

HELLBECK, Jochen. *Die Stalingrad-Protokolle, Sowjetische Augenzeugen berichten aus der Schlacht*. S. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 2013. 608 pp.

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During the struggle for surviving the German invasion, the Soviet authorities created a commission of historians, with the aim of collect the most valuable documentation and be able, later to write the history of the “Great Patriotic War”. Historians went to the front to collect and archive the voices of the protagonists: commanders, officers, soldiers, nurses, civilians, etc. This book represents the first output of this huge work, after seventy years.

The work of Hellbeck is offering us a first insight in the documentation collected by the Soviet historical commission. Thousands of interviews were steno typed during the war and then hidden in the archives until recent years. This book offers us a sample of this documentation, focusing on the epic battle that took place in Stalingrad, between the summer and the winter of 1942-43.

Before getting into the sources, an introduction of around 100 pages welcome the reader. It gives a clear and detailed picture not only of the battle, but also of the context, the antecedents and the consequences. This general view did not limit to the military and political aspects, but goes beyond, facing the cultural and symbolical meanings of Stalingrad, its history and its role for both strategic and ideological values. Stalingrad is in the crossroad of the Russian campaign. Short before, Stalin ordered not to leave a single meter to the enemy, after the end of the siege, the fate of the war took another course. Hellbeck goes through the multifaceted history of the battle in a clear and articulated text, with punctual reference to the current stand of research while introducing the new perspectives allowed by the new sources he is presenting. A very useful discourse on the cultural peculiarity of the Red Army and the use of political propaganda and agitators in it, put the reader in the right perspective to fully evaluate the sources. Some final sub-chapters introduced the history of the commission that collected the sources, their political and scientific aims and the way in which the sources are organized in the book. In the history of the commission, the figure of the historian Isaak Minz emerges as the project creator, even if the actual direction was given to a communist party-functionary. The role of Minz is also stressed in the conclusions, as the one that mostly struggled to publish some results from the commission’s protocols. As the author stresses, those sources are mostly to be intended as an instrument to understand the cultural aspects of war, the human factor and, not the least, the importance that political agitation and ideological training had in the red army.

The first chapter opens with the evocative title “Der Soldatischen Choir”. Here, the affidavits of many different actors have been cut and paste, to recreate the impression of a round table, with the witnesses telling their stories about the battle. Even if it takes away the integrity of the sources, the result is a pleasant reading that gives an effective insight on the multifaceted mosaic of people and stories around the main event. Some specific stories have been isolated for their exemplar interest, like the



memory of Agrafena Posdnjakowa, a civilian, the only person interviewed that actually lived in the city during the German occupation. Also the episode of the capture of Generalfeldmarshall von Paulus deserved, correctly, a voice outside the choir. The introductions to the sources are generally well done, giving a good context and anticipating some of the thoughts that will result from the texts. It must be observed that putting the references at the end of the book may bother the reader avid to check any detail, but it allows a more focused attention on the text. As comparison, an abstract of a reportage by the soldier and writer Vasily Grossmann, is part of this chapter. Besides the historical commission, Grossmann, fighting in Stalingrad, also had some talks and interviews with witnesses, in order to write a reportage and, after the war, a narrative of the “Great Patriotic War”.

It follows a chapter (*Neun Erzählungen vom Krieg*), in which single witnesses are introduced, together with large extracts of their affidavit. The choice was to overview different kind of people considering both rank and education. Starting from the first witness, the commander of the forces in Stalingrad, General Tschuikow, we can step down the ranks to the simple “Rotarmist”, passing by a 22 years old nurse, a teacher of history fighting as corporal and, to underline the importance of politics in war, the expert of German propaganda. The choice seems appropriated to follow the line of the book, which seems the creation of a mosaic-sample of the variety and the peculiarity of this sources.

A final chapter (*Die Deutschen sprechen*), is devoted to the voices of the enemy. Here, the author introduces the partial transcriptions of the hearings of German prisoners by the Russians. As methodological note, he advises that the hearings should not be interpreted as actually representing the mood or the feeling of the prisoners. Instead, he argues that those hearings let us know what kind of information the Russians wanted from the prisoners and considered important. As final document, in this chapter, we find some extracts from a diary of a German fallen, that was collected by a Russian soldiers and added to the documents of the commission.

The voice of the Germans leads to the conclusions (*Krieg und Frieden*). Here, the author traces some parallel. The first concerns Tolstoj’s book “War and Peace” and the renewed fortune it had during World War II. Then, the author moves to Vasily Grossmann and its attempt to create a narrative of this new war. Grossmann efforts, although different from the ones of the historical commission, moved through a parallel way and faced a similar misfortune. Altogether, the narratives of World War II, both the subjective of Grossmann and the objective by Mintze and his commission, had to struggle because of the post-war political order and the raising of Stalin’s cult of personality. Both had to face a growing anti-Semitism too. The conclusions, then focus on the cultural significance of a narrative of war in Russia during and after the conflict and how political context prevented the birth of both subjective and historical analysis in which the soldiers’ voice could have a place.

In conclusion, the book of Hellbeck provides an interesting insight in this new collection of sources. Far from being a collection of selected and edited sources, this book tells the story of how the sources were collected and what was the political background behind the works of the historical commission of Mintze and its post-war misfortune. The selection of the sources and the way of presenting them seems appropriate and realize a good compromise between a pleasant reading and scientific accuracy. The long introduction and the texts presenting chapters and sources provide an efficient background for the reader and shows the multifaceted problematic issues raised by the sources and by the history of the war in Russia as well. As final observation, this book can be considered a well written handbook not only for a better

knowledge of the cultural history of World War II in Russia, but also a general framework to evaluate and understand this very peculiar kind of sources. It also raises cultural questions that sometimes are missing in the military history. To conclude, this book is strongly suggested to anyone interested in contemporary military history. An English translation would be more than welcome, to reach a wider public.