
Introduction

History is a product of the time in which it is written. This should not surprise us since each generation has its own interpretation of the past, which is easily impacted by the events of the present. Writing the history of the Nazi-Soviet War in the 2020s against the backdrop of resurgent warfare in Eastern Europe – war that draws so directly from interpretations (many of which are disputed) of the period 1941–1945 – makes our task unusually complex but all the more important. The temptation to use and abuse history is nothing new, but amid an active information war the value of first-rate scholarship and established expertise cannot be overestimated. To that end, I am deeply appreciative for the time and support of so many leading scholars.

If the Cambridge Companion series imagines a non-professional audience, predominately those unfamiliar with a period, it is perhaps important to frame what this volume is and is not. The *Cambridge Companion to the Nazi-Soviet War* is at its core a military history because the conflict is the common denominator that cannot be separated from the events. This need not be controversial, since the best military histories today, as reflected in this volume, defy narrow categorisation and embrace the diversity of the humanities. Scholarly military histories are not the patriotic pulp that dominates a percentage of the literature in the field, but every academic discourse confronts popular challenges, which only underwrite the importance of corrective, evidence-based studies. The Nazi-Soviet War is a case in point. The ideological nature of the conflict and enduring divisions that resulted from its conclusion shaped

decades of literature, with many partisan authors and institutions fighting a paper war over its representation. In the early post-war decades, the quality of many publications was dubious – and sometimes fanciful – but the end of the Cold War proved an intellectual renaissance. Long-standing tensions disappeared, while the opening of former Soviet and Eastern European archives provided an abundance of new evidence to correct and confirm past narratives.

Beyond the challenge of agenda-driven narratives, the early histories of the Nazi-Soviet War also suffered from being one-dimensionally focused on the military campaign. This is hardly surprising since the centrality of the ‘battle narrative’ predominated throughout the military history genre. With only a few exceptions, this narrowly ‘operational’ focus shaped western accounts of the Nazi-Soviet War until the 1990s and continues to dominate the field in Russian-language literature today. When researched and well-written, the battle narrative certainly has its place in military history, but it is inadequate for identifying context and causality in warfare. Indeed, because of what it historically ignored, it inadvertently (and incorrectly) attributed an undue importance to generals and armies when explaining events. Not surprisingly, therefore, the intellectual tradition of framing history through ‘great men’ has also pervaded military history, and the Nazi-Soviet War is no exception. The centrality of Hitler and Stalin, as well as their leading generals, dominates the ‘top-down’ perspective of the war, but this is slowly changing as increasingly more institutional, cultural, and social research into the war is conducted. This reflects the changes in military history from the late twentieth century towards a more philosophically diverse and methodologically rich discourse that is sometimes called ‘new military history’ or ‘war and society’. This has redefined the field from narrowly dogmatic operational histories to a truly interdisciplinary study of the phenomenon of war. It is this intellectual evolution that informs our history of the Nazi-Soviet War. As Stephen Morillo has asserted, ‘many contemporary military historians have begun to examine these universalist assumptions, and an alternative view has emerged that places military decisions and systems in their social and cultural context, and then tries to assess them in their own historicized terms’.¹ In layman terms, military histories have increasingly drawn upon a far wider disciplinary lens. The possibilities granted by exploring war

through political, sociological, economic, environmental, intellectual, and psychological contexts have transformed the field and enriched our understandings. Many of these new perspectives have shaped the work of this volume's author base, and while no claim is made to fundamentally rewrite the Nazi-Soviet War, it is the most authoritative and wide-ranging synthesis available.

There are seven conceptual themes to this book, subdivided into twenty chapters. Capturing the vast dimensions of the Nazi-Soviet War is a challenge for any study, and the size constraints imposed by a volume for the Cambridge Companion series require some hard choices to be made. This book cannot claim to have covered every subject of relevance, but it does capture many of the most important. The big picture of the war emerges, and it is one that equally considers both the German and Soviet perspectives, as well as their main allies.

Given the space constraints, as well as an anticipated undergraduate readership, contributors were recommended to limit their citation to more essential texts (as opposed to highly specific studies or archival references) and, where possible, to preference English-language sources. This is not to suggest the contents of these chapters are not overwhelmingly informed by a deep familiarity with the German and/or Russian literature, as well as past archival research – every contributor's publication history speaks to this. The concept here is to provide useful further readings for newcomers to the field, which are readily accessible to them both physically and linguistically.

