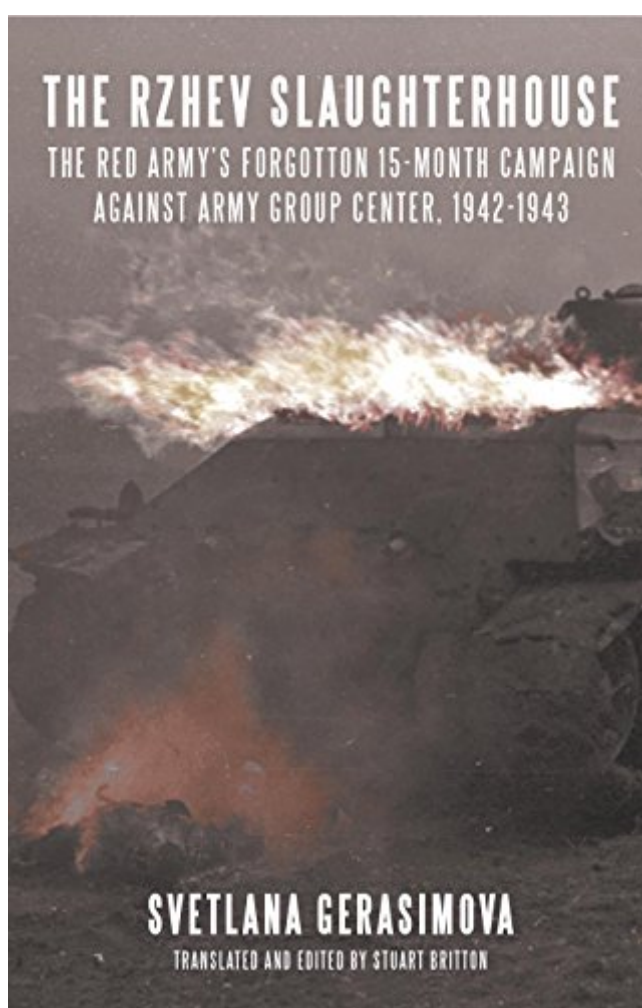


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# The Rzhev Slaughterhouse: The Red Army's Forgotten 15-month Campaign Against Army Group Center, 1942-1943



## Synopsis

Historians consider the Battle of Rzhev "one of the bloodiest in the history of the Great Patriotic War" and "Zhukov's greatest defeat". Veterans called this colossal battle, which continued for a total of 15 months, "the Rzhev slaughterhouse" or "the Massacre", while the German generals named this city "the cornerstone of the Eastern Front" and "the gateway to Berlin". By their territorial scale, number of participating troops, length and casualties, the military operations in the area of the Rzhev - Viaz'ma salient are not only comparable to the Stalingrad battle, but to a great extent surpass it. The total losses of the Red Army around Rzhev amounted to 2,000,000 men; the Wehrmacht's total losses are still unknown precisely to the present day. Why was one of the greatest battles of the Second World War consigned to oblivion in the Soviet Union? Why were the forces of the German Army Group Center in the Rzhev - Viaz'ma salient not encircled and destroyed? Whose fault is it that the German forces were able to withdraw from a pocket that was never fully sealed? Indeed, are there justifications for blaming this "lost victory" on G.K. Zhukov? In this book, which has been recognized in Russia as one of the best domestic studies of the Rzhev battle, answers to all these questions have been given. The author, Svetlana Gerasimova, has lived and worked amidst the still extant signs of this colossal battle, the tens of thousands of unmarked graves and the now silent bunkers and pillboxes, and has dedicated herself to the study of its history. Svetlana Aleksandrovna Gerasimova is a historian and museum official. After graduating from Leningrad State University with a history degree, she worked in the Urals as a middle school history teacher, before moving to Tver, where she taught a number of courses in history and local history, and about museum work and leading excursions in the Tver' School of Culture. She earned her Ph.D. in history from Tver State University in 2002. For more than 20 years, S.A. Gerasimova has been working in the Tver' State Consolidated Museum, and is the creator and co-creator of a many displays and exhibits in the branches of the Museum, and in municipal and institutional museums of the Tver' Oblast. Recent museum exhibits that she has created include "The Battle of Rzhev 1942-1943" and "The Fatal Forties – Toropets District in the Years of the Great Patriotic War." She has led approximately 20 historical and folklore-ethnographic expeditions in the area of Tver' Oblast and is the author of numerous articles in such journals as Voprosy istorii [Questions of History], Voennno-istoricheskii arkhiv [Military History Archive], Voennno-istoricheskii zhurnal [Journal of Military History] and Zhivaia starina [The Living Past], and of other publications. In 2009, she served as a featured consultant to a Russian NTV television documentary about the Battle of Rzhev, which quickly became controversial for its very frank discussion of the campaign.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

While a short book, it's very well researched and written. Due to it being a great loss the campaign was glossed over and covered up, only recently coming in view. Answers a lot of questions about the fighting on the eastern front in 1942.

excellent reference

Once i got passed the nonstandard wording the translator used, I found the book interesting since it covered a part of the war on the Eastern Front not very well covered in other books. I wish I could read Russian, i feel something was lost in the translation of the book. I would recommend any student of the Great Patriotic War, the Eastern Front to read this book, some interesting in sites.

