



# QUEENSLAND BRANCH NEWS

NEWSLETTER of the QLD Branch of the MARITIME UNION of AUSTRALIA

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*To be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing - Raymond Williams* No. 147 – 7 September 2018

## SPECIAL EDITION: STALINGRAD

### Foreword by Bob Carnegie

I KNOW SO many members would be scratching their heads wondering why the Queensland Branch has a special edition of the Branch News relating to the battle of Stalingrad. The reason is quite simply that 75 years ago on the West Bank of the Volga the fate of civilisation hung by a thread.

If Stalingrad had fallen perhaps the 3<sup>rd</sup> Reich may have begun its 1000 year reign.

So to a large degree, as paradoxical as it may sound, we owe many of our rights we enjoy today to the 62<sup>nd</sup> Army at Stalingrad!

This article has been written by one of the Union Movement's foremost legal minds and our great mate and Comrade, Craig Buckley of the AMIEU.

### Stalingrad



*"The Motherland Calls" - The 87-metre high statue built to honour the heroic defenders of Stalingrad. It stands atop Mamayevo Kurgan (a "kurgan" is a "burial mound"), a scene of intense combat during the actual battle. The statue overlooks the industrial districts of Volgograd (as the city is now known) and the Volga River.*

THE DIFFICULTY IN writing an article on the significance of the Battle of Stalingrad is that many will be unaware of the battle completely. Those for whom the name is familiar have likely encountered little but the clichés and misconceptions found in Cold War-era history books and bad cinema. However, Stalingrad is a city and a battle which, perhaps more than any other in human history, deserves to be known. It is the place where both German military might and Nazi dreams of conquest were broken.

Hitler's plan to conquer the Soviet Union, Operation Barbarossa, had failed on the approaches to Moscow in December 1941, defeated by determined resistance by the Red Army (not by the winter weather which German apologists prefer to blame). In 1942, the Nazi invaders concentrated their offensive strength in the south, intending to capture the Russian Caucasus and its oilfields. To protect the northern flank of this advance, the Germans sought to capture Stalingrad, which was also a major industrial centre producing tanks, munitions, and other war materials.

In late June 1942, the German offensive began, driving the Soviets forces eastwards. After the Germans captured Rostov, Stalin issued Order 227, forbidding soldiers to retreat without express orders and threatening harsh discipline for those who did so. The order, containing the line, "Not a step back!" was read to all front-line troops. One Red Army veteran recalls that when she heard the order being read out, her officer added, "And if you're wounded, fall with your head toward the west." [i.e. so it would appear that they had been wounded while moving toward the enemy, not away from them.]

By August 1942, the German advance reached Stalingrad. From then until February 1943, two massive army groups fought for control of a rubble city on the banks of the Volga River. The Soviet 62<sup>nd</sup> Army, commanded by Lieutenant General V. I. Chuikov, was the principal unit defending the city proper, assailed by the German 6<sup>th</sup> Army (under General, later Field Marshal, Paulus) and the 4<sup>th</sup> Panzer Army of Colonel General Hoth.

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It is impossible to convey the entire sweep of events in the battle in a short article such as this.



*V. I. Chuikov commanded the 62nd Army at Stalingrad. His postwar memoirs were among the very few Soviet accounts of the battle that were available in the West.*

In August, German aircraft bombed the city heavily, causing heavy civilian casualties and fires which burned some of the workers' residential districts to the ground. Photographs of some suburbs show a forest of stone or brick chimneys, with not a trace of the wooden building that once surrounded them.

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*A 'chimney forest' in Stalingrad*

Among the first of Stalingrad's defenders to engage the Germans were women volunteers crewing anti-aircraft guns, forced to lower their gunsights from the skies above to fire on the charging enemy tanks. The Soviet forces defended the city's buildings, factories, the heights

of Mamayev Kurgan, and even the wide gullies and gorges than ran through the city to the riverbank.

The close-quarter nature of street fighting resulted in enormous casualties to both sides. The large scale manoeuvre warfare of the German *blitzkrieg*, with mechanised troops engaging each other on the wide Russian steppes was replaced by small groups of soldiers fighting for control of each house. Indeed, individual buildings became the focus of entire battles lasting days or even weeks: "Pavlov's House," "The Chemist Shop," "The Commissar's House," "The Grain Elevator," and others. Such struggles were ferocious and bloody. In the factory districts, different rooms in the same factory hall or workshop would sometimes be occupied by opposing sides. The Stalingrad Tractor Factory, converted to war production, continued to manufacture T-34 tanks during the battle, the tank crews boarding the vehicles as they rolled off the assembly line, and driving to the battle zone.

