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Review of "Stalingrad Lives: Stories of Combat and Survival" by Ian Garner

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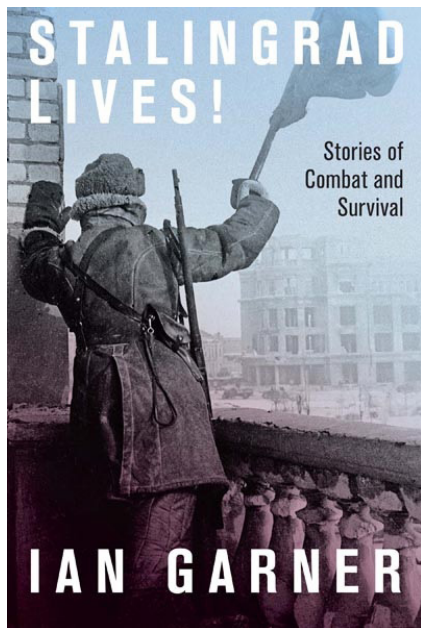
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Ian Garner. *Stalingrad Lives: Stories of Combat and Survival*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022. Pp. xi + 315.

Stalingrad looms large in any history of the Second World War and continues to exert a powerful influence on the collective memory of the conflict. Yet, in the West, memory of the battle for the city on the Volga River is, by in large, dominated by the German experience and refracted through the prism of the Cold War. Ian Garner, in *Stalingrad Lives: Stories of Combat and Survival*, endeavors to show how writers constructed the Soviet story of the Battle of Stalingrad during the fighting to understand how it is remembered in Russia, as well as in other former Soviet republics, such as Ukraine. He challenges the reader to not dismiss the wartime writing of Soviet reporters as mere propaganda but recognise it as true literature. This book helps explain why the myth of Stalingrad remains so powerful, especially in Russia, even three decades after the collapse of the Soviet state.

Stalingrad Lives (or *Stalingrad Lives!* as the title is punctuated on the cover to clarify “lives” is a verb and not a noun as well as to convey the staccato emphasis of the slogan that was repeated in Soviet newspapers across the Soviet Union during the battle) is an unusual book. It is a blend of history, literary analysis and translation. Garner sets out to “create an immersive sense of what it felt like to read about Stalingrad day-by-day in 1942-43” (p. 49). Consequently, he combed through all the issues of the main Soviet newspapers from the period and selected representative texts about the fighting. Nearly all the pieces – whether by well-known authors like Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasile Grossman or almost forgotten writers like Evgeny Kriger and Boris Ploevoy – are translated into English for the first time. Garner uses these texts, framed within historical context and literary commentary, to explore how a host of Soviet writers, in good communist fashion, collectively penned a grand Russian epic line by line, story by story across a plethora of Soviet publications over a period of six bloody months laying the foundation of the myth of Stalingrad. This narrative, however, largely excluded the coercive nature of the Soviet regime as well as “women, people of colour, and other non-Russians” (p. 45).

The introduction delves into the combination of long-established Russian and revolutionary Soviet literary styles that informed the



writing of the journalists who were mobilised to support the Soviet war effort by producing propaganda to inspire the Soviet peoples. Garner argues Soviet Social Realism, oft maligned as pedantic and false, was actually a powerful creative tool in the hands of Soviet propagandists. He goes on to explain the concept of *podvig* in Russian culture. This untranslatable Russian word rooted in the lives of medieval Russian Orthodox saints denotes a “deed of great import” usually requiring the death of the holy figure (p. 16). The *podvig* became the central focus of the myth of Stalingrad, which focused on the resurrection of the nation through a miraculous, bloody victory. Garner also underlines the importance of the Soviet

adoption of sloganeering as “a means to quickly thrust narratives toward the epic” (p. 31). Leaning on traditional cultural tropes while employing modern mass communication allowed Soviet journalists to quickly and effectively convey big ideas to readers in the limited space available in newspapers. These “micro-fictions” (p. 23) cumulatively created an epic worthy of Leo Tolstoy or Fyodor Dostoevsky.

The remainder of the book is divided into five chapters. The first four chapters cover roughly a month and a half of the fighting between late-August 1942 and early February 1943 and have a thematic topic: Idyll and Annihilation; Torment; Resurrection; and Forward, Life. Garner begins each with some history explaining the situation of the battle for Stalingrad during that period before then moving on to insightful biography of the Soviet writers and literary explorations of the translated pieces in the chapter. The wartime writings follow in chronological order as they would have appeared in the publications of the day. The last chapter, Utopian Lives, acts as a kind of epilogue featuring a pair of post-war pieces written decades after the end of the fighting at Stalingrad. He argues Soviet memory of the epic battle became bifurcated between popular sentiments and the regime’s narrative.

The resulting narrative in *Stalingrad Lives* makes for fascinating reading. The stories Garner selected are powerful and show of the literary skills of a generation of Soviet writers from all walks of life. The translations are well-done and engaging. Readers who are unfamiliar with Russian and Soviet literature will not feel lost because the author carefully explains themes, tropes and styles found in the writings that follow in each chapter. Each group of writings builds on the next. The reader really does get a feel for what it was like to read about Stalingrad as the battle unfolded in the broadsheets of the time.

Garner's work is part of a wider historiographical debate among historians about why the Soviet population sacrificed so much to defeat the Nazi menace. The simple, and unsatisfying, explanation is the Soviet regime used extreme coercion to compel its citizens to fight on the front and work on the home front or face a firing squad. Claims about popular Soviet enthusiasm for the war effort are dismissed as wartime propaganda and historians who repeat them as naïve. In rebuttal, *Stalingrad Lives* demonstrates that in the midst of the despair of the Eastern Front, Soviet propagandists produced nuanced and moving prose capable of motivating readers to self-sacrifice to accomplish a national *podvig*. While Communist Party coercion was ever-present, so too was grassroots Soviet patriotism. Therefore, as Wendy Goldman and Donald Filtzer recently argue in *Fortress Dark and Stern: The Soviet Home Front during World War II*,¹ the Soviet war effort cannot be truly understood without recognising the popular support among Soviet citizens for the "Great Patriotic War."

Stalingrad Lives does an admirable job showing how Soviet propaganda shaped the way readers understood the battle of Stalingrad and how survivors later framed their experiences. A textbook case of how to do serious cultural history, which would benefit being assigned in graduate classes. Additionally, the book is just a thoroughly good read. Finally, at a time when Stalingrad is constantly being invoked in commentary about the war in Ukraine, Garner offers insights into how Russia and Ukraine both are trying to harness the Soviet narrative of the Second World War against each other.

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¹ Wendy Goldman and Donald Filtzer, *Dark and Stern: The Soviet Home Front during World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).