

STALINGRAD



INTRODUCTION

The film 'Stalingrad' is based on the historic battle which took place in 1942-43. The story of the battle is seen through the eyes of a fictional group of German soldiers who take part in the battle. The film is thus "historical". But what are the implications for an historian of such 'historical' films? Before seeing the film, it is worth considering the following five questions which ask you to think about the relationship between feature films and history.

- What should a good historian try to do when writing about history?
- What should a good feature film director try to do in his/her film?
- What problems do you think face a film director when making an historical film?
- How can film assist a student exploring an historical period?
- Do you think that it is possible to make a 'good' historical film that would appeal to audiences and also satisfy historians?

When you watch the film 'Stalingrad' it is worth bearing in mind the answers that you have given to the five questions above. As an historian, how useful is the evidence given in the film? And as

a member of an audience for a feature film, how effective is the film as 'entertainment'? Lastly, how easily do history and entertainment sit together?

If you are using this film as part of your history course then you will need to consider not only what it shows you about the events but also why certain incidents are shown and others are not.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO 'STALINGRAD'

Listed below are what could be called the main events of the battle of Stalingrad. They are a series of facts which could be commonly agreed on no matter what perspective was held on the battle. However, from this list, much has been missed out. Full facts and figures do not appear, nor is any reason given as to why the Germans should even have been in the Soviet Union. Nor is it completely clear as to why Stalingrad took on so much importance in the Germans' and Soviets' eyes.

28 June 1942 Beginning of German offensive in the Kharkov region. The aim of the offensive was to strike towards the Caucasus region of the USSR and capture the oil wells located there, as well as destroying Soviet armies which were lined up against the German forces. Equally important was to cut the vital Soviet supply line of the Volga River on which Stalingrad stood.

24 July 1942 - Germans capture Rostov.

19 August 1942- Attack on Stalingrad launched.

23 August 1942 - Heavy German air raids begin on Stalingrad.

13 September 1942 -Renewed attacks on Soviet held districts of Stalingrad. Many factories of the industrial area of the city are held by the Soviets "to the last man". Heavy house-to-house fighting make this one of the bloodiest periods and battles of the whole war.

14 October 1942 -The German offensive comes to a standstill. By the 12th November small areas of Stalingrad are still under Soviet control.

19-23 November 1942- Soviet counter-attacks in the whole Volga/Don area. The German line is smashed and by the 23rd November the German 6th Army in the Stalingrad region is completely encircled. The "Cauldron" has been formed. 250,000 German troops have been cut off.

25 November 1942- In attempts to airlift supplies to the beleaguered garrison of "Fortress Stalingrad", the Luftwaffe loses approximately 500 aircraft. It rapidly becomes apparent that it will be impossible for the Luftwaffe to keep the isolated army supplied by air.

30 November 1942- Over 50 kilometres now separates the Stalingrad garrison from the main forward units of the German army.

12 December 1942- Army group Hoth attempts to break through to Stalingrad to relieve the 6th Army. By the 19th December, they have come within 40 kilometres of Stalingrad, the closest they will get.

24 December 1942 - Repeated counter-attacks by the Soviet forces means that the rescue attempt must be called off. Army group Hoth is forced to retreat.

26 December 1942 -The troops in Stalingrad are receiving only one seventh of the amount of basic supplies that they need in order to function. Rations are reduced.

End of December 1942-The German front line is now nearly 200 kilometres from Stalingrad. No hope now exists to rescue the 6th Army.

8 January 1943- First call on the 6th Army to surrender by the Soviet High Command. Hitler has already ordered that there must be no surrender. The garrison must hold out "to the last man".

10 January 1943- First Soviet breakthrough in the Cauldron of Stalingrad in the Western area.

17 January 1943 - Second Soviet call to surrender.

22 January 1943- Final Soviet offensive against Stalingrad. In four days what remains of the 6th Army is split in two.

2 February 1943- Final surrender of German forces in Stalingrad. 91,000 German soldiers are captured of the 250,000 who were originally trapped.

1956- The last of the German soldiers captured at Stalingrad return to Germany. In this period only 6,000 of the 91,000 captured ever return. The others have died in captivity.

How useful do you think that these basic facts would have been to the film makers? What else would they have had to find out? What gaps would have had to have been filled out in order to make a film about the battle?

FILLING THE GAPS

One thing that the film makers would have done is to look at the documentary evidence - both on film, in photos and written. Below are a selection of written documents from the period covered by the film. These give us evidence of various aspects of the battle for Stalingrad. Each selection is followed by a series of questions that you should answer.

