



2009.06.03

Andrew Nagorski, *The Greatest Battle: Stalin, Hitler, and the Desperate Struggle for Moscow That Changed the Course of World War II*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007. Pp. xiii, 366. ISBN 978-0-7432-8110-2.

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In *The Greatest Battle*, Andrew Nagorski argues that the battle of Moscow in 1941 was the most important of the war. This unclear struggle that ultimately favored the Soviets was a first turning point: it changed not only the predicted outcome for the Eastern European theater but also modified the implications of the war and the post-war world for the international community. For Nagorski, Moscow's position as the first Soviet success gives the battle a special significance despite the narrow margin of its victory. Other victories, such as Stalingrad and Kursk, merely continued the gathering momentum of Soviet battlefield strength. With Moscow, the Allies learned the true military potential of the Soviet Union, watched the fading of Germany's invincibility, and began to consider the implications of combat in a world theater that could provide Allied support in the East. For the Soviet Union, the preservation of its capital and industrial center meant the continued ability to mobilize for further conflict. Nagorski, however, does not blindly applaud the Soviets as underdogs who deserve empathy and praise, but instead stresses the horrific aspects of a battle that was almost lost. He holds Stalin accountable for both the high casualty count and for the ability of the Germans to threaten Moscow to the extent they did; Stalin's leadership contributed more towards a potential loss than a victory. The Soviet people looted, panicked, and started riots; they didn't always support the country, Stalin, the mission, or even their own neighbors. A thorough understanding of the inglorious reality of the fight magnifies the subsequent significance of the battle of Moscow.

Though not a trained academic historian, as a longtime *Newsweek* correspondent and current Vice President and Director of Public Policy for the EastWest Institute,¹ Nagorski has ample experience in international relations and journalism. *The Greatest Battle* is his military history debut.² His background is both a hindrance and a help. His thoughtful and compelling argument is presented in a perfectly organized manner that improves not only the clarity of the content but the flow of the chronological narrative, based on only the most pertinent information and anecdotes. Central to his argument, for example, are the diverse and complex experiences and opinions of the Soviet people. Therefore, many first-name, personal stories about these citizens, some extending to several pages, dominate the narrative.

The author's extensive journalistic experience contributes to a highly enjoyable and readable text, replete with captivating stories about, for example, the preservation of Lenin's body, romances between NKVD operatives, and disturbing interrogations of loyal Soviet soldiers accused of spying.

When Germany invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, Ilya Vinitsky was a student at the Moscow Aviation Institute (MAI) and had just started a job as a summer trainee at a factory in Volga. Raised in a Jewish family in Kiev, he had trained as a sniper while he was still in high school there. So he was ready—eager—to volunteer for military service when the war broke out. He rushed back to Moscow the very next day.... The beating continued until the NKVD officer was tired. He then proposed they shoot Vinitsky on the spot.... Vinitsky didn't know it yet, but he was lucky to be there. His new interrogator, a young NKVD agent wearing civilian clothes, wrote down everything he said, including his protestations that it wasn't his fault that he was never issued a military ID card.... The interrogator freed Vinitsky, who would go on to do maintenance work on airplanes, though not in Rzhev (63–68).

1 See the website <www.miwsr.com/rd/0915.htm>.

2 He has previously written two non-fiction works on international affairs and one novel: respectively, *Reluctant Farewell: An American Reporter's Candid Look inside the Soviet Union* (NY: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1985); *The Birth of Freedom: Shaping Lives and Societies in the New Eastern Europe* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1993); *Last Stop Vienna* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2002).

Such vignettes, while in some ways anecdotal, support Nagorski's thesis by highlighting the central importance of the Soviet citizenry and the harsh, sometimes brutal, situations they endured during Germany's invasion. These accounts fill many pages and usually open chapters, giving the book the feel of a novel, rather than an analytical, academic work. Nagorski has tailored his book more for a common readership with an interest in military history and World War II in general than for historians, scholars, or academics.

With good historical accuracy, Nagorski takes the reader seamlessly through the key aspects of the battle of Moscow: the chronological development of the event, from untrustworthy pacts to the lengthy combat, the battling wits of Stalin and Hitler, and the interest of other countries in the events unfolding in Eastern Europe. He tells the accepted history of the battle of Moscow without many new insights. He takes little notice of the reevaluation by historians of Soviet accounts of the war in the two decades since the opening of the Soviet archives.³ Nagorski's focus on the battle of Moscow itself, rather than the entirety of Operation Barbarossa, is innovative and usefully responds to, for example, Richard Overy's dogmatic disregard for Moscow (315),⁴ but seems ultimately ill-advised in the absence of new information and conclusions.

Nagorski uses declassified NKVD documents, an ample selection of oral histories and interviews, as well as personal memoirs and diaries, archival material (at the Hoover Institute), and a solid collection of secondary sources. Unfortunately, he too rarely cites primary sources. Thus, although he mentions orders and memoranda and quotes conversations and statements of key historical actors, he more often than not references attributions in secondary works. For example, he uses Order 0428, Stalin's policy for the destruction of Soviet land and property, as causing heavy Soviet casualties and feelings of discontent toward the government (266). The source he cites for the order, however, is a 1991 biography of Stalin rather than the archives where he might have examined the original. He refers to the same biography when discussing Stalin's order to secure the town of Rzhev (299). While some primary sources, notably published personal memoirs, figure prominently as evidence in the text, whatever actual archival work he did somehow gets lost in the presentation of the narrative.

The Greatest Battle has received many laudatory reviews in the popular press (*Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Wall Street Journal*) and has been shortlisted for awards and prizes⁵—deservedly so. While not an academic work in the traditional sense, it is nonetheless a historically accurate portrayal of the battle of Moscow that will excite its readers by the vibrancy of its prose and the intelligence of its argument.

3 See, e.g., Joseph Wiczynski, ed., *Operation Barbarossa: The German Attack on the Soviet Union, June 22, 1941* (Salt Lake City, UT: Charles Schlacks, 1993): authors from Great Britain, the United States, Russia, and Germany cover a wide range of subjects on the invasion, including Stalin's influence on battle development and outcomes, which Nagorski also explores. John Barber, "Popular Reactions in Moscow to the German Invasion of June 22, 1941" and Mark von Hagen, "Soviet Soldiers and Officers on the Eve of the German Invasion: Towards a Description of Social Psychology and Political Attitudes" also address the complex responses of the Soviet citizenry and the lack of universal loyalty toward Stalin and the nation.

4 In *Russia's War* (NY: Penguin, 1998).

5 It was selected as a "Best Book of 2007" by *The Washington Post* Book World and was a finalist for the 2007 *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize in History.