



2010.02.03

Isaak Kobylanskiy, *From Stalingrad to Pillau: A Red Army Artillery Officer Remembers the Great Patriotic War*. Ed. Stuart Britton. Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2008. Pp. ix, 316. ISBN 978-0-7006-1566-7.

Review by Walter G. Moss, Eastern Michigan University ([waltmoss@gmail.com](mailto:waltmoss@gmail.com)).

This is an excellent book. The heart of it, Parts II and III, recounts and reflects upon the author's experiences during the war between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, what Soviet citizens called the "Great Patriotic War." Parts I and IV, together less than a third of the book, deal with his prewar and postwar years. In the year before the German attack on the USSR in June 1941 and for years after his discharge in January 1946, he studied at the Kiev Polytechnic Institute (formerly, Kiev Industrial Institute). He completed his undergraduate work there in radio engineering in 1949, and earned a Ph.D. at the same institute in 1953. Not counting the Appendix dealing with his veterans' reunions and visits to wartime sites, the author devotes only a few pages to his life after 1960, which includes his emigration to the United States in 1994. Thus, this is the memoir not of some career officer, but of an intelligent Ukrainian Jew who served his country during World War II. He saw his first action on the Stalingrad Front as a sergeant and was honorably discharged as a lieutenant.

His military obligations, though not his active duty, began in July 1941, when he entered the Strategic Reserve and was sent to the eastern Ukrainian city of Stalino—where Nikita Khrushchev had been a Communist Party official in 1920s. Kiev itself fell to the German onslaught in September and remained under Nazi control until November 1943. From July 1941 until May 1942, Kobylanskiy worked and went to school in various places. His Kiev institute had been relocated to Tashkent; and after spending time in that Central Asian city, he reported further northeast as a cadet in an artillery college near Alma Ata. His wartime experiences before reaching this destination were strikingly haphazard. With all the Soviet people fleeing east and more than 1500 enterprises being relocated in the same direction, it is hardly surprising that the Soviet government could not exercise the types of control it desired. Kobylanskiy even managed, by various transport, to go from the Stalino area to Tashkent via an out-of-the-way northern rather than southeastern route, allowing him to visit Kuibyshev to see his girlfriend and then Bashkiriya to see his mother and brother.

After three months at the artillery college, he was transferred and spent seven more weeks training in the Tatar Autonomous SSR. There he was assigned to a 76-mm field gun battery, whose main job was to support the infantry of the rifle regiment to which it was assigned. These artillery pieces were short barreled, horse-drawn, and often fired directly, over open sights, at enemy troops and weapons, including tanks. Kobylanskiy describes his battlefield experiences from the Stalingrad Front in late 1942, through Stalino, Sevastopol, Belorussia, Lithuania, among other locations, and finally to fighting the Germans in East Prussia, mainly in early 1945. He estimates that in the process he and his regiment marched 2,500 kilometers.<sup>1</sup>

Considering all the battles he engaged in and all the Soviet loss of life in the war—the USSR suffered about fifty times as many deaths in WWII as did the United States—the author depicts relatively little of the horrors of war. The following is about as dreadful a battlefield scene as he describes: "Around us, we saw the evidence of yesterday's fierce fighting. There were many dead Soviet soldiers and several dead horses. The merciless July heat quickened the process of decomposition, and we could hardly endure the

---

1. For a good overview of the Great Patriotic War, see David Glantz and Jonathan House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 1995).

ever-present, putrid odor of decay—the eternal concomitant of death” (89). His accounts of battles do, however, capture the confusion and typical mixture of fear and courage.

After Part II, devoted to all the battles he participated in, Part III offers the author’s reflections on the war, with chapters on such topics as the multiethnic solidarity he witnessed, what war taught him, the importance of receiving letters, the constant marching (often while half asleep), food and sanitation, leisure, ideological pressure, the implications of his being Jewish, his dealings with Germans, and Soviet women in his regiment. The latter subject is especially interesting because women played a significant role, and their presence in war zones led to unique situations.

Kobylyanskiy comes across as an honorable and intelligent man trying to recollect and tell about his experiences as best he can. From what I know of Soviet history, and my own two-year stint as an artillery officer (though in peacetime), what he says about Soviet wartime conditions and military life rings true. And his narrative style is simple and straightforward. For example, in dealing with charges that Soviet soldiers raped many women in Germany in early 1945,<sup>2</sup> he recalls that:

Once in July 1945, when we were at the time located in a rural hamlet, I met an eighteen-year-old German woman named Annie. Her figure was definitely attractive, but she looked very unwell. [She then told him how she tried to escape from advancing Soviet soldiers, but was ordered back to her village.] Instead of a few hours, Annie’s journey back lasted a full week. Time and again, both day and night, passing Soviet soldiers stopped her. Nobody ever beat her, they just ordered her to lie down, and she was afraid to refuse. In some instances, she was forced to have sex with up to three men at a time, one by one. Altogether, there were more than eighty of these sexual assaults (243).

