

RUSSIA'S HEROES 1941–45

Albert Axell

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It is seldom that one comes across a work where history-writing and qualitative research meet succinctly. Add to this an author who communicates crisply and relates real-life narratives that capture and hold the reader's attention. This is such a work. The author read history but did more than that. Since 1960, Axell has interviewed dozens of veterans of all genders, from soldiers to marshals, who took part in the battles on the Eastern Front. Through his reading of history, close acquaintanceship with the Soviet Union and Russian-speaking society, and multiple interviews, Axell brings the experience of the individual and group up close and personal.

Although the work is entitled *Russia's Heroes*, the author vividly demonstrates that war is deeply destructive and brings about more than just burning oil, dust, mud, snow, sweat and tears. Organised mass conflict is dehumanising in the extreme. The work shows that heroes are often ordinary people acting out of conviction or sheer necessity, and that villains are frequently driven not (only) by greed or creed, but by arrogance and habitually overrating their own capabilities.

The Eastern Front saw more than 50 major battles, and at different times, the two sides had 8–12 million soldiers confronting one another across vast landscapes. Until the Allied landings, the numbers of Axis divisions thrown against the Soviets were 20 times greater than the divisions deployed against the Allied Forces (p.xv).

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The author addresses the war through the experiences of participants and explores the following enlightening topics:

- The role of partisans and the

consequences of their activities right from the start of Operation Barbarossa, the latter which caught the Soviet Union apparently unprepared for Blitzkrieg and seemingly not ready to wage an extended war.

- “Unconventional” air force activities, for example night-time attacks with wood and canvas aircraft that could scarcely be described as bombers, were frequently flown visually and with little other aid or air protection. Mostly female pilots were involved, with some of them flying up to 1 000 missions in the course of their deployment. Secondly, some pilots practised ramming, which was not a strategy but a tactical last resort, yet taken so seriously that formal directives were issued about it.

- The role of women, which included front-line nurses, partisans (guerrillas) and snipers, is relevant. Front-line nurses were more than medics, and tasked as “extractors”,¹ they literally had to retract the wounded from the frontline while under fire. Female snipers, not only at Stalingrad, which was but one theatre of the war – but also other theatres including partisan actions far behind the enemy lines – played a major role in stemming the tide of aggression.

- Generals, including more than 100 Jews who, apart from patriotism, had many other reasons to fight Nazism and Fascism, are dealt with in a well-written chapter (pp.155–167).

Not to be missed are the reflections in the last two chapters, “The Wounded won the War” and “The High Costs of Victory” (pp.235–244 and pp.245–250). The maps are highly useful and photographs reveal graphic realities not sparing the reader. The select bibliography adds value and the notes and sources derived from the works of Churchill, Guderian, Lefebvre, Griffith and McCauley provide useful historiographic corroboration.

It is worth relating some of the topics in more detail.

Partisans

Axell contextualises his narrative on the partisans –of whom roughly 6 000 groups from small to large were active behind the German lines – around the story of a girl, Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, born 13 September 1923, and her eventual fate (pp.79ff). The first press reports on her wrongly named her Tanya, the only name she gave to her torturers before her death. Zoya’s mother was a schoolteacher, and

Zoya was well read and loved music, Beethoven in particular. Some of the authors she had read were Lermontov, Dickens, Byron, Chekhov, Longfellow and Goethe. In the autumn of 1941, Zoya, then eighteen years old, and her female friend Klava volunteered for partisan duty, and by mid-October, they were trained and deployed west of Moscow, tasked to penetrate enemy lines. With her group, she survived several contacts with the enemy and on her own undertook a successful sabotage mission. On another lone mission, she was caught near the village of Petrischevo setting fire to a warehouse. After a night of torture, she was hanged the next morning with the villagers forced to watch. The occupying forces allowed the body to hang on the gallows for nearly the whole of November (it was winter) to act as a warning to would-be partisans. Lyubov Timofeyevna, her mother, learned about her death through a newspaper article (which referred to her as “Tanya”). Deeply distressed, the mother recognised her daughter’s face. Kosmodemyanskaya wrote down a quote from Saltykov-Shchedrin in a notebook that her friend Klava retrieved. It read, “I love Russia, my heart bleeds for her, and I cannot imagine myself anywhere but in Russia” (p.81). Five photos of Zoya’s execution were found on the body of a German officer killed near Smolensk. Zoya’s younger brother Alexander, a tank commander, was killed in action in Germany one month before victory day. Pyotr Lidov, the journalist who wrote up her story, was killed in 1944 in a contact with the enemy (p.89).

