

Geoffrey Roberts, Irish Examiner, 23 July 2011

THE statistics of the Soviet-German war of 1941 to 1945 never cease to astonish. In four years of ferocious fighting the Soviets lost eight million soldiers. The Germans lost three million. During the battle for Stalingrad, the Red Army suffered more casualties than the British and Americans did during the whole war. Three million out of five million Soviet POWs died in German captivity.

The survival rate of their German counterparts was a little better with about half of the two million captured by the Soviets living to tell the tale.

Some 80% of the Second World War's combat took place on the Eastern Front where the Soviets destroyed more than 600 enemy divisions — Italian, Hungarian, Romanian, Finnish, Croat, Slovak and Spanish as well as German. Among the Axis losses were 48,000 tanks, 167,000 artillery guns and 77,000 aircraft.

But, as Michael Jones reminds us, at the heart of this vast theatre of combat was the drama of millions upon millions of individuals interacting with each other, fighting, killing, suffering, enduring, surviving and dying.

Jones is a British military historian who is interested in the Red Army's experience of the war, as related in the diaries and memoirs of Soviet soldiers. This, his third book on the subject, tells the story of the Red Army's arduous march from the ruins of Stalingrad in 1942 to those of Berlin in 1945.

The theme of the book is the struggle of Soviet soldiers to maintain their humanity, not just in traumatic conditions of intense combat, or in the face of unimaginable German atrocities, but as witnesses to their own sides' brutality and criminality.

The stereotypical image of the Red Army during the WWII is framed by books such as Antony Beevor's *Stalingrad* and the film *Enemy at the Gates* — cannon fodder soldiers forced to fight by a ruthless communist regime that would shoot them if they dared retreat.

The discipline was certainly harsh — the Soviets executed 170,000 of their own soldiers during the war — but as Jones shows, most of the Red Army soldiers fought because they wanted to. They fought because they were patriots and because they

faced an enemy that wanted to inflict mass murder and mass enslavement on their country. Striking, too, is the extent to which the feelings of ordinary soldiers were shaped by official Soviet propaganda. This was particularly true of the regime's anti-German hate campaign which depicted the enemy as inhuman fascist beast who deserved no mercy.

"Kill a German every time you see one", exhorted the Soviet writer Konstantin Simonov,

Soviet soldiers needed little encouragement to kill the enemy, especially when they began to recapture territory occupied by the Germans. In February 1942, Soviet artillery man Mikhail Volkov wrote to his wife: "Whatever they write in the newspapers, the reality is much worse. I have seen burnt-out towns and villages, corpses of women and children. These terrible sights have strongly affected me — and all my soldiers."

As the Germans retreated from Russia their atrocities grew worse. One of the most gruesome occurred in Belorussia in March 1944 when, as part of an anti-partisan operation, the Germans herded nearly 50,000 civilians together in a single camp. The result was a typhus epidemic and the idea was to spread the disease into the ranks of Red Army when it liberated the camp.

Horrific though this bacteriological warfare was, it paled into insignificance when the Red Army entered Poland and discovered the German extermination camps at Majdanek, Sobibor, Treblinka and Auschwitz.

At Majdanek "there was a whole warehouse full of shoes", recalled Captain Anatoloy Merezko, "hundreds of thousands of them, piled high to the ceiling, in all sorts of sizes, Many of them were children's. Our soldiers asked each other in bewilderment: 'what has been going on here'?"

Equally unbelievable was Auschwitz where the Soviets found the chimneys of the crematoriums were coated with human fat deposits 45cm thick.

By the time the Red Army crossed into Germany in January 1945 ordinary Soviet soldiers were primed for revenge. It is to Jones's great credit that he provides a balanced picture of the Red Army's murder, rape and pillage of eastern Germany.

Only a minority of the troops committed atrocities but many more stood idly by. A few intervened and tried to stop what was going on, seeing that what was at stake was not just saving the lives of Germans but the soul of the Red Army itself.

Soviet soldiers, he writes “carried an overwhelming burden of rage and grief and some expressed these emotions in the most terrible and destructive fashion. But many others renounced the right to vengeance, and pulled away from the brink.”

Jones’s account concludes with the battle of Berlin in April 1945 during which another 80,000 Soviet soldiers died. The climax of that battle was the struggle for the Reichstag in the centre of Berlin. When the battle was over the Soviet photographer Yevgeny Khaldei took a famous picture of two Soviet soldiers raising the Soviet flag on top of the Reichstag. Khaldei’s aim was to create as iconic a picture of the Red Army’s conquest of Berlin as the hoisting of the Stars and Stripes by US troops over Iwo Jima months earlier.

One of the two men raising the Soviet flag was Lieutenant Alexei Kovalev from Kiev in the Ukraine. He was chosen for the picture because he had in fact taken part in storming the Reichstag and during the fighting had placed a small red flag in one of the building’s first floor windows.

Kovalev served in a reconnaissance unit whose job it was to scout ahead and gather intelligence. His main sources of information were Russian civilians. After they told him what he wanted to know he had to kill them lest they fall into German hands and betray news of the advancing Soviet army.

“I cut their throats with a knife”, Kovalev told Jones. “I murdered hundreds of my own people, decent, kind, honest people. I murdered them — so that we could defeat Nazi Germany. This is the price I paid.”

One can only hope that Kovalev was exaggerating but his story sums up the complex and contradictory experience of the Red Army at war.

The Red Army saved Europe as well as Russia from Hitler and the Nazis. To do so it had to fight a savage war against a barbaric enemy. As Jones argues, we can be critical of Soviet conduct “but that criticism has to be tempered with understanding.

We did not have to endure what the Soviet Union endured. Until we realise this, the wounds of this terrible war will never fully heal.”

Geoffrey Roberts is professor and head of the School of History at UCC. His biography of Marshal Zhukov will be published early next year.