

E. R. Hooton, *Stalin's Claws: From the Purges to the Winter War, Red Army Operations before Barbarossa 1937-1941*. Ticehurst: Tattered Flag, 2013. 240pp. ISBN 978-0954311551 (Hardback). Price £22.95.

E. R. Hooton is a defence journalist who has written respected books on the Luftwaffe, the Spitfire and also the 1914-18 air war on the western front and despite its rather lurid title *Stalin's Claws* is a valuable addition to Red Army studies, the history of Stalinism and Russia's contribution to World War Two in general. Its focus is the evolution of Red Army operations between the catastrophic self-wound of Stalin's military purge in 1937 and the German invasion of Soviet Russia in June 1941. A key theme of the book is the enduring atmosphere of fear engendered by Stalin's purges, which run like a bloody thread throughout the work. These did not begin and end with the *Ezhovchina* (named after Nikoli Yezhov, the diminutive and murderous Peoples Commissar for Internal Affairs) but continued right up until 1942 when senior generals were still being executed, this time for incompetence and cowardice, rather than political unreliability. The author spares few details of how ghastly and brutal the whole bloody business was; he has a particularly gruesome description of Beria, Stalin's notorious security chief, personally torturing Blyukher (one of the first five Marshals of the Soviet Union) to death. Never was the precariousness of Russia's service state more aptly demonstrated.

This section on the purges is important for understanding the enormous damage done to the professional military caste by Stalin's paranoia. This damage was laid bare by the vastly expanded army's poor showing against the Finns in the Winter War of 1940 and the first two years of the German invasion. The purges spread fear, which bred a lack of initiative that severely hampered Red Army operations in the west. However, there is a solid analysis of the battles between the Soviets and the Kwantung Army in Manchuria. Japanese troops were defeated at Lake Khasan in 1938 and a year later suffered a major reverse on the Mongolian border at the River Khalkin (Khalkin Gol) in an offensive directed by the future Marshal Zhukov. These were not small engagements, but full-scale battles with many thousands of dead and wounded. These are too little known in the west (except to military scholars) however they are of supreme importance for understanding why the Second World War evolved into a clash, not only between Germany and the Soviet Union, but also why Japan chose to become embroiled in, what they themselves believed to be an unwinnable war with the United States. There is an equally solid analysis of the Finnish war, where a number of generals were shot for failure to achieve Stalin's desired 'quick' victory. In his sense the military terror did not stop with the arrest and subsequent execution of Yezhov, in 1939, indeed it didn't really abate until Stalin died in 1953. Hooton makes a telling point when he describes Marshal Vrolishov, one of Stalin's few close friends, himself deeply implicated in the military purge, shouting

back at Stalin during a Kremlin banquet after Finland, 'It's all your fault; you killed all our best generals.'

Hooton quotes some interesting and thought provoking literature, but has made far greater use of unverifiable web based sources, which he claims offers a glimpse at Russian/Soviet material that is unavailable elsewhere. However, the book's biggest problem is denseness, which makes it hard to read. It also has a limited contextualisation of the events; we learn little of what is happening outside the Soviet military during these crucial years. However, *Stalin's Claws* repays careful study and the most interesting point Hooton makes is that given the relative failure of the modernising strategy, the purges (where droves of incompetent officers were over promoted, literally into dead men's shoes) become an alibi for the Red Army's later poor performance during operation Barbarossa rather than the cause. In fact the Red Army's command and control structure, particularly its staff work and higher military education, was weak throughout the whole period of Tukhachevski's ascendancy. It was the ex-Tsarist staff officer, Shaposhnikov, (even in the mid 1930s Stalin's closest professional military advisor) whose insistence on higher professional staff training and a reconstituted Stavka (General Staff) after 1936 who made the real contribution to winning the Russo-German war, not the slain darlings of the Red Army.

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