A United States Ambassador to Moscow between 1936 and 1938 recalled in his notes of 15 November 1937: “Guerrilla warfare is much featured by the Soviets. There is a marked preponderance having to do with the guerrilla bands, or partisans as they are called ...”² His book, however, was not published before May 1942 and few German political and military readers and leaders timely gained from Ambassador Davies’ insight.³

Rammers

Ramming was a high-risk, last resort tactic of air defence and involved danger and courage. The first ram attack took place at 0515 hours on 22 June 1941 (p.121). Junior Lieutenant Leonid Butelin in this case severed the tail of a German Junkers-88 bomber (p.121). Russian wartime directives made it clear that it was a last option to be used only when guns were jammed, ammunition expended and the enemy still an imminent threat. A combat directive made it clear that it is an act of bravery but should not be one of self-sacrifice. Notwithstanding the warnings, numerous pilots executed several rammings (p.122–123). Air ace Alexander Pokryskin, with 59 kills to his credit, argues that at the defence of Moscow “this

method was rightly necessary” (p.123). In at least one case, a female pilot destroyed a Luftwaffe fighter through ramming. Estimates of rammings are up to 300, with the majority executed in the skies above Moscow. The highest ramming took place at 22 800 feet and the lowest at approximately 300 feet (p.129). Cases of double rammings were reported. Once air superiority was established by September 1944, rammings were no longer advised. Ivan Denisov’s action is the only recorded case of a wood-and-canvas biplane (the R-5) that rammed a Henschel-129. Both aircraft were destroyed but Denisov survived (p.130).⁴

Women

The lesson learnt during the war it seems was not whether one was male or female, but whether one had the skill, the will and perseverance. Natalia Peshkova, a Muscovite, was seventeen years old when she finished high school with the dream of becoming a journalist. Starting as a medic, she ended in the tank corps as the third highest ranking officer in the battalion and was wounded three times. As one of 800 000 women who served in the Red Army, she was eventually awarded the Order of the Red Star.⁵

Some 200 000 young women served in the anti-aircraft forces as ground crews, gunners, searchlight operators and communication officers.⁶ All women fought on a voluntary basis, including the approximately 2 500 snipers and numerous armed naval combatants.⁷

The experiences of females entering combat roles are interesting. In a somewhat cold philosophical argument, Nadezhda Popov, a pilot, recalls, “At first no one in the armed services wanted to give women the freedom to die” (p.59). Yulia Drunina remarked that the army did not welcome girls with rapture and frequently sent them home (p.59). Women in turn would move on to other units that were willing to take them on in a fighting capacity. This initial male resistance and scepticism against women is confirmed by other sources.⁸ This was to change. By 1944, Russian women accounted for 50 per cent of the doctors, 23 per cent of the medical orderlies, and thousands served as anti-aircraft gunners, signallers, pilots, snipers and gunners on merchant ships (p.59ff).

Popova trained as a parachutist but switched to the air force. She completed a thousand missions as a seasoned pilot in the second Women’s Regiment. The aircraft used (the PO-2) was an open-cockpit trainer version converted to bomber and attacks took place at heights of 2 600 to 3 200 feet while flying was sometimes

as low as 1900 feet. The open cockpits were a serious drawback in winter months, Popova recalls (p.61). Because of the aircraft's slow speed, night-time bombing was preferred. Popova mentions some other interesting facts: In one particular span of time, when confronted by Messerschmitts they lost four aircraft on one day and thirty-seven in total in the Black Sea region over just a few days (pp.62–63). Other snippets are that the aircraft was versatile and could land on farm roads, that she feared being shot down and caught behind enemy lines, and that there was no discrimination in the vodka ration for men and women. Each woman pilot and navigator was entitled to one small glass of vodka before a mission (p.62). Yevgenia Zhiulenko recalls, "Yes, I was jittery. Flying was frightening. After completing a mission, your teeth would chatter, your knees would shake and you [could] barely walk" (p.69). In some cases, the women nicknamed "night witches" by the Germans would fly up to ten missions a night. After the war, Zhigulenko became a script writer and film director.

Snipers

Most serious cinema-goers and DVD rental shop clientele have heard of or seen *Enemy at the Gate*, a fairly thrilling though over-interpreted movie (by compliments of Hollywood) of two snipers duelling it out in Stalingrad, the one German, the other a Soviet. Axell does not spend too much time on the sniper of Stalingrad. He was but one in a large theatre.⁹ Other snipers (some call them sharpshooters) are detailed. Mila Pavlichenko, who made her name at Sevastopol after being deployed at Odessa, used a standard 1891/1930 Nagant rifle with telescopic sight. She finally dispatched 309 odd enemies including some skilled German snipers. A two-person team of snipers, privates Mariya Polivanova and Natalya Kovshova, were jointly accredited with more than 300 kills.¹⁰ Fyodor Okhlopkov, a Yakut from Krest-Khaldji in Siberia (whose brother a co-sniper was killed and died in his arms) who dispatched of 27 opponents in the last week of October 1943, supplied younger snipers with six rules of sniping starting with "Do not imitate others ..." and the last one insisting that "Unless you can see a way out, do not enter" (p.114).