1 MOTIVATIONS

"I wanted to get to the Volga and to do so at a particular point where stands a certain town. By chance it bears the name of Stalin himself / wanted to take the place, and do you know, we've pulled it off, we've got it really, except for a few enemy positions still holding out Now people say: "Why don't they finish the job more quickly?" Well, the reason is that I don't want another Verdun. I prefer to do the job with quite small assault groups. Time is of no consequence at all."

Adolf Hitler - Broadcast, 9 November, 1942.

"If Stalingrad is of no use to us strategically what is to be gained by occupying these ruins beside the Volga?"

General von Schwedtler, Commander of German 4th Corps.

"The days are shortening again, we can definitely sense it. In the mornings the air is quite cool. Are we really going to have to fight through another of those dreadful winters? That's what's behind our efforts. Many of us feel that it is worth anything, any price, if we can get it over before winter."

Wilhelm Hoffman. 267th Regiment. Stalingrad, October 1942.

- a) In what ways do the three pieces of evidence give contrasting views of the importance of Stalingrad?
- b) How would the three pieces of evidence be of use to the film makers?
- c) How is Hitler's speech used in the film?

② CONDITIONS

"October 30th 1942. We have had no rest. Our battalion was given a few transport drivers and sent to another part of the front, on the northern outskirts of Stalingrad. You can scarcely do battle with a complement of this size Everyone is depressed. Stalin grad has turned us into beings without feelings - we are tired, exhausted, bitter. If our relatives could see us now they would be horrified."

Wilhelm Hoffman. 267th Regiment. Stalingrad, October 1942.

"Owing local shortage of wood, no possibility of building defensive positions, and owing shortage of fuel no possibility of transferring building materials from Stalin grad to Western Front. Troops are sleeping in the open, in the snow, with absolutely no shelter of any sort. Temperature -35 deg. centigrade."

Wireless message - 6th Army to Army Group Don, December 1942.

"Often quite useless loads were flown into the Fortress; for example, one day five tons of sweets and a dozen cases of contraceptives arrived; on another two planes were loaded up entirely with marjoram and pepper, to a total of four tons. Cumbersome and unusable engineering gear would be flown in; 200,000 leaflets arrived for the Propaganda Department, a ton of cellophane protective covers for hand grenades, labels, dried herbs and much else."

Heinz Schrotter, 'Stalingrad' 1958.

"Many roads lead to Pitomnik airfield down this road came the wounded, escaping from the stricken city. They tried to reach the airfield where the big friendly Junkers stood with their promise of rescue and safetyAll sorts and conditions of men could be found on this highway: private soldiers and generals, the sick, the wounded, the crippled and the healthy, with and without orders. They wore furs, or skins, or charred uniforms or leather waistcoats. They had bloodstained bandages about their heads or across their stomachs. There were brave men and cowards among them. Some came in lorries, others crawled on hands and knees."

Heinz Schrotter, 'Stalingrad' 1958.

"What is happening here each day is worthy to be included in any human history of courage since the world began. "

German war correspondent, Stalingrad.

"The situation of your troops is desperate. They are suffering from hunger, sickness and cold. The cruel Russian winter has scarcely yet begun. Hard frosts, cold winds and blizzards still lie ahead. Your soldiers are unprovided with winter clothing and are living in appalling sanitary conditions."

From Soviet Ultimatum to 6th Army, 7 January, 1943

- a) How do these pieces of evidence compare to the attitude expressed in Hitler's speech (section 1)?
- b) Examine closely the description of the road to Pitomnik airfield. How close is the description to the section in the field which deals with the three soldiers' attempt to escape?
- c) Compare the extract from the Soviet ultimatum with the news correspondent's piece. How does each reflect an ideological viewpoint?
- d) In what ways do the comments in this section illuminate the chronology given in the section on the historical background?

3 ATTITUDES

"Surrender is forbidden. 6th Army will hold their positions to the last man and the last round and by their heroic endurance will make an unforgettable contribution towards the establishment of a defensive line and the salvation of the Western world."

Communiqué from Adolf Hitler to 6th Army, 20 January, 1943.

"The hundreds of thousands sacrificed at Stalingrad will not suffice to prevent the collapse of the Western world, if that is destined to come to pass."

German war correspondent, Stalingrad.

