

Commemorating Stalingrad

by Rachel Douglas

Feb. 3—Russia and the other countries that were parts of the Soviet Union have commemorated, during the past few days, the 70th anniversary of victory in the Battle of Stalingrad. Westerners, all too many of whom today either dismiss the Russians as a major strategic power, or seek to destroy it, would do well to pay attention to the importance the Russian leadership and public put on this anniversary of what all competent historians acknowledge as a vital turning point against the Hitler onslaught in World War II, which was won by almost unbelievable determination and sacrifice by the population of the U.S.S.R.

German Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus surrendered in Stalingrad on Jan. 31, 1943, and the remnants of his surrounded forces were taken prisoner on Feb. 2.

After five months of brutal, house-to-house fighting, their surrender brought an end to the farthest advance of the Wehrmacht into the Soviet Union. The order of Generalissimo Stalin for the fighting at Stalingrad was, “*Ni shagu nazad*”—“Not one step back.” The slogan for the battle was, “There is no land beyond the Volga.” The strategic city, now called Volgograd (but it officially resumed the name of Stalingrad for this week of commemoration), is situated on the western bank at the Volga Bend, where Russia’s mighty river turns westward, coming close to the Don River, before flowing back southeast into the Caspian Sea.

More than 2 million people were killed during the Battle of Stalingrad (Aug 23, 1942-Feb. 2, 1943). Russian national TV this week stated the figure as 2.5 million. An estimated 850,000 men of the invading German army were killed, wounded, or went missing. Of the over 1.15 million Soviet casualties, at least 40,000 were civilian deaths.

Changed the Course of History

The commemoration occasioned a Russian national TV news broadcast on Channel 1 two days ago, introduced by the anchorwoman saying, “Today in the

Kremlin, heroes were honored. Those invited to the Georgiyev Hall were people who changed the course of history.” The youngest of them are now in their late 80s, and most are over 90 years old. On Feb. 1, President Vladimir Putin received 300 of these veterans at the Kremlin. The broadcast showed him greeting a female veteran on her 90th birthday and reading aloud some recently discovered documentation of the 1942-43 heroic acts of a young officer, who turned out to be present—trembling at his advanced age, but on his feet and readily embracing today’s President of Russia.

On Feb. 2, Putin travelled to Stalingrad. He laid flowers at the famous Mother Russia (“The Motherland Calls”) monument on Mamayev Kurgan, a high point on the north side of the city, which changed hands several times during the battle. Mamayev Kurgan is the site of the grave of Marshal Vasili Chuykov, who as a general-lieutenant, led the Soviet 62nd Army at Stalingrad, neutralizing many of the invaders’ capabilities through his tactics of close-in fighting, called “hugging the enemy.” National television showed the skeleton of Pavlov’s House, a famous apartment building held by Soviet forces during the battle. It has been preserved as a memorial. Historic T-34 tanks were brought out of museums to roll through the streets of Stalingrad yesterday.

Among those taking note of the Stalingrad anniversary was the Russian-American Goodwill Association, whose director, W. George Krasnow, sent out a mailing on the importance of Americans paying homage to the Russian victory at Stalingrad. He quoted a column by Martin Sieff, who wrote in the *Baltimore Post-Examiner*’s online edition Feb. 2: “Communism is dead but Russian patriotism is not. And that is why in an era of growing differences and alienation between Russia and the United States, we need to remember the passionate intensity of that struggle, how much it contributed to our victory, too, and what it cost the Russian people. Russia remains a great, proud and militarily mighty nation that cannot be ignored. Global peace and security in the 21st century are impossible if we cannot cooperate with it. The Russian people cannot be ignored or underestimated.”

Russian TV today displayed a TASS release of Feb. 3, 1943, titled, “American press on the completion of the elimination of armed enemy forces at Stalingrad” and quoting the Associated Press headline: “Russians Win One of the Greatest Battles in History.”