1950s, *Last Letters from Stalingrad*, were almost certainly fakes.

In another section of the archive, I found the reports which officers and soldiers flown out of the *Kessel* or encirclement, had been made to write. These men, usually two from each division, were mostly those selected for Hitler's Noah's Ark. His idea was that he could efface the disaster of Stalingrad by recreating a new Sixth Army with symbolic seeds from the old. Their personal reports, written almost immediately after arrival, struck me as particularly valuable, considering the circumstances in which they were written. They had no senior officers to fear. They knew that the officers who asked for the reports were desperate for reliable information on what had happened, while they themselves clearly felt a need to testify, because they owed it to all those comrades they had left behind. The confused mixture of relief and survivor guilt among all those who were flown out is very striking. In fact, I was most interested to find that those officers flown to freedom out of the hellish encirclement did not condemn the captured generals, such as General von Seydlitz, who sided with the Russians in a vain bid to start a revolution against Hitler. They could appreciate the anger of those captured senior officers who felt betrayed by Hitler and guilty for having in turn persuaded their own soldiers to fight on uselessly. But I found that junior officers, taken prisoner after the

surrender who had somehow survived the years of Soviet labour camps, could not forgive those generals who collaborated with their captors.

Interviews with veterans and eye witnesses, especially those conducted over fifty years after the event, can be notoriously unreliable, as I said earlier, but when the material is used in conjunction with verifiable sources, they can be extremely illuminating. I was exceptionally fortunate to be put in touch with several of Sixth Army's staff officers who had been flown out on Paulus's orders just before the end. General Freytag von Loringhoven, whom I interviewed in Munich, was also the panzer commander who first reached the Volga on the northern edge of Stalingrad in August 1942. Even more important, was Winrich Behr who wanted to set the record straight after Alexander Stahlberg's book, *Bounden Duty*. He told me the true story of his mission in January 1943, when he was sent by Paulus and Field Marshal von Manstein to Hitler in an attempt to persuade him to allow the Sixth Army to surrender. His account of his meeting with Hitler, surrounded by his staff in the headquarters bunker at Rastenburg, provided the most fascinating morning of my life.

Among the other soldiers and officers I went to see, (some of these introductions were arranged through a serving officer in the Bundeswehr), was Colonel Pfeifer, who had been a young battalion commander captured with the 60th Motorized Infantry Division at Stalingrad. He had returned to Germany in 1954 after eleven years of Russian prison camps totally deaf. I had to talk to him through his wife, because he could lip-read her mouth far more easily than my badly enunciated German. He had personally reported to Sixth Army headquarters the fact that the Russian prisoners of war, starved of rations by their German captors in the *Kessel*, were resorting to cannibalism. There is still nothing to show that Paulus himself was informed, and I would not be surprised if his chief of staff, General Schmidt, had kept him in the dark on purpose. Schmidt would have known Führer headquarters

would have been outraged if Russian prisoners had been released because of the lack of food.

The longevity of some survivors was astonishing, especially those who had suffered up to twelve years in the Soviet prison camps. A stroke of luck — a sudden hunch of looking in the local telephone directory — revealed that Professor Girgensohn, the Sixth Army's pathologist was still alive and living literally only four hundred yards from the archives in Freiburg. Girgensohn was another who wanted to set the record straight before he died. He was furious at inaccurate reports of his work carried out on the spot. He had been flown into the encirclement to study the dramatic rise in deaths of Sixth Army soldiers occurring neither from enemy action nor disease. His own analysis, on the basis of the fifty autopsies he carried out towards the end of the battle, was that the combination of extreme cold, starvation and stress had had a disastrous effect on the metabolism. In such conditions, he concluded, the body evidently absorbs only a small part of the nutritive value of any food consumed. Girgensohn was one of the few who survived many years in the military Gulag after the surrender. His testimony at last provides a satisfactory explanation for the phenomenon which had baffled the medical conference held on the subject in Berlin in the early part of 1943.

At times I felt like an ambulance-chaser. Whenever I met a German, I asked with indecent haste whether they had a relative who had been at Stalingrad. One of my most valuable sources was the uncle of a German woman I met. He insisted on remaining anonymous and refused to allow me to use a tape-recorder. He had hoped to avoid the war — he was twenty years old when it broke out — by remaining in the United States in 1939. But he was threatened with the withdrawal of his passport if he did not return for military service, and as the heir to no less than five castles as well as the bearer of a rather well-known name, he felt obliged for his family's sake to come back. He had absolutely no need to persuade me of any anti-Nazi credentials or to justify his record. He was simply irritated by most of the books published on the subject

in Germany. In general terms, those of the older generation had sought to justify the Wehrmacht, while those of the younger generation wanted to condemn it in a blanket fashion. As one of the Luftwaffe officers based at Pitomnik airfield, he was able to correct me on many points, to confirm others and to provide a host of small insights. His account of the final surrender within Stalingrad and the appalling conditions in the infamous camp at Beketovka was unforgettable. It lent both substance and visual form to many of the written accounts, which had all been evasive over one terrible aspect. Starving German and Rumanian prisoners were reduced to cannibalism, cutting slivers of flesh from the mounds of frozen corpses.

