



The Stalingrad Cauldron: Inside the Encirclement and Destruction of the 6th Army

By Frank Ellis

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Stalingrad. The city's name alone conjures images of desperate hand-to-hand fighting in ruined industrial plants and destroyed apartment blocks, snipers stalking their targets across the snow-filled urban landscape, and, ultimately, the long march into Soviet prison camps for survivors of the German 6th Army. Stalingrad, in much of Western historiography, is the turning point for German ambitions in the East and the start of the long, bloody slog back to Berlin. Frank Ellis' *The Stalingrad Cauldron: Inside the Encirclement and Destruction of the 6th Army* sheds new light on the famous battle while elucidating the truths behind our collective understanding and impressions.

The Stalingrad Cauldron is, in reality, more a collection of essays than a coherent narrative. As Ellis states in his introduction, "my study is more tactical and personal, more concerned with some of the lesser-known detail than with the bigger operational picture." Those looking for a comprehensive analysis of the battle from start to finish are best served looking elsewhere, like David Glantz's recent *Stalingrad Trilogy*. Ellis' work is immaculately sourced and researched, creating an in-depth analysis of life for the 6th Army, Soviet citizens inside the battle zone, and the fate of German prisoners after the battle.

He begins with an overview of the battle and the conditions facing the 6th Army. The problems the Germans faced as the battle wore on, he argues, had their genesis in the larger German campaign in the Soviet Union. Ellis explains that most German infantrymen arrived on the Volga River already malnourished, and the encirclement only reduced their already meager energy stores. When coupled with the weather, which Ellis meticulously plots, the impact non-battle influences had on the German failure is clear. He also includes a brief but insightful analysis of recent historiography and discussion of his sources.

Three previously unpublished war diaries or operational histories of the 16th Panzer Division, the 94th Infantry Division, and the 76th Berlin-Brandenburg Infantry Division follow the introduction. Written retrospectively by survivors, these archival finds present the attritional impact of intense urban combat on the encircled German army. For today's combat leaders, the war diaries elucidate the decision-making process and actions of a surrounded army facing logistical burnout and dwindling strength that is also battling the cold.

All three chapters repeatedly cite the German officer and NCO as critical in holding defensive positions and maintaining unit integrity during the battle, especially during retreats. Hauptmann (Captain) Rudolf Krell of the 94th Infantry Division remarks that "the initiative, the willingness to make decisions, and the skill and boldness of the junior leaders alongside the quality, endurance, and bravery of the troopers were now [in January 1943] more than ever decisive for the deployment of the forces and for the outcome of the fierce battles." These words could as easily have been written by American forces as well and serve as a reminder that the junior leaders are the backbone of all armies.

After the three war diaries, the focus on the minutiae of the battle takes center stage in the book. He begins with a chapter on the Soviet and German application of snipers in Stalingrad. His analysis calls into question the popular memory created by films like *Enemy at the Gates* and Soviet propaganda highlighting the sniper's success. While explaining the impact of a well-trained and employed sniper on the urban battlefield, Ellis argues that the German army was more successful than commonly thought in employing snipers. Using released NKVD interrogation documents and reading between the lines in war diaries and memoirs, Ellis synthesizes the role and impact of German and Soviet snipers in the battle. Furthermore, he debunks the Zaitsev-Konings duel at the center of *Enemy at the Gates*.

His next chapter focuses on the role of Soviet ethnic minorities, deserters, and prisoners of war who supported German efforts inside the encirclement. These men and women, numbering between 20,000 and 30,000, provided a large boost to the 6th Army. Their presence and assistance, as both support troops and as combatants, extended the lifespan of 6th Army and prolonged the battle immeasurably. It is a fascinating chapter on the role disaffected Soviets played in supporting the German war effort.

Ellis concludes his book with chapters on the role of intelligence operations during the battle, the experience of German prisoners in Soviet hands, and the case of Oberst (Colonel) Arthur Boje. The intelligence operations chapter has parallels to American line-crossing efforts in Korea and stay-behind operations like NATO's Gladio program in Europe. The chapter looks almost entirely at human intelligence, leaving an opening for further study in other intelligence disciplines and their place in the battle.

The fate of the men of 6th Army in Soviet hands serves as a reminder that even after surrender, the battle continued for many Germans, most of whom were too physically depleted to survive the movement to captivity and the conditions found there. The need for a prisoner of war code of conduct becomes apparent as one reads Oberst Boje's story. The chapter is based on his captivity narrative and released NKVD documents. It focuses on the role of Soviet intelligence and German collaboration in the Soviet war crimes trial process and eventually concludes with the release of the prisoners in the mid-1950s.

The Stalingrad Cauldron is a dense and heavy work full of rigid scholarship and new insights into the life and death of the 6th Army. This said, it is not a book for casual reading for uninitiated readers or to gain a greater sense of the battle, its causes, or ultimate impact. Works like David Glantz's *Stalingrad Trilogy* and Robert Citino's *Death of the Wehrmacht* place the battle in its context whereas Ellis narrows his scope to the often-overlooked areas of the battle and reexamines some of the better-known events using new primary source material. Ultimately, *The Stalingrad Cauldron* should be seen as a detailed companion to broader studies and narratives rather than a stand-alone source.