Part I deals with pre-war German and Soviet relations, especially as conceived by Hitler and Stalin in the years immediately preceding Operation Barbarossa. While the ideological divide shaped the conflict, it belies the complexities of the relationship, which from the 1920s to the early 1930s included an important period of intensive military exchange and cooperation. Part II considers the standing of the German Wehrmacht and Soviet Red Army, both as organisational institutions built and managed from above but also as organic societies of men (and in the Soviet case also women), whose motivation and upkeep are equally important to their survival and endurance. Part III is the longest section of the book, taking a chronological look at the major German and Soviet campaigns of the war from 1941 to 1945. Barbarossa, Stalingrad, Kursk, Leningrad, Bagration, and Berlin are by

no means the only campaigns of the war, but they are the best known and each meaningfully represents the conflict in its period. Part IV explores the parallel wars each side waged against civilian populations, domestically or foreign. While the scale of the violence and number of victims varied between them, it was their willingness to target non-combatants that epitomised German and Soviet methods. Part V is devoted to the colossal social, cultural, and economic effort of both the German and Soviet societies to maintain their respective war efforts. In a conflict that was existential for both sides, the mobilisation was total and militarisation of the home fronts soon blurred the distinction between civilian and soldier. Part VI situates the Nazi-Soviet War in a transnational context by illuminating the significance of political, economic, and direct military aid through both Allied and Axis countries. The Nazi-Soviet conflict was by no means limited to Central and Eastern Europe; global resources sustained it, each alliance configuration was contingent upon it, and more than thirty nationalities directly participated in the fighting,² which in the context of a world war meant the repercussions were truly universal. Part VII traces the conflict's fraught memory politics and politicised history of commemoration through the past eighty years. Recognising the rupture in national narratives that 1941–1945 represents, the power that this period exerts is as cautionary in its terrible cost as it is unifying in its defiance of imagined tyranny and violence.

Clearly, this short volume attempts a good deal, but its brevity is also its strength. The Nazi-Soviet War is the largest-scale conflict ever fought. More than thirty million people died in the period 1941–1945 (soldiers and civilians), and many times that number experienced its horror. If the devil is in the details, this volume is merely an introduction. It is a primer, not only for the events themselves but for the scholarship that shapes the field. While the sources that constitute each chapter will point to their own specialised literature, the volume distinguishes itself in a number of ways from comparable literature.

First, this study is a delicate balancing act, representing each side of the conflict in both subject matter and expertise. Histories of the Nazi-Soviet War are overwhelmingly written from one side or the other, and even those that purport to represent both sides seldom have truly equal representation or equal expertise in that representation. This is not

a criticism of past works; it is simply a comment on the mountain of primary and secondary material pertaining to each side, as well as the obvious language barriers. Yet for these reasons an anthology of the Nazi-Soviet War probably makes the most sense for grappling evenly with the vast scale of the conflict.

Second, it cannot be lost on any of the contributors in preparing their chapters, or presumedly the readers of this book, that it has been produced in the era of what Chancellor Olaf Scholz determined to be a *Zeitenwende* – an historic turning point – in German and European history. It was only in 2016, in the preface to Evan Mawdsley's majestic *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War 1941–1945*, that Professor Hew Strachan suggested what the book 'tells us about modern war and its lessons has also lost immediacy'. Indeed, Strachan concluded that the historic departure from high-intensity, industrialised warfare 'may be increasingly remote from current perspectives on war, at least within Europe', but that this fact 'is no reason to forget it'.³ Strachan was not wrong at the time, but such analysis illustrates how we view and what we draw from the past. It goes without saying that the Nazi-Soviet War looks alarmingly different today. The intractable east-west divide has dashed the hopes of a united post-Cold War world, while in many respects, the reality of modern warfare in the 2020s looks decidedly less modern. For all that has changed, the Russo-Ukrainian War suggests remarkable continuity with its 1941–1945 predecessor: the aggressor seeks the political and cultural elimination of the rival state, the war quickly transitioned from a blitz campaign to costly attritional fighting, it is sustained by divergent political alliances, its justification reinforces competing worldviews, it is framed by irreconcilable territorial claims, it is underwritten by an increasingly global arms race, the battlespace is marked by constant technical evolutions, and civilians have been purposefully and consistently targeted. The similarities were metaphorically illustrated when a Ukrainian volunteer group searching for recent war dead reported, 'When you dig into a trench you find a trench from World War II.' Not surprisingly, they have also recovered soldiers from the Nazi-Soviet War in the same places they are searching.⁴ Of course, analogies with the past only extend so far, but given the frightening realities of the Nazi-Soviet War, any parallels with the war in Europe today are a sobering proposition and a reminder of what historical study offers us.