He took me up into a mountain village nearby to introduce me to the private soldier who had saved his life. This soldier, whose local dialect he had immediately recognised on hearing his voice, worked in the so-called prison infirmary. He had passed him crusts taken from the hands of those who had died, lacking the strength to eat their pathetic ration. The two of them — one a count the other a peasant farmer — spoke with the distant wonder of survival. Neither of these men complained of the cruelty of their fate, nor, considering their experiences, did they display much hatred. They remembered the Russian women for their strength and humanity and despised most of the Russian soldiers, especially the guards, for unpredictable brutality and drunkenness.

Towards the end of our day together, the count asked me if I had read Theodor Plievier's novel *Stalingrad*, published in East Germany in 1946. I said that I had. I asked what he thought of it. He told me that purely for the physical descriptions of suffering, it was very accurate. Plievier, a German Communist of 'the Moscow Emigration', had been allowed by the NKVD authorities to tour the Soviet prison camps, interviewing German prisoners on their experiences during the battle of Stalingrad. He had been one of the many questioned by Plievier in great detail, and when he finally had a chance to read the book many years later, he had found it most impressive.

I was also to find how accurate in their descriptions of conditions two Russian novels about the battle were: *Front Line Stalingrad* by Viktor Nekrassov, who had fought in the battle as a platoon commander in Colonel Batyuk's division of Siberians, and Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate*, which many people rate as the greatest Russian novel of this century. Grossman, a novelist, worked as a war correspondent in Stalingrad during the battle, and came to know the soldiers and snipers of the 62nd Army well. Obviously a novel can never provide a valid historical source, but these accounts by eye-witnesses offered valuable background descriptions.

In Moscow, later that autumn, I was prevented mainly by bureaucratic problems from getting access on that visit to the central Ministry of Defence archive out at Podolsk, but this proved a blessing in disguise. Professor Anatoly Chernobayev, the editor of the journal *Istorichesky Arkhiv*, advised me to go back to the old Marxist-Leninist Institute, (now the Russian State Archive for Social and Political History), where I had worked several years before on the French Communist Party for *Paris After the Liberation*. Chernobayev was right. There was a great deal on the fate of Stalingrad civilians, both at the hands of Beria's NKVD and the Germans. There were also captured letters, diaries, notebooks and *samizdat* from German troops and their allies, all of which had been passed by Red Army Intelligence to the Department of Agitation and Propaganda.

Another excellent piece of advice was to go through private collections in the Russian State Archive of Literature and the Arts. The papers of Ilya Ehrenburg contained captured private documents sent to him by soldiers at the front. The papers of Vasily Grossman included all his notebooks, with the original jottings made when he covered the battle of Stalingrad as a journalist. What was interesting was to contrast his sturdily optimistic vision of Soviet Communism in the notes — a wartime need to believe — with the final version of *Life and Fate*, after he

had finally realised in 1949 that the Stalinist regime, the self-proclaimed scourge of Nazism, was deeply anti-semitic itself.

In the Central State Archive, there were all the reports on the extraordinary story of General von Seydlitz-Kurzbach's rather naive dealings with the NKVD after the surrender. Seydlitz proposed forming an army corps from German prisoners captured at Stalingrad. He urged the Russians to arm them and fly them into Germany to start a revolution against Hitler. Beria vetoed the proposal, certain that it was a trick. But Seydlitz's energetic anti-Nazi efforts, did him no good. Beria suddenly had him charged with war crimes when he was no longer useful.

Before travelling down to Volgograd, I interviewed a number of participants in Moscow. The most important was Lev Bezyminski, a Red Army intelligence officer who was reserve interpreter at Paulus's surrender. Bezyminski provided me with several personal accounts in manuscript, of which by far the most valuable was that of his former colleague, Major Nikolai Dimitrivich Dyatlenko, the key NKVD officer-interpreter attached to Don Front headquarters. Dyatlenko's account (verified later by material I found in the Russian Ministry of Defence archive) gave a fresh view of several important aspects: the Soviet offer of surrender to Paulus in the second week of January 1943, the interrogation of captured German generals, the use of German Communists at Don Front headquarters and numerous other details.

