

## Catherine Merridale "*Ivan's War*"

(Fragment)

The attack came on Sunday 23 August. That day, 600 German planes circled over Stalingrad. They flew in low, carpet-bombing in relays. By nightfall there was little left above the ground but rubble, searing flame and smoke. "The streets of the city are dead," Chuikov would write as he toured his new battleground a few days after the catastrophe. "There is not a single green twig on the trees: everything has perished in the flames. All that is left of the wooden houses is a pile of ashes and stove chimneys sticking up out of them. The many stone houses are burnt out, their windows and doors missing and their roofs caved in. Now and then a building collapses. People are rummaging about in the ruins, pulling out bundles, samovars and crockery, and carrying everything to the landing stage". Tens of thousands of civilians would never manage to escape. In that first day and night, an estimated 40,000 people died.

The bitterest and most appalling phase of Stalingrad's defense also began that August. For a few weeks, the Soviet 62<sup>nd</sup> and 64<sup>th</sup> armies retreated from the city's western suburbs to a few strongholds in the center and the north. By mid-September, the 62<sup>nd</sup> Army was holding the city on its own. Its orders were to destroy the enemy – the 6<sup>th</sup> Army of General Paulus – in the city itself. Soldiers holding the narrow strip of ruined earth along the Volga's western bank were told to fight as if there were no land across the water on the eastern shore. What that would mean soon became clear. Chuikov's men, reinforced by any troops who could be shipped across alive, clung to their bridgehead by contesting every house. Inside the ruins, sometimes in the dark, men fought with bayonets and their bare hands to hold each stairwell and each bullet-pitted room.

From October, Chuikov's soldiers in the city would be supported by well-organized artillery, this time sensibly sited on the Volga's eastern bank. But the enemy maintained complete superiority in the air. All troops in the city, German and Soviet – and the few civilians who had not succeeded in escaping after the first fatal days – were subject to unrelenting bombardment. So were the boats that brought supplies and men across the river from the Soviet side. The food ran out, bullets ran out, the cooling water in machine guns boiled. The men lived and died amid a litter of corpses and rubble, the bodies blending with the dust. As Chuikov himself recalled, "The heavy casualties, the constant retreat, the shortage of food and munitions, the difficulty of receiving reinforcements... all this had a very bad effect on morale. Many longed to get across the Volga, to escape the hell of Stalingrad". His men were close to absolute despair. "It is all so hard that I do not see a way out", a soldier wrote home that October. "We can consider Stalingrad as good as surrendered".

For tens of thousands, there could never be escape. True, some of the top brass, as well as some police, shipped out to safer ground, leaving the men to face the wreckage and the flames alone. Chuikov himself is said to have requested several times to remove his headquarters to the safety of the other bank, but the general had no choice. His orders were to lead the soldiers by example. He had a relatively free hand over tactics, and the promise of daily replacements of men, but there would be no going back. The troops who disembarked at Stalingrad had no option except to fight. One sanction, which Chuikov was never ashamed to use, was the threat of a bullet in the back. The discipline the general maintained was savage even by the standards of Zhukov's Red Army. But the Volga river, steaming from the heat of German shells, was a barrier more deadly than any secret police line. Just over half a million troops were massed for Stalingrad's defence in July 1942. Well over 300,000 of these would die.

The physical toll defies imagination. The day-to-day contortions on their own wore the men down; it was not just the bombing, the unrelenting noise, the dust, flame, cold and darkness. The city's defenders relied entirely on the river boats to deliver supplies. As these began to fail, soldiers turned into scavengers, taking the boots, the guns and even writing paper from corpses. The reek of decayed flesh mingled with the hot metal and sweat. There was little enough clean water in the shelters where soldiers huddled at night, so washing was out of the question. Lice, always a problem, at the front, infested clothing, gloves, bedding and the men's own matted hair. Unlike the rats and birds that also moved among the ruins, these vermin were not even good to eat.

[...] "I cannot understand how men can survive such a hell", a pilot in the Luftwaffe wrote home. "Yet the Russians sit tight in the ruins, and holes and cellars, and a chaos of steel skeletons which used to be factories." "The Russians are not men, but some kind of cast-iron creatures", another German concluded. This war outrage speaking, the voice of shock when victory was neither swift nor cheap. But until November, Paulus's men could still believe that they would beat the Slavic devils, crushing them as they had done for seventeen months. Their German rearguard would support them, their planes deliver vital food, rescue the wounded. As their thermometer dropped and the nights grew longer, however, it was the Red Army, and not the invader, that would take the initiative.

The ruins of Stalingrad were the icon of Red Army stoicism, but it was not within the city itself that the outcome of that winter's long campaign would be decided. Chuikov's 62<sup>nd</sup> Army surely earned the honour of the title "guards", but it was planning, not merely endurance, that would save the Soviet cause. In November 1942, a massive operation, codename Uranus, was set in train. Its aim was to encircle Paulus's trapped 6<sup>th</sup> Army, cutting off its retreat from the city. As Soviet and German troops duelled over rust and rotting bricks, more than a million men were gathering beyond their horizon. Armies were brought only for the signal to move out across the steppe.

It would not have consoled the city's defenders, but life was hardly easy for the divisions that converged on the city from bases to the north and east. Supply problems would dog them, too, including shortages of winter clothing. Men died of frostbite and hypothermia before they ever reached the front. But the operation, which began on 19 November, was a swift and complete success.