"The number of casualties is double the number of replacements. It can be calculated on what date there will only be casualties left."

German war correspondent, Stalingrad.

"On a single day on the Northern Front, one division lost two hundred and sixty men. It was not, however, a unit two hundred and sixty strong that was lost, but two hundred and sixty individuals who were killed one by one."

German war correspondent, Stalingrad.

- a) Contrast Hitler's message to the 6th Army with the attitudes expressed in the comments of the war correspondents.

4 THE END

"In years to come it will be said of the heroic battle on the Volga when you come to Germany, say you have seen us lying at Stalingrad, as our honour and our leaders ordained that we should for the greater glory of Germany. It may sound harsh to say that it was necessary that soldiers must die at Stalingrad if we soldiers are not prepared to risk our lives then we would have done better

to enter a monastery A soldier who goes into battle must know that he will probably not return. If he does come back, he should be thankful for his good fortune. "

Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering. Message to 6th Army, 28th January, 1943.

"Every seven seconds a German soldier dies in Russia. Stalingrad - mass grave."

Soviet propaganda broadcast, Stalingrad December 1942.

"But here (Stalingrad) what is death in reality? Here they croak, starve to death, freeze to death - it's nothing but biological fact like eating and drinking. They drop like flies; nobody cares and nobody buries them. Without arms or legs and without eyes, with bellies torn open, they lie around everywhere. One should make a film of it; it would make 'the most beautiful death in the world' impossible once and for all. It is a death fit for beasts; later they will ennoble it on granite friezes showing dying warriors with their heads or arms in bandages."

German soldier, Stalingrad 1942.

"We watched hundreds of prisoners go by... All the privates and non-commissioned officers were emaciated and their clothes were infected with vermin The German officers, on the other hand, were well-fed and had pockets stuffed with cold sausage and other food, obviously left over after the meagre rations had been issued."

Vasili Chuikov on the German surrender. From 'The Beginning of the Road; The Battle for Stalingrad' (1963)

"The battle of Stalingrad has ended. True to their oath to fight to the last breath, the 6th Army under Field Marshall Paulus has been overcome by the superiority of the enemy and by the unfavourable circumstances confronting our forces. The enemy's demands for capitulation were proudly rejected. The last battle was fought under a swastika flag flying from the highest ruin in Stalingrad. Generals, officers, non commissioned officers and men fought shoulder to shoulder to the last bullet They died that Germany might live."

German High Command Communiqué Radio Broadcast, 3 February, 1943

a) Which of the pieces of evidence in this section would be the most useful to the historian? Why?

b) Contrast the attitudes shown in each of the extracts with the view of the battle given in the film 'Stalingrad'.

c) Why should the various versions of the end of the battle for Stalingrad be so different?

When you have completed this exercise you should look back through all of the extracts and try to divide them up into those that best reflect the viewpoint of the film and those that do not. Having done this, try to say what the two different positions are of your list of extracts and why these positions should be so different.

PERSPECTIVES

Because of the domination of Hollywood films throughout the world, we are used to seeing 'war films' from the American/British point of view. A possible exception was Sam Peckinpah's "Cross of Iron". It is only recently that Germany has started to examine its own wartime experiences through films such as "Das Boot" and the extended "Heimat".

Just as above when you considered the possible aims of both historian and film maker, one should now think about the perspective on the battle of Stalingrad taken by the German film maker compared to possible approaches of a Russian or a Hollywood film maker. Similarly, how do you think German and Russian historians might differ in their presentations of the events?

BACKGROUND TO THE MAKING OF THE FILM 'Stalingrad'

The film 'Stalingrad' was shot between October 1991 and April 1992 in Italy, Czechoslovakia and Finland. It was pointless for the film makers to go to Stalingrad itself (now renamed Volgograd) because the destruction of the town during the war was such that the town has been completely rebuilt and so there were no period buildings to add an air of authenticity to the film.

9,000 original World War II uniforms were found and the production team were lucky to find a number of original World War II Soviet tanks still in complete working order. All weapons seen in the film were also original period pieces.

30 actors were signed up to appear in the film along with 12,000 extras and 100 stunt persons. The production team itself consisted of 180 people.

The world's largest snow making machine was used during the filming of the winter scenes.

Every effort was made to ensure the authenticity of what appeared on the screen.

THE ACTUALITY EFFECT

The film makers have gone to enormous lengths to capture the 'actuality' of the historical period by close attention to surface details. If you look back at the section on the making of the film, you will see that as far as possible, they used uniforms and equipment from the World War II period.