In Volgograd, I inspected the main sites of the battle, interviewed civilian survivors and veterans from the battle, and worked on the mass of letters taken from German bodies, as well as the collection of letters from Red Army soldiers in the battle. It was the civilian aspect, a scale of suffering which we never really were able to imagine in the west, which impressed me most. Unlike many of the soldiers' stories, which were sometimes boastful, sometimes self-serving, I believed almost every detail that I heard from civilian survivors. Their terrible accounts were delivered with deep sadness, but little trace of self-pity.

The next spring, I returned to Germany to finish the huge volume of material at Freiburg, then moved to Potsdam, to consult some published works and manuscripts in the Militargeschichtliches Forschungsamt library, and finally went to Vienna, where I found several interesting personal collections of unpublished typescripts from survivors in the Austrian State archives.

During this time, Dr Lyuba Vinogradova, my research assistant in Russia, had sorted out the last problems over access to Red Army files held at the Russian Ministry of Defence Central Archive out at Podolsk, an establishment set up in 1936.

My negotiations over access the previous year had been conducted at the Ministry of Defence with the responsible officer on the General Staff, which directly controls the archives. He told me flatly that the way the system worked was for me to tell them my subject, and that they would then select the files. It would have been futile to protest.

I explained that I was interested in depicting the experience of soldiers on both sides during the battle. To give an indication of the sort of material I was looking for, I mentioned the reports by doctors and chaplains attached to the German divisions. This prompted a bellow of laughter from the Russian colonel. 'There were no priests in the Red Army!'

'Ah, yes', I replied, 'but you had political officers.' This provoked another laugh. 'So you want to see the political department reports', he said. 'We will see.'

Vinogradova and I arrived at Podolsk on the first morning in good time. To our surprise, this caused a slight flurry of embarrassment. We were told that Colonel Shuvashin, the deputy director, was not yet ready to receive us. The colonel had a good sense of humour when relaxed. He told us that the military archive complex at Podolsk was a strange place, cut off from the rest of the world, with its own time zone, its own laws, and its own weather system.

He then showed us the mountain of files they had extracted and selected for me. Pieces of paper marked the passages chosen for us, and a typed sheet gave a summary. We were never told directly that it was forbidden to look outside the marked pages, but it was assumed to be clear.

We started off on that first morning in the most extraordinary conditions I have ever encountered in any archive. We had to sit and work on the far side of Shuvashin's desk, while he yelled into the malfunctioning telephone. He pointed to the instrument in frustration: 'Soviet 1960s model. It would be easier to shout to Moscow'.

Just to be on the safe side, I decided to begin with the dossiers of interrogations of German prisoners, which I knew would not be controversial or unsettling from the Russian point of view. This proved a fortunate choice. At the end of the morning, a man appeared in dark glasses, a beach shirt and a moustache. He had a menacing friendliness and spoke such good English that it could only have been learned abroad. I discovered later that his name was Colonel Gregor Yurievich Starkov. Even I, the most inexperienced of spook spotters, could see GRU written all over him. Shuvashin, although technically senior, was also nervous as Starkov questioned me. He questioned me on my approach to the subject and asked whether I was just interested in 'negative' material. I tried to talk about a historian's duty of objectivity, but this cut no ice whatsoever. Colonel Starkov, then told us that it was time to go to lunch in the canteen. We should leave all our bags and papers in the office. Not much subtlety there.

That afternoon, everything was much more relaxed. (Presumably Colonel Starkov had found nothing anti-Soviet in my notes). We were given a lecture room to work in, completely unsupervised with the mountain of files. We then started on the daily reports — up to eighteen pages per day — sent by the political department of the Stalingrad Front to Aleksandr Shcherbakov, the Chief Commissar of the Red Army in Moscow. I was so carried away by the material, that I genuinely forgot that we

were supposed to read only six pages out of the 600 page dossier covering one month of the battle.

The pages selected for us consisted of letters of praise addressed to Comrade Stalin from soldiers on the Stalingrad Front. The rest was exactly what I had been looking for: a detailed record, day by day, without any propaganda gloss. They described the acts of heroism, but also the 'extraordinary events' which was commissar-speak for desertions, self-inflicted injuries, drunkenness of commanders, alcohol poisoning of soldiers, retreating without orders, 'counter-revolutionary agitation', defeatism and all other crimes punishable by death. Story after story put terrible flesh on the figure of 13,500 Red Army soldiers executed at Stalingrad by their own side. The problem with the 'positive' material was that it consisted of dreadful propaganda versions of no doubt genuine bravery and self-sacrifice, but which sounded unconvincing when related with Stalinist clichés.

