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### Book Review: Catherine Merridale. *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006

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Review by Kathleen Cunningham Guler

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The soldiers of the Soviet Union's Red Army did their best to forget the horrors of World War Two. Indeed, the country's leadership under Joseph Stalin tried to erase all negative aspects of the war, leaving only the celebrated victory over Nazi Germany for public knowledge. But the soldiers had an important tale to tell. In the book *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945*, historian Catherine Merridale digs beneath Stalinist propaganda to explore the personal side of the soldiers who fought. Her quest is to find the difference between the mythological heroic soldier generically called "Ivan" and the real soldier, the true character of those who suffered beyond imagination.

A highly respected, award-winning writer, Merridale is Professor of Contemporary History at Queen Mary University of London, focusing on the social, political and cultural history of modern Russia. The author employs documents from Soviet military and secret police archives that have opened only since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. In addition, she interviews surviving soldiers, as well as using diaries and letters. Merridale follows the soldiers' compelling personal stories through their journey from being thrust unprepared and headlong into war, through devastating battles, losses, hopes, dreams, triumphs, to going home to utter disappointment. Further, she cleanly knits together the complex social history of the Soviet Union's wartime soldiers into the context of communism's effects on Soviet society and the reality of Stalinism's brutality and hypocrisy.

Written in chronological order, *Ivan's War* discusses each stage of the army's evolution as its capabilities and attitudes changed from an ill-trained, ill-equipped and ill-led force with an initial dream of a swift, decisive win to a much more professionalized army with enough resolve and cohesiveness to defeat the Germans, driving them out of Russia and all the way back to Berlin. Merridale

achieves her greatest strength in addressing psychological themes related to the war's phases, some of which emerged over time while others continued to plague the army throughout the war and beyond.

Drawing from letters written home to families, the author describes that at the time the Soviet Union entered the war in 1941, soldiers fought in a "collective national trance," a belief that defending the motherland was a just cause (p. 99). However, this sense of righteousness was bombarded right from the beginning with relentless suffering, one theme that recurs throughout the book. Expected to fight brilliantly, the army could not fulfill this ideal due to numerous factors. Brief and inadequate training involved the use of facsimile wooden guns and cardboard tanks. Real weapons included antiquated rifles from the 1890s. Battle training was neglected in favor of spending hours each day listening to communist ideology. Food was neither enough nor nutritious, dangerously weakening soldiers on long marches across vast distances and making them susceptible to dysentery, typhus and other diseases. Horses were still the main power to pull lighter guns on a *tachanka*, the three-horse cart used in the civil war that followed the Bolshevik Revolution. Proper clothing, especially boots and winter coats, were in such short supply that men stripped any useful items from dead soldiers. Merridale tells of a man who checked corpses for boots, seeking out the most decomposed bodies so he could break off the legs—the boots were easier to remove from them.

Stalin's politics, which affected every aspect of life in the Soviet Union, contributed heavily to the army's problems. Besides ignoring the basic pragmatic needs of the army, he clamped an iron fist on crucial strategic maneuvers in order to maintain what he saw as socialist political correctness. In reality, he was jealously guarding against anything he thought could lead to outside influences, uprisings or anti-Soviet acts. His logic forbade the use of maps, considered secret and effectively blinding his army's movements. Soldiers were not allowed to develop any kind of rapport or trust with each other. Spied on, they were transferred from one unit to another to prevent conspiracies that might arise—that is, if the men survived the fighting long enough to be transferred. Camouflage was considered a sign of cowardice. Soldiers were only supposed to attack, never defend, forcing them to rush into battle with no strategy.

As massive numbers of the dead piled high, the theme of despair emerges. Stalin's propaganda machine spewed socialist ideology and kept

negative issues silent. Numbers of the dead were never released, meant to keep the human cost of the war from fomenting revolution. The *politruks*, the army's political officers, reported how well things were going—negative reports would guarantee their imprisonment or execution, having been blamed for not inspiring good efforts. As the dream of swift victory faded and as finding any suitable reason for fighting grew impossible, the psychological effect prompted thousands of men to desert or to suffer self-inflicted wounds, hoping to be sent to a field hospital, if there had been any. The government absolutely ignored the deteriorating mental condition of the troops.