This is a remarkable book. As a vivid reader of literature on WW II in general and on the Eastern Front in particular, I am always interested in new analysis and discussions that feature the battles on this front, especially coming from Russian historians. The main reason is that while the Western and other countries archives were analyzed in a great extent for different studies, the

Russian/Soviet archives still held the veil of secrecy. Future studies will probably benefit from this key information when they will be open to the public, clarifying some aspects of the struggle, not to mention some details of so-called "forgotten" battles (actually they are "covered lost battles").

Therefore, much of key information about WW II is still in Moscow. As a prelude to the main story, Mrs. Gherasimova outlines a different "battle" with the official Russian historians about the place, role, casualties and significance of the 15-month Battle of Rzhev in the context of the Great Patriotic War. The controversies and debates are restated throughout the book about all aspects of the operations involved. We can discover a silent clash between generations of historians, and between official perspective (much still anchored in the traditional Soviet-era view) and the new Russian scholars. Admitting that there is a real and time-consuming problem in solving all the aspects of this epic campaign author modestly claim that this book is a mere "skeleton" of an "unrecognized battle".

Moreover, author accused "those who keep sources classified" for possible mistakes and wrong assertions in the book. For the above reasons, at the end of the Introduction, the author asked a legitimate question "So, the Battle of Rzhev-is it a myth or a reality?" In the chapter I (only 9 pages) author described the formation of the salient, the importance for both sides, troops involved, fortifications and the formidable size of German lines of defense. Chapter II is dedicated to the First Rzhev-Viazma Offensive (8.01-20.04.1942), one of the largest operations on Eastern Front, which never received full and objective coverage from historians. With respect for the sides strength (page 28), I have some doubts (Soviets 688.000 men, 10.900 guns, 474 tanks vs. German 625.000 men, 11.000 guns and 354 tanks!), but the figures were extracted from latest edition Military encyclopedia, which explains many. Combat during operations Hannover and Seydlitz (May-July 1942) are described in chapter III (20 pages). These less known operations, showed the Wehrmacht effort (23 divisions involved out of 77 units in AGC) to mop up the rear of AGC. The second attempt to eradicate the salient was the First Rzhev-Sychevka Offensive (30 July-30 September 1942) fully described in chapter IV. In spite of trying to achieve the factor of surprise and to deploy overwhelming forces on the main axes of attacks on both fronts (Kalinin and Western), the Soviet offensive achieved only tactical successes (some attributed to the formation of blocking detachments and penal companies!) unable to achieve its final goal, sustaining almost 300.000 casualties. The famous Operation Mars - "Second Rzhev - Sychevka offensive" (25.11-20.12), in the book- is analyzed from both operational point of view and impact. I was particularly interested about the success of Solomatin's 1st Mech Corps in penetrating 20 to 25 km of the enemy's lines and the powerful reserves provided to the German forces, in contrast to those provided to Romanian 3rd Army at Stalingrad. Large portions of the chapter discussed the casualties of the Russian forces

(335.000 men), author stating that neither Glantz nor H.Grossman offered any figures for German casualties (p.122). It is true that D Glantz didn't mention the extent of the German casualties in his book, but in a subsequent article he wrote about 40.000 men. Chapter VI (22 pages) is dedicated to the liquidation of the Rzhev salient (2-31.03.1943), largely a pursuit operation, that cost about 140.000 Soviet casualties. Both sides actually benefited from these operations and Soviets eventually regained this much-disputed territory. A year earlier (1942) a German retreat from this region could have saved them from Stalingrad debacle - shortening the front and making some reserves available. Moreover, an attack launched in 1942 from this held Axis regions towards Moscow, still within German reach, would have a telling effect instead of an offensive in south. A major offensive in this area would therefore have given the Germans a far better chance to deal the Red Army a knockout blow than an operation in the south. The last chapter (Results of the battle) is the largest (36 pages), the most controversial and analytical. The debates from the beginning of the book are restated concerning both casualties and the place/significance of the battle. Author treated both issues presenting the perspectives different documents, comparative data from various versions. The discussions about casualties range from about 1 million to more than 2 million which make this battle one of the bloodiest in WW II, exceeding Battle of Stalingrad in many respects. On the other hand, German casualties still remain to be tabulated. Efforts were made to arrange some German cemeteries and much work was done by the search teams to bury to discover and bury the remains of the fallen heroes. Some stories are compelling and emotional. The importance of the Rzhev bulge in immobilize an increasing number of German divisions, the influence of the last offensives in sapping German 9th Army strength before its participation in Battle of Kursk were also discussed. Also, the question if this 15-month campaign is or not part of Battle of Moscow or it is an independent battle remains unanswered, largely because of official opposition. There are about 120+ photographs which do an excellent job at showing various actions, pieces of military equipment and the environment the battle took place in. After the main chapters 36 appendices are describing various Stavka and General Staff concerning matters of the combat operations and even appointments (dismisses) in the area of the salient. In addition to the excellent narrative, the author presents 8 quality colored maps showing the main operations described in the study. The book also includes 8 tables, an impressive 14-page Bibliography (unpublished documents from TsAMO, wartime periodical literature, scholarly works etc), a short note section and closes with an index. I really enjoyed this book. It really does offer the reader a completely different perspective of some important events. Mrs Gherasimova (plus S.Briton fine translation) presented an excellent academic work. I highly recommend this book.

