

The Round Tablette

Founding Editor: James W. Gerber, MD (1951–2009)

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Welcome to the January meeting of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight's speaker is Texas A&M University Professor Roger R. Reese, author of *Why Stalin's Soldiers Fought: The Red Army's Military Effectiveness in World War II*. He will be joined by Russian veterans who will tell of their struggles along the Russo-German front.

In the last thirty years military history has moved beyond the analysis of battles and generals to include topics such as environment, gender, culture, and their effect on the fighting capabilities of a nation. There has also been a shifting of emphasis away from the “top down” approach to military history toward the motivations and life of the individual soldier as they fought their war. Discerning an individual infantryman's experience has inherent difficulties, among them, level of literacy, political beliefs, and – survival to tell the tale. Oral histories, either written during or shortly after a conflict provide some insight, but there is the problem of self-censorship. Some of the encounters on a battlefield are too fantastical for a civilian to believe, or are glossed over for the sake of propriety. Then there are the constraints of living in a repressive society, such as the Soviet Union, where any deviation from the Communist Party hagiography of the Great Patriotic War could be detrimental to the individual. Oral histories written decades after the event should be looked at with an even more skeptical eye, not that they are not useful, but the passage of time provides more gloss to the truth.

A simple definition of military effectiveness is the willingness and ability of a military force to impose its will on an enemy (Reese, 4). The military effectiveness of the Red Army in World War II can be an elusive thing to gauge. For instance, if an historian goes by the first six months of *Operation Barbarossa*, in 1941, where the *Wehrmacht* had victory upon victory and captured over three million Soviet soldiers; the Red Army appeared extremely ineffective. However, if an historian only goes by the ultimate outcome of the war then, of course, the

Soviet military was highly effective. It was determinative in the defeat of the Third Reich. Victory is not always the truest test or definition of effectiveness. Attrition can have a huge impact on a country's army, and victory can just come down to a numbers game: whoever has the most stuff or the most people standing — wins. Luck is not a measurable factor in determining military success. Still, the Red Army had the luck (and curse) of both geography and climate working on their side as, in 1941-1942, they re-grouped to defeat the German invaders.

The defeated Germans worked industriously throughout most of the post-war era to convince the anti-Communist west that if only they had had more divisions they would have defeated the Soviets or the Western Allies. The US Army interviews with defeated German Generals and the US Army Center for Military History analyses of the performance of the *Wehrmacht* - analyses written by the defeated Generals in question, were key to building this myth. It was popular because, in the Cold War era, it helped make the Soviet Army appear more beatable. That it made the Germans look better than they were was unfortunate for the development of US Army doctrine.

To the Western observer, looking through the prism of anti-Communism or Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, the very notion of fighting for the “evil empire” of the Soviet Union was unfathomable, but millions fought and died. The reasons why the common Soviet soldiers fought are quite familiar to the United States “greatest generation”, their country was attacked. The Soviet Union's “Pearl Harbor” occurred in June 1941, not December. The impact of surprise was made even worse because of the 1939 Non-Aggression Pact with Hitler's Germany.

Soviet propaganda focused on hatred for and revenge upon Germany, but there not much prodding needed. As each village, town, or city was destroyed and its inhabitants were slaughtered, vengeance became a part of their patriotism. For the average Russian it did not matter who their leader was, the Third Reich had invaded their homeland, destroyed their cities and fields, and killed their families, friends, and neighbors, so they would have to pay. Much as with the North Vietnamese in

If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

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their war with the United States, the Russian Army endured high casualties, supply problems, shortages of food and equipment, and questionable training, but they had, as a force, the single-minded goal to defeat Germany, and sometimes single-mindedness is all an army needs to be effective.

Further Readings:

Roger R. Reese, *Why Stalin's Soldiers Fought: The Red Army's Military Effectiveness in World War II* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2011).

Mansur Abdulin, *Red Road from Stalingrad: Recollections of a Soviet Infantryman* (South Yorkshire, U.K.: Pen & Sword Books, 2005)

Vasiliy Krysov, *Panzer Destroyer: Memoirs of a Red Army Tank Commander* (South Yorkshire, U.K.: Pen & Sword Books, 2010).

Nikolai Litvin, *800 Days on the Eastern Front: A Russian Soldier Remembers World War II* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2007).

Alexander V. Pyl'cyn, *Penalty Strike: The Memoirs of a Red Army Penal Company, 1943-45* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2009).