By mid-September, some German troops reached the banks of the Volga. Soviet troops, including the veteran 13th Guards Division, were ferried across the Volga River to reinforce the city. Their counterattack recaptured critical parts of the city, including the heights of Mamayev Kurgan. At the same time, the Soviets had begun to plan a major counter-offensive, stockpiling resources and mobilizing new forces that would strike the German flanks, north and south of the city, when the time was judged to be right.



*Major General Rodimtsev, pictured in Stalingrad, as commander of the 13th Guards Rifle Division. A veteran of the Spanish Civil War, he was twice decorated as a "Hero of the Soviet Union." He was quite possibly the toughest combat commander in the Red Army.*

In mid-October the Germans attempted to capture the factory district along the Volga. Under increasing German pressure, the size of the Soviet foothold on the western bank gradually diminished. Veteran German combat engineers were flown into the city for one last attack, to commence on 11 November. The objective

was to capture the massive Red Barricades factory complex and eliminate the Soviet presence on the western bank of the Volga. It failed. Even though the Red Army soldiers were in places forced back all the way to the riverbank, they continued to hold out.

On 19 November, the forces of the Stalingrad Front began their counteroffensive, focusing their attack on the Romanian, Hungarian, and Italian forces outside the city, guarding the German flanks. In a sweeping pincer movement, the two wings of the Soviet attack met at Kalach on the Don River, west of Stalingrad, encircling one complete German army and part of another. German efforts to break through that encirclement to relieve their forces trapped in Stalingrad were repulsed. Attempts by the German airforce (the *Luftwaffe*) to fly in supplies were woefully inadequate.

The Soviet Marshal Rokossovsky offered surrender terms to the Germans. Their commander, Field Marshal von Paulus, obeying Hitler's orders, refused to give up, prolonging both inevitable defeat and the suffering of his troops. By the time von Paulus was finally captured on 2 February 1943 and surrendered the remnants of his forces, many of his men were suffering from malnourishment and typhus was rampant. Many would die before they reached POW camps.

Stalingrad marked the first major defeat of the Nazi war machine, with its impact felt not just in material terms but also upon military and civilian morale (on both sides). Hundreds of thousands of German soldiers had been killed, wounded, or taken prisoner. The Soviet army suffered even greater casualties, but even though it would have two years of hard fighting ahead of it, commenced an advance to the west that would continue until they reached the streets of Berlin.

The desperate defence of the City on the Volga by the men and women of the Red Army is an achievement which can be fairly described as unparalleled, as unique. It is an achievement easier described than explained. For much of the cold war, accounts of the battle were mostly from German sources, who preferred to explain "the Russians" as fanatical or mindless hordes driven forward unthinkingly by brutal discipline.

Some of the more recent "popular" writers of history - in the West at least - do little better in their explanations. Historians like Anthony Beevor also emphasise harsh Soviet discipline. Catherine Merridale, in her study of the Red Army, interviewed many Soviet veterans, and dismisses their explanations of their motivations entirely, unable to believe the veterans' repeated references to ideological commitment to a Soviet ideal and socialist values could be anything but unconscious self-deception. But, as Jochen Hellbeck writes:

*"Anyone who, like Merridale or Beevor, depicts the Soviet population as enslaved by the system cannot persuasively explain why millions of people fought against the Germans until they literally collapsed."*

The Second World War, at least in Europe, was won by the men and women of the Red Army. Sadly, that will come as a surprise to many. Perhaps the one Second World War date widely known in the West is D-Day, 6 June, the date in 1944 when the forces of the western Allies landed on the Normandy beaches, finally opening the "Second Front." But by then, the decisive battles of the war (Stalingrad and Kursk) had already been fought and won, a year previously.

This year, 2018, marked the 75th Anniversary of Soviet victory during the Battle of Stalingrad. Even today we owe a debt of gratitude to the men and women who, at Stalingrad and elsewhere, removed Nazism and Fascism from the map of Europe. It is a real irony that those who long trumpeted the supposed superiority of the freedoms and democratic rights of Western Europe over the Eastern bloc, were able to enjoy those liberties largely because of the sacrifices of the Red Army. Certainly, the governments and peoples of western and central Europe had proved unequal to the task of resisting fascism. Now we are witnessing a re-emergence of extreme right-wing political movements and racial politics in Europe (and elsewhere), and populist "democratic" politicians willing to pander to them, it is particularly timely to remind ourselves of the price of allowing that history to repeat.



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