

**Absolute War. Soviet Russia in the Second World War. By Chris Bellamy. Macmillan, 2007. Pp. xxix + 813.**

Reviewed by Mark Harrison.

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In some places, World War II is still going on. Russians versus Chechens; Eastern versus Western Ukraine; Serbs versus just about everyone else; Estonians versus Russia over a Red Army war memorial; Jaroslaw Kaczynski versus Angela Merkel over the war dead lost from Poland's voting strength at Strasbourg; "Two world wars and one world cup," still sung when England's youth meets Germany's on the battlefield of sport.

The first half of the twentieth century contained too much history; it overflowed, and the spillovers still lie on the surface, ready to be ignited wherever nation builders and nationalist adventurers see the prospect of turning a political profit.

Nowhere more twistedly, perhaps, than in Russia, where extreme nationalists lionize the man who killed more Russians than anyone else in the last century: Hitler, not Stalin. (Hitler may have killed a lot of Russians, but *proportionally* he killed more Jews, and that is why they love him.) If World War II was truly the pivotal event of world history in the twentieth century, its outcome was decided largely in Russia: the Russians played the greatest part in the epic struggle that ended Hitler's ambitions.

Hitler wanted a colonial empire in Europe, stretching to the Urals, where German firms and farms would produce food and materials with a downsized workforce of hungry slaves to feed German industry and the German workers; in exchange, German settlers would buy the products of the Reich. To achieve that harmonious arrangement Hitler intended to reduce the population of the Ukraine and European Russia by killing millions of Jews and imposing famine on the rest so as to drive tens of millions, in fact all who ate food and did not produce it, into Asia. It was a war of extermination.

The Red Army stood in his way. Stalin is often charged with personal responsibility for a great intelligence failure: despite numerous warnings, he allowed Hitler to take the Red Army by surprise on the morning of June 22, 1941. In *Absolute War*, Chris Bellamy disputes this view. "Stalin had been fooled," he writes (p. 161), but it was "a failure of political interpretation"—of Hitler's true intentions—not a failure of intelligence. "The real and very big intelligence failure was that of the Germans—one of the two greatest in world history." Like the Japanese later the same year, "the Germans

catastrophically underestimated their opponent. And they, too, would face a terrible revenge.”

The scale of the war on the eastern front dwarfed that of the other theatres in the size of the opposing forces, the resources that they brought to bear, and the human cost; Soviet losses alone came to around 25 million premature deaths.

Chris Bellamy's book helps us to grasp this outcome in several ways. For one, it is a treatise on "absolute war": according to Clausewitz, once the decision for war has been made, there is no reason in principle for the generals to hold back reserves or ration effort over time, so war should tend to an absolute, instant clash of arms. What holds the generals back, and turns the dream of speedy victory into grinding attrition for years on end, is the practicalities, the human and physical frailties and "frictions" that impede the smooth execution of their battle plans.

From another perspective the book explores the resilience of an apparently weak tyrannical regime under annihilating attack by a powerful neighbour, its sources of resistance not easily grasped by intellectuals used to the conditions of more open or liberal societies. The unanticipated resistance to the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq is a recurring sub-theme.

Finally, Bellamy tells a story: a complex, swift-moving narrative that weaves together old and new facts and dispels some myths.

Why did Hitler so underestimate the resilience of the Red Army and Soviet society? Bellamy's story suggests that absolute war tends to become "people's war." While generals marshalled multi-million armies and faced each other along an organised front line, there unexpectedly arose large-scale guerrilla organisations, a kaleidoscope of shifting nationalisms, and an individual readiness for self-sacrifice that injected the flavour of suicide missions into conventional warfare.

The Soviet partisans, for example, continually destabilised the German rear; the Germans considered them to be bandits, and the fight against "banditry" behind the lines eventually acquired the same priority as fighting on the front. "It was particularly hard," Bellamy writes (p. 239), "for [General] Halder and his fellow German leaders, schooled in a world where people accepted the results of big battles, to come to terms with this kind of warfare."

Eventually they realised that they could win only with the support of the local population, which their own occupation policies made it everywhere difficult or impossible to gain. But they never made sense of the Soviet partisan commanders' willingness to take heavy losses (p. 480).

Not all the banditry was directed against the German occupiers. Bellamy uses the killing of the Red Army General Vatutin by Ukrainian

nationalists in 1944 to illustrate that “this was not a simple, symmetric contest between two great, conventional military forces. This was a complicated war, with nationalist guerrillas who had their own agendas ... The Russians, for all their talk of ‘liberation,’ were not always welcome back in the Ukraine” (p. 607).

Another aspect of “people’s war,” suicidal heroism could be found in the conventional forces too: two women snipers, surrounded near Novgorod in August 1942, “fired until they ran out of ammunition, then waited for the Germans to come forward. Then [they] blew themselves up with hand grenades, taking some of the enemy with them” (p. 489).

Like the war it describes, Bellamy’s book is vast and sprawling, yet still overflows. More than 800 pages and 1.2 kilogrammes require a strong wrist and fresh eyes. *Absolute War* has a saving grace: it is a compelling read. Bellamy combines the historian’s care for detail, including a multi-lingual bibliography and nearly 2,000 footnotes, with the journalist’s ability to bring detail to life. There has not been such a book since Alexander Werth published his *Russia at War* more than 40 years ago.

Werth had one advantage over Bellamy: he was there at the time. To Bellamy’s advantage is the collapse of the Soviet Union, which gave free speech to the survivors and opened up the Soviet state and party archives, revealing to plain sight things that Werth could not know: the true effects of Stalin’s prewar purges on the Red Army, who killed the Polish officers buried in the Katyn forest, Stalin’s depression in the early days of the war, and the scale of Red Army losses.

It is ironic, but also instructive, that the Soviet Union survived the fiercest onslaught ever launched by a modern industrial state, yet collapsed half a century later under its own weight.

Some scholars have maintained that the Soviet Union was always inherently fragile because it was not a “normal state.” A problem with this view is that “normality,” defined as democracy and the rule of law, has been normal only for a few regions for a short period of world history. By the standards of the rest, dictatorship and unfreedom have been the typical conditions of social life.

Stalin’s Russia maintained its own normality. Bellamy illustrates this with the story of “Buntovshchik,” the anti-Soviet pamphleteer of besieged Leningrad. Over 18 months the secret police checked the personal files and handwriting of more than 100,000 Leningraders. Painstaking police work, not terror, eventually got their man (p. 401). Even under bombardment and famine this was a functioning state. “The survival and resilience of Leningrad,” Bellamy tells us (p. 408), “mirrored that of the whole nation.”

Stalin’s Soviet Union was tougher than it ought to have been by normal standards. This was partly, for sure, because Stalin himself was immensely tough; for the rest of the story, there is *Absolute War*.