Stalingrad, as the byword for Soviet heroism, is a particularly sensitive subject. This is especially true in post-Communist Russia when all political camps like to use Zhukov and the Red Army (untainted by Stalinism because it had been persecuted in the purges), as symbols of Russian unity and greatness. Even Lyuba Vinogradova, viscerally anti-Stalinist and anti-militarist, who had often been moved to tears by the terrible details we were reading, said to me at one moment: 'Helping you get this material almost makes me feel like a traitor to the Motherland'. It was a sharp reminder that national politics are never simple. When I was in Russia, interviewing veterans, I soon learned that the one thing to avoid at all costs was to become bogged down in a political argument with them. Any hint of criticism of Stalin, and even the most anti-Stalinist of them would go into an all-round defensive position. A criticism of Stalin seemed to undermine their sacrifice.

Richard Overy, in his book *Russia's War*, emphasized that the astonishing capacity of the Russians to withstand suffering had little to do with Communist Party propaganda. 'The Tsarist

armies', he writes, 'between 1914 and 1917 averaged 7,000 casualties a day, compared with 7,950 a day between 1941 and 1945. . . The distinction between the "we" and the "I" was symptomatic of a deeper social outlook in Russian life, where collectivism was preferred to individualism. These cultural traditions were borrowed and enlarged by Soviet Communism'. Orlando Figes disagreed with this collectivist explanation. He underlined the effect of the blocking detachments of NKVD troops and Komsomol groups under their control armed with machine guns.

Undoubtedly the biggest challenge in writing about Stalingrad was to provide some sort of answer to that fundamentally difficult question: Did the Red Army manage to hold on against all expectations through genuine bravery and self-sacrifice, or because of the NKVD and Komsomol blocking groups behind, and the ever present threat of execution by the Special Detachments, soon to become known as SMERSH? Figes is right to point to the panic and the appalling degree of coercion. But Overy is also right to seek to explain the astonishing degree of self-sacrifice. We cannot tell for sure whether a minority or a majority of soldiers panicked in the early stage of the battle for the city in late August and September. In that early period, before the Political Department of Stalingrad Front felt able on 8 October to make the sinister claim: 'the defeatist mood is almost eliminated and the number of treasonous incidents is getting lower', the proportion might well have amounted to more than a minority. But equally, there can be no doubt about the astonishing resolution of many, if not most, Red Army soldiers to hold onto their diminishing foothold on the west bank of the Volga. No remotely similar feat was performed by any Western army in the Second World War, in fact the only comparable defence is the French sacrifice at Verdun.

The debate is even more important than it appears on the surface. Young Russians today cannot understand the suffering of the Second World War, as the colonel on the train to Volgograd

argued passionately. They will understand it even less as their country gradually picks itself up economically. Yet if they cannot understand it, how will young European and American historians be able to comprehend such things in the future? Will they — hoping to imitate some historians of German forces on the Eastern Front like Goldhagen and Bartov — set out to analyse the number of Party or Komsomol members, the percentage of cadres, intellectuals, factory workers or peasants, breaking them down by age, and marital status, and forming their conclusions almost exclusively on archival statistics? Well, the answer is that they will not be able to. The Soviet system, unlike the bureaucratic Wehrmacht, simply did not bother itself with the personal details of its soldiers. Only when the NKVD began to suspect an individual of ‘treason to the Motherland’ was such information recorded.

One of the obvious questions is how much important material is still hidden in the former Soviet archives. This was brought home to me two years after *Stalingrad* came out. Professor Oleg Rzheshevsky, the president of the Russian association of Second World War historians, came to London for a seminar and very kindly brought me a copy of a book entitled *Stalingradskaya epopeya*. This glossy volume, which had just been published by the KGB’s successor organisation, the FSB, is supposed to contain the greatest hits from the NKVD files on Stalingrad. But most of the material is anodyne in the extreme. There are a few tantalising documents, but in fact one is left fuming at the glaring omissions. Most striking of all, there is nothing about the NKVD’s treatment of former Red Army Hiwis captured in German uniform at Stalingrad. Were they executed with clubs and rifle butts, or driven over with tanks to save bullets, as some reports claim? Or were the bulk of them transferred to the Gulag to be worked to death on a special punishment regime? How many were executed? And how many managed to take Red Army uniform from corpses and then reintegrate themselves into the Red Army in the chaos? I long to

know, but I fear that we never will find out. I suppose this is why the Russian archives are so frustrating and so fascinating.