Ms Gerasimova believes the general public is not aware of the scale or the importance of the fighting for the control of the Rzhev-Viazma salient that began in January 1942 as an extension of the Moscow counter offensive and lasted until March 1943 when the Germans skillfully pulled back to shorten the line and to prepare for Operation Citadel. As an academic and professional historian these series of battles over this 15 month period and the subsequent impact it had on the war has intrigued and obliged her to study this time period in great detail. This depth of research and dedication shines through with the level of details and commentary presented. The level of the author's knowledge is not only impressive but is backed up with the inclusion of snippets from other historians as well as comments by notables like Stalin, Zhukov, Vasilevsky, Grossmann, Model, von Tippelskirch etc. The book has seven chapters; the first six are divided into the separate phases of battle that occurred during this period and the final chapter is conclusions and results. The book begins by explaining the basics: the size and location of the salient, how it came to be as well as the importance of controlling this ground so close to Moscow. This is not a daily battle chronicle which projects constant fighting but an overview of the separate offensives intermixed between relative periods of quiet refit and preparation for the next surge of fighting. For example the very first phase of Soviet fighting that lasted from January to April 1942 was the longest and most costly of the entire period and dwarfs all the other phases including Operation Mars. The next Soviet phase begins to escalate in July though the Germans squeezed in a small counter between these two Soviet offensives. I've read "Zhukov's Greatest Defeat" by David Glantz so some knowledge of this fighting has been garnered beforehand but I wasn't aware that as many as two million Russians and a quarter that number of Germans were casualties in this epic series of battles to destroy the bulk of Army Group Center. While the main theme of this book is strategic in nature, both militarily and politically, there is also coverage in broad strokes of the ground events. It was a hectic time with many armies involved covering many attacks and counterattacks. Ground was gained and lost with the next counter. A salient was formed within the larger salient and fighting was occurring in all directions on all fronts. Some anecdotal experiences are also provided to help show the brutality of the fighting within the salient. The Soviet perspective is prevalent though the German side isn't ignored, with key commanders like General Model and key battle facts included. There is greater analysis and criticism of the Soviet side for having a larger force yet couldn't eliminate the salient while the Germans wanted it. Included are eight colored maps that are some of the best I've seen and will be indispensable in helping the reader follow the give and take action that changed the salient with each passing phase. In addition to walking the reader through the battle history, the

author points out the weaknesses of the Red Army in 1942. Things like poor logistics, consistently not having enough food, ammo, medical supplies weighed heavy on the Russian soldier. Commanders that regularly showed no respect to their troops or poorly trained and or ruthless field commanders that didn't care if they sent their forces to an early grave following an untenable battle plan or a dictator that over extended his resources by insisting on attacking along the whole front so soon after losing so many millions in the fighting of 1941 and giving the Germans a reprieve after being pushed back in December 1941. I recently finished reading the intriguing "The Viazma Catastrophe, 1941" which covers the brutal fighting in the Viazma cauldron in October 1941 that saw a million Red casualties. The Rzhev Slaughterhouse though formatted differently is a creditable sequel for it shows the Soviet's response to the earlier tragedy as well as Stalin's obsession for revenge and the need to eliminate the large German concentration so close to Moscow. It's an ideal combination that provides insight to this important period of the war. The last chapter is a summary of key results as well as a brief synopsis of how this important period is still remembered and celebrated by the locals and the country alike. An extensive Notes Section, Bibliography and Appendix are provided if you want to delve deeper. A scattering of statistical tables and a unique photo gallery that covers key officers and battle scenes are also provided. This is a small book but Ms Gerasimova is efficient and precise and a lot of important ground is covered. The battle history of this period is concisely covered as well as the thoughts and opinions of key people involved in the conflict. The author also includes how the fighting in the Rzhev-Viazma salient also effected the rest of the line at the time as well as its impact on how the rest of the war was prosecuted. The maps are also a key ingredient that will help when reading this book and other related books. I enjoyed it, learned from it and recommend it to all interested students of the Eastern Front.

Makes for an interesting read and certainly helps one understand the Russian approach to war

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