With discipline crumbling and vast Soviet territory lost to the Germans, Stalin issued Order 227 on July 28, 1942. Its slogan “Not a step back!” represented a turning point. Anyone who deserted or mutilated himself would be shot or sent to a *shraf* unit, a penal battalion that conducted only the most dangerous missions. Fear, the emergent theme for the Red Army that the author next describes, accompanied despair. But, Merridale explains, in spite of an awareness that the army was coming to its last stand, a slow gathering of “rage and hatred” towards the Germans, coupled with new “skills and competence,” began to surface (p. 159). This gradual shift in attitude characterized the beginning of the army's professionalization. Commanders learned that trust between them and their soldiers helped morale and cohesiveness. Strategic maneuvers replaced old suicidal civil war tactics. Skills became more important than class or ethnicity. Meanwhile, Stalin had been enforcing a supreme effort to get tanks, guns and other equipment manufactured and delivered. Military aid came from the United States as well. Clothing and food improved, though they remained in short supply. Women were recruited, performing duties from conducting sniper missions to flying bomber runs.

A five-month long battle for the city of Stalingrad (known today as Volgograd) ended on February 2, 1943 in the first real decisive Soviet victory, reflecting the army's newfound strategy and resolve. From this point on, the Soviets began to regain large areas that the Germans had taken deep into Soviet territory since 1941. While marching westward, the soldiers discovered the depth of the Germans' horrendous scorched-earth destruction of European Russia and Ukraine, intensifying the “rage and hatred” Merridale previously noted. Again drawing from interviews, letters and diaries, she writes of pent-up hatred that exploded. By the time the army reached Eastern European countries such as East-Prussia and

Hungary on their march to capture Berlin, these men took out their hatred on anyone and anything. They stole and destroyed property at will. Of the atrocities, the horrendous number of rapes and killings were the worst. “The first rumors ... came out of Hungary ... Hungarian women and girls were locked into Soviet military headquarters ... and repeatedly raped” (p. 305). Anyone suspected of being German or having colluded with the Nazis was a target. This behavior was encouraged by the Stalinist government, deemed justifiable revenge and reparation for the cost of the war. In her analysis, the author sees the rampage as more than simply an outpouring of rage. The men also drew on the miseries of their own lives prior to the war, the deprivations of the war itself, and grief for the deaths of fellow soldiers. Drunkenness, a longstanding problem in Russian and Soviet society, worsened as a way to “kill the mind, to escape from the war without leaving one’s post” (p. 271). An interviewee reported on a wine cellar, “The floor was knee-deep in wine, and floating in it lay three drowned soldiers. They had used their submachine guns to make holes in the barrels ... having tasted [the wine, they] evidently could not stop drinking and became so intoxicated that they drowned in it” (p. 313).

The most compelling section of this book comes in the final chapters in which Merridale discusses the poignant fate of the soldiers following the end of the war. By this time some were addicted to war and could live no other way. Nor could they relate to their families—they had changed too much and could not talk of their experiences. Some, hoping to go home, were kept in Eastern Europe to maintain the Soviet-controlled sectors designated in the war’s settlement. Others were sent to the Far East theatre that was still in operation.

The soldiers who did make it home were hopeful of a utopian life that had been long promised by Soviet leaders. Letters and interviews portray a deep disappointment that in reality nothing had changed. Worst of all, Stalin took the main credit for the Soviet triumph. Staged victory parades rang hollow due to Stalin’s politicization of the war, calling the soldiers “the little screws and bolts in the great engine of his state” (p. 344).

Many of the truths of the Red Army’s life remain hidden. “The violence was on a scale that no one could have overlooked, and yet it disappeared from Soviet consciousness,” Merridale writes (p. 311). Her veterans also explain that they think they must still keep Soviet secrets, perhaps out of habit, perhaps from

fear. For the soldiers personally, they have indeed tried to forget, but most likely without success.

Although *Ivan's War* specifically addresses the Red Army soldier's plight, the insights, truths and realities about wartime suffering and psychological disorders are universal. Western readers will likely see a similarity between the Soviet Union's "Ivan" and the US army's "GI Joe," the draftee or enlisted man who started off fighting for the mythic, glorified patriotism that turned into the mud-slogging, bullet-riddled hell of reality. It is a difficult and sad story, but one that is still relevant and needs to have all of its most deeply buried aspects revealed.

Kathleen Guler is the author of the award-winning Macsen's Treasure series of four novels set in fifth century Britain, the fourth of which, *A Land Beyond Ravens*, won the 2010 Colorado Book Award for Historical Fiction. Drawing from her Welsh and Scottish heritage as well as a long background in history and literature to research her books, the author has also published numerous articles, essays, reviews and poems, is a member of the Historical Novel Society, holds a Master's Degree in History (Honors) from American Military University, and participates in various writing and academic groups focused on history. She is currently working on a new novel that involves Celtic raiders and nomadic Scythians in the fourth century BC.