Isaak Kobylanskiy, *From Stalingrad to Pillau: A Red Army Artillery Officer Remembers the Great Patriotic War* (Modern War Studies) (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008).

Reina Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

Announcements:

Twin Cities Civil War Round Table -
Jan. 19, 2016 – *Which "Gettysburg of the West"?* -
www.tccwrt.com - info@tccwrt.com
St Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - Jan. 25,
2016 – *Anglo-American Relations* - 715-386-1268 –
rossandhaines@comcast.net
Rochester WWII History Round Table –
507-280-9970; www.w2roundtable-rochester.org
Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000
Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345, 320-616-6050,
<http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>
Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - crazyjerry45@hotmail.com - 651-338-2717
CAF - Commemorative Air Force - www.cafmn.org 651-455-6942
Minnesota Air Guard Museum - www.mnangmuseum.org 612-713-2523
Friends of Ft. Snelling, www.fortsnelling.org
Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN,
320-564-6644, <http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>.
World Without Genocide, 651-695-7621, <http://www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/>
Airshow - Eden Prairie - 16-17 July 2016
www.wotn.org 952-746-6100
Fort Snelling Civil War Weekend, Aug. 2016
Military History Book Club, Har Mar Barnes &
Noble: 27 Jan. Dalrymple, *Return of a King* -

See our programs on YouTube at <http://youtube.com/w2hrt>

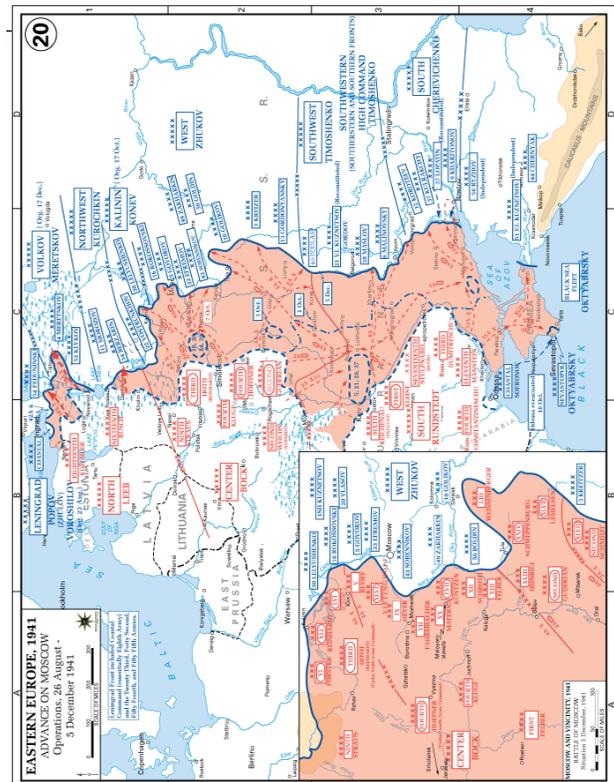
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We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

Round Table Schedule 2016

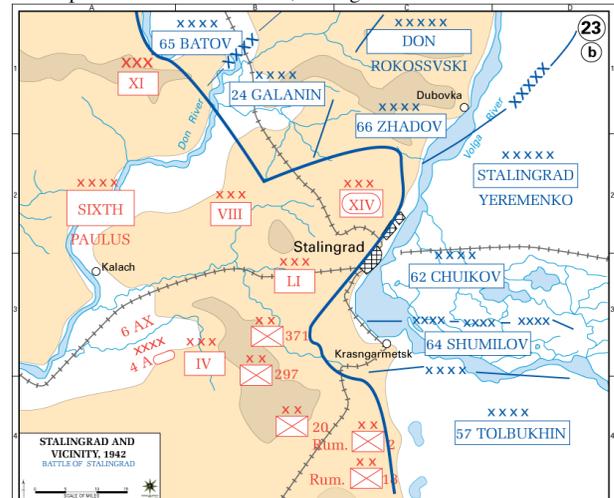
11 Feb. Liberation of Concentration Camps
10 Mar. From OSS to CIA
24 Mar. Birth of New Age of War
14 Apr. Operation Dragoon/Anvil
28 Apr. OSS Maritime Units — First SEALs
12 May Start of Cold War



USMA Atlas, WWIIEurope20.gif Advance on Moscow, 1941



Russiopedia: Great Patriotic War, Stalingrad



USMA Atlas, WWIIEurope23.gif Battle of Stalingrad