Nina Lobkovskaya joined at age seventeen. Her father was already at the front (and was later killed in 1942). Nina's experience shows that snipers are not an elite group with the comfort of high titles and long periods of rest. "We fought shoulder to shoulder with men in rifle companies." Multiple skills are useful. They beat off 12 counter attacks with the rifle companies in one case but also switched jobs carrying wounded men from the battlefield – in one incident dragging a tank

commander from a knocked-out tank. In her career, Nina accounted for 89 enemy killed (p.120). Her detachment of company-size, however, accounted for 3000 kills by 1945 (p.120). The emotional effects of this job are strikingly described. Kotliarova recalls, “killing was horrible” and another, a combat medic, that frequently they “were trembling at night” wishing they were “at home”.¹¹

Jewish generals

In 1918, a year after the Russian Revolution, Lenin remarked that the military had to get rid of “old officers who had nothing in common with the private soldier” (p.155). The rule, despite the Stalin purges, was broken in many ways. In the image of a new people, many of the generals were from peasant stock and from Armenia, Georgia, the Ukraine, Byelorussian and Uzbekistan (for example, the Armenian general Ivan Bagramyan and the Uzbek, Sabir Rakhimov) (p.156). However, the post-1917 army also integrated competent officers and soldiers from the previous regime. Some commanders came through the ranks of the old tsarist army; for example Georgi Zhukov, Konstantin Rokossovsky, Alexander Vasilevsky (son of a priest and a tsarist captain), Boris Sapozhnikov (of noble birth) mixed with younger ones that joined the force after 1917 (pp.155). Western academics, in order to make the social world understandable to them and their readers, frequently make use of terms such as “minorities”, “pluralism” or “multi-culturalism” as part of what they call “pluralist theory”. Axell discusses the Jewish generals as a “minority” while cautioning that some of those he tried to interview thought that the topic of being Jewish was of lesser relevance and to an extent immaterial (p.156).

Major General Lev Dovator, also known as a Cossack Jewish general, became renowned for his exploits behind enemy lines. In one case, in the vicinity of Smolensk, he attacked the enemy with 3000 cavalrymen and killed 2 500 German soldiers and officers, seized 1 500 rifles, captured 200 vehicles, artillery, mortars, four tanks and destroyed a supply train. The captured arms were promptly redistributed to lesser-armed partisan groups in the vicinity (pp.156–157). Daniel Abramovitch Dragunsky saw several battles, was wounded several times (in one case, doctors extracted shrapnel from his liver after the Kursk battles) and won the Gold Star for bravery twice. He lost his mother and sister who, together with other Jews and “Slavic outcasts”, were killed by German invaders on the city square in Svyatsk in 1941. His two brothers fell at Stalingrad in 1942. There were also Skvirsky and General Sapozhnikov, known for his saying “I am a Jew. I never concealed it. And everyone knows it” (p.164). Axell relates numerous other examples of retired generals and, in cases where they were deceased, their families.

The author also shares a narrative such as that of Sapoznikov who participated in the campaigns against the Japanese and who suggested that his father would have liked to see his son become a Talmudic scholar, but that the son thought that at least one member per family should defend the country (p.162). In human experience and in providing insights into social identities, this chapter makes for more than worthwhile reading.

The strength of *Russia's Heroes* lies in the way in which historical data are complemented by qualitative research over a number of years. Individuals and their experiences are introduced to the author. There is little entertainment of abstract or glib ideologies, but ample sharing of personal trials and tribulations such as those of the eighty-two-year-old veteran pilot that Axell interviewed. He survived after crawling for 18 days to reach safety, feeding on snow, moss, ants and the gum of young trees (the military doctor nicknamed him "the crawler" and the name stuck).

Historians, political scientists, sociologists and military practitioners can learn much from this work. The author provides more than just a journalistic overview.

The value of Axell's work lies in unearthing the human experience within a historical epoch of individuals from different backgrounds and their strengths in the then and now in a convincing way.

Russia's Heroes is a must read.

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Endnotes

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- ¹ Other sources use the term "combat medics" to illustrate the contrast with normal stretcher-bearers and field hospital nurses. See Reese, R. *Soviet Women at War. Military History*, 2011 (May), p.52.
 - ² Davies, J E. *Mission to Moscow*. London. Victor Gollancz Limited, 1943 (seventh impression), p.158.
 - ³ Another interesting work – though in some instances generalised and stereotypical – about the Soviet Union that provides insights in how Americans viewed the wartime Soviet Union is White, W. L. *Report on the Russians*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1945.

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- ⁴ Much later, during the U-2 spy plane incident in May 1960, a Soviet Air Force major was ordered to take off and ram the intruder. However, Gary Powers' aircraft was hit by a ground-to-air missile and he parachuted safely. The ramming never took place. In 1990, the incident was made public.
- ⁵ Reese, R. Soviet Women at War. *Military History*, 2011 (May), pp.44–53
- ⁶ Ibid, p.50
- ⁷ Ibid, pp.50, 52
- ⁸ Ibid, p.50
- ⁹ In Chapter 8 of the work there are some references to Alexandrovich Zaitsev and his opponent(s) See Axell, A. *Russia's Heroes 1941–1945*. London: Robinson. 2002. pp.101ff
- ¹⁰ Reese, R. Soviet Women at War. *Military History*, 2011 (May), p.52.
- ¹¹ Ibid, pp.51, 52.