Although Kobylyanskiy cites more examples of ignoble behavior by other Soviet troops, he generally praises his fellow soldiers for their courage and decency. Several scenes are especially touching. While in Lithuania, he and four other soldiers, temporarily separated from the rest of their unit, asked a Lithuanian farmer to shelter them for the night. He agreed to let them use his barn. Before the soldiers went to the barn, however, they had hoped the farmer and his wife might offer them some food, but the sullen attitude of the farmer suggested this was not to be the case. When Kobylyanskiy asked for hot water for tea for his group, he was told they would have to wait at least an hour. While waiting in a room of the house, the soldiers began singing some popular Russian and Ukrainian folk songs. This charmed the two young daughters of the family, who listened from the doorway of the room, and eventually the farmer and his wife joined the daughters. They all entered the room and started clapping in time to the music. The singing dispelled the farmer’s sullenness, and the soldiers soon received a hearty meal.

On another occasion, Kobylyanskiy recalls overcoming a German couple’s fear of him in East Prussia by reciting in German (a language he had learned in school) Heine’s poem “Lorelei.” They then asked him whether they should hide their fourteen-year-old daughter from other Soviet soldiers, and he advised them to do so.

Sprinkled throughout the book are other recollections that add to our knowledge of the USSR during the war. The author mentions the spy mania in Kiev soon after the German invasion but before Nazi forces captured the city; his continuing search for sufficient food in Tashkent; and the use of a “blocking detachment” behind front-line troops to prevent them from retreating. And contrary to Soviet propaganda, the author reports that he never heard his division’s riflemen shouting “For the motherland, for Stalin!” when they attacked the enemy (213). Although the Soviet deportation of suspect minority nationalities like the Crimean Tatars is well known, the author’s observation of one such occurrence is still chilling. He saw a Ministry of Interior sergeant get out of a truck, walk up to a doorway, and tell a Crimean Tatar: “According to government decree, you and your family are to be resettled. You have fifteen minutes to prepare.” Within

---

2. Antony Beevor, in “They Raped Every German Female from Eight to 80,” *The Guardian* (1 May 2002) <[www.miwsr.com/rd/1002.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1002.htm)>, writes that “altogether at least two million German women are thought to have been raped” by Soviet forces; see also Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin 1945* (NY: Penguin, 2003).

the allotted time the Tatar, his wife, and daughter, “each carrying a sack of household items, left the house and boarded the truck” (116).

As in some other accounts of Soviet soldiers in East Prussia, Kobylyanskiy observes “amazing order and cleanliness everywhere” (134). In contrast, he often comments on backward Soviet conditions, as in the Crimean area in 1944, when “a belated spring and steady rains made all the local dirt roads impassable” and ammunition had to be delivered to the front by a “multikilometer human chain” (112).

He also details various aspects of military life that were not unique to the USSR. He laments that once in the midst of war his unit had to spend countless hours preparing for a parade before high-ranking officers. He writes fondly of the soldiers who were expert scroungers and came up with all kinds of valuable goods, like food and alcohol, especially in East Prussia. And, of course, plenty of pages mention drinking, smoking, bribe-taking, bragging about sexual encounters, and camaraderie. The author also mentions two unauthorized leaves he got away with, although the longer one (a four-day trip to Moscow) took place after the Germans had surrendered. In the latter instance, he had just been denied participation in a Stalin-reviewed Moscow Victory Parade because he did not meet the 5'7" height requirement—ironic in that Stalin would not have measured up either. More significantly, the author recounts military screw-ups that had life or death consequences, including a case of “friendly fire.”

Although the prewar and postwar pages of the book are fewer, they too contain interesting observations. We learn about living in Kiev during the Ukrainian famine of 1933, Soviet schools, the books he read, propaganda, patriotism, family relations, food rationing, and crowded postwar housing conditions—until 1960 Kobylyanskiy and his wife, Vera, and their two sons had to live with his parents in a one-bedroom communal apartment. And through most of the book, the author speaks of his love for Vera, whom he met in his teens and who died in 1992. The book contains a picture of her as a teenager, with the caption “My one and only love.”

There are also other pictures, including one of a 76-mm field gun, but no maps. This is especially unfortunate in a book so often describing places where the author lived and fought. The publisher should have rectified other shortcomings as well: a fuller (than two-page) index and more endnotes would have been useful. As it is, the author does not document the disputed claim that 7 million Ukrainians died of famine in 1933.<sup>3</sup> So too there is no reference to support the author’s statement that “it became widely known that of every hundred soldiers my age, only two returned from the war” (63). Despite these minor flaws, however, Kobylyanskiy’s memoir is a very readable and worthwhile work.

---

3. See my *A History of Russia*, vol. 2: *Since 1855*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Anthem Pr, 2004) 250, for a brief treatment of the controversy.