- a) Why do you think some film makers are prepared to spend so much time and money in this way?
- b) What problems do you think the film makers would experience in attempting to recapture the period of the film through location and costume?
- c) If film makers take so much care in order to create this surface 'reality' then why do they feel free to alter or only show certain aspects of actual events?

'Stalingrad' AS A WAR FILM

One possible way of describing 'Stalingrad' is as a war film. This is a type of shorthand word that we, as an audience, and also critics might use to quickly sum up what a film is about. Other films we might describe as horror or Western or romance. We can use these shorthand terms because they imply a shared experience of certain types of films. We all know what is meant by a Western, for example.

But is it fair to use these blanket terms? If 'Stalingrad' is simply summed up as a war film, then what have we lost from the film itself? Is it simply about war?

Before answering this question, it would be a good idea to quickly describe what our expectations are of a war film.

When we use these terms we are describing a series of 'conventions' which we would expect to find in a particular type of film. These conventions can best be summed up under the following headings:

* Characters * Settings * Plots * Situations * Themes * Clothing * Music

Is it possible for you to think about these conventions in relation to a war film? What sort of characters would you expect to find? Where would the possible settings be for a war film? In each case there will probably be more than one idea that you will wish to write down.

When you have completed this you should then consider which of the conventions that you have listed appear in 'Stalingrad'. Having done this, try to think of what else appeared in 'Stalingrad' which was not on your list of expectations? What was new about it? What made it more than just a war film?

STALINGRAD - HISTORY AND STORIES

If you look back at the answers that you gave to the five questions at the beginning of this guide you will see that there was probably a difference between what you saw as the task of the historian and what you saw as the task of the film maker. The 'stories' told by each of these are very different. You have already looked at the possible ways of examining historical events. Let us now look at the way these can be transferred into filmic 'stories'.

In a filmed story what are you expecting? One thing that you might say is that you are expecting to see different characters. What else? Try to list as many things as possible. Look back at the work you did on war genres as this might be of use here.

The next thing to think about is how these stories entertain us. Obviously, different genres give us different types of entertainment. We 'enjoy' a comedy in a different way to 'enjoying' a horror film. So, if for the moment we say that 'Stalingrad' is a war film, then what sort of enjoyment are we expecting? Do we expect to enjoy someone winning at the end of the story? If so, who wins at the end of 'Stalingrad'?

How do we understand the characters in the film? What methods are open to a film maker to express character? Make a list of the major characters in the film. Try to describe each character, how they change in the film and how this change is shown in the film. Having completed this, then try to say what methods a film maker can use to show character.

If you look back at your work on the historical background to the film, what sort of characters were you shown there? Who were the main people that you encountered? Did any of them appear in the film? If they did not, why do you think that the film makers decided to omit them from the story?

We can also say that in a story, every shot has a purpose. It is included to tell us something.

Why, for example, do you think that the scriptwriter included the scenes in Italy? What does it tell us about the characters and how does it relate to everything else that we see in the film?

Another incident that we could think about is when the soldiers make their way to the airfield in order to try to escape. What information does this give us? What part does it play in the story?

Below are listed a number of moments from the film. Try to say what their importance is within the overall story:

- The Lieutenant capturing the Soviet woman soldier in the sewers.
- The Lieutenant trying to stop the soldier beating one of the Soviet prisoners.
- Rollo receiving a letter from his wife telling him she is having an affair with a French prisoner of war.
- The cease-fire in the battle when the wounded are collected.
- The fight against the Soviet tanks.

Each incident that we are shown in the film gives us an insight into the battle for Stalingrad. Look back at the chronology of the battle. How much of this are we shown in the film? Does it matter that certain events are not shown to us or that we do not realise that the events that we are shown are actually those historical moments?

THERE ARE NO HEROES

We closely follow a group of soldiers through the battle. You may have included in your work on expectations of stories that you would expect to find heroes within a story. Yet are there any heroes in 'Stalingrad' that fit our expectations of the way heroes normally behave? If you look back at your work on the different characters and the changes that we see occur within them, is it possible to identify any one of them as the hero of the story? One could say that there are central characters but is this the same thing as a hero? And what about 'villains'? Are the Soviets the villains of the piece? When do we see Russians in the film? What are they doing? How do they react to the Germans?

How does this affect the way that we understand what happened?

In the end how does it affect the ways in which we understand the historical events on which the film is based?