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From Publishers Weekly

Thirty million men and women served in the Red Army during WWII. Over eight million of them died. Living or dead, they have remained anonymous. This is partly due to the Soviet Union's policy of stressing the collective nature of its sacrifice and victory. It also reflects the continuing reluctance of most Soviet veterans to discuss their experiences—in sharp contrast to German survivors of the Eastern Front. Merridale, professor of history at the University of London, combines interviews, letters and diaries with research in previously closed official archives to present the first comprehensive portrait of the Red Army's fighters. She carefully details the soldiers' age and ethnic diversity, and she puts a human face on a fact demonstrated repeatedly by retired U.S. officer and Soviet military expert David Glantz: the Red Army learned from the experience of its near-collapse in 1941, and by 1945 its soldiers were more than a match for their Wehrmacht opponents. Most poignantly, Merridale reveals that frontline soldiers increasingly hoped their sacrifices would bring about postwar reform—"Communism with a human face." What they got instead was a Stalinist crackdown—and a long silence, broken now by this outstanding book. (Feb.)

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Doing research in the Soviet archives seems like a trying task, but critics revere the work Catherine Merridale did to prepare Ivan's War. The professor from Queen Mary, University of London, conducted over 200 interviews with Soviet veterans and visited major battle sites, but the most enlightening information came from tireless vetting of diaries, transcripts, and officers' reports. That Merridale can plait all this information into "an attempt to fathom war's meaning, effect and legacy" (Foreign Affairs) proves her acuity as a social historian, a skill she displayed previously with the admirable Night of Stone (2002). Only a curious absence of maps mars an otherwise compelling testament to these tragic, unsung warriors.

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A powerful, groundbreaking narrative of the ordinary Russian soldier's experience of the worst war in history, based on newly revealed sources

Of the thirty million who fought in the eastern front of World War II, eight million died, driven forward in suicidal charges, shattered by German shells and tanks. They were the men and women of the Red Army, a ragtag mass of soldiers who confronted Europe's most lethal fighting force and by 1945 had defeated it. Sixty years have passed since their epic triumph, but the heart and mind of Ivan -- as the ordinary Russian soldier was called -- remain a mystery. We know something about hoe the soldiers died, but nearly nothing about how they lived, how they saw the world, or why they fought.

Drawing on previously closed military and secret police archives, interviews with veterans, and private letters and diaries, Catherine Merridale presents the first comprehensive history of the Soviet Union Army rank and file. She follows the soldiers from the shock of the German invasion to their costly triumph in Stalingrad, where life expectancy was often a mere twenty-four hours. Through the soldiers' eyes, we witness their victorious arrival in Berlin, where their rage and suffering exact an awful toll, and accompany them as they return home full of hope, only to be denied the new life they had been fighting to secure.

A tour de force of original research and a gripping history, Ivan's War reveals the singular mixture of courage, patriotism, anger, and fear that made it possible for these underfed, badly led troops to defeat the Nazi army. In the process Merridale restores to history the invisible millions who sacrificed the most to win the war.

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Most helpful customer reviews

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.Informative, but unevenBy mcgudaCertainly a valuable source for those who have limited knowledge of the "Great Patriotic War". Merridale has obviously researched her topic thoroughly and extensively.

But for readers looking for a greater understanding of the war itself and some of the questions that persist to this day, it may prove disappointing. It gives excellent insight into the mindset of the Soviet soldier. Merridale's extensive interviews with survivors are clear evidence. But for those who have broader "why" questions about the ebb and flow of the conflict itself, the account can be frustrating. Why, for example, was a notoriously distrustful and paranoid Soviet state seemingly unaware of and unprepared for the massive German Eastern Front build up in 1941, one that hardly could've been conducted quietly?

Merridale recites the Stalingrad story, noting that the Soviets managed to conceal two large armies from the German advance until the city was virtually surrounded. How did they do that?

Finally, the account notes that German air dominance early is later replaced by overwhelming numbers of Soviet warcraft later. How did that happen?

But perhaps that was never her intent. The book is essentially a sociological analysis of a massive war, more of a micro look at the Soviet psyche.

3 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

biased book

By Boris K

This book is not without accomplishments, especially, for people who know very little about Red Army and its fight with Hitler. It does provide, overall, correct picture of horrible suffering of Red Army soldiers, millions dead, wounded, POWs who were betrayed by their own country. "Ivan" is truly both a hero and a victim.

There are multiple shortcomings: many reviewers have already mentioned lack of military detail, inconsistencies in storytelling, some annoying sugary stories, for example, when author interviewed some old female who lived through the war and who worried if Catherine Merridale had food in England. The author is frequently selective with what veterans tell her and sometimes outright dismisses veterans' stories as failure of memory or them still being under the influence of soviet propaganda.

The worst thing is that the book wrongly creates picture of Ivan as a murderer, rapist, plunderer, barbarian, the list goes on and on. I have no doubt that multiple atrocities were committed by soviet soldiers. It was, after all a conquering army that first had surrendered to Germans a major part of European Russia, then, while taking it back saw destroyed cities, villages, killed people, hundred of thousands if not millions of their countrymen who were sent to Germany to work as slaves in war industry. It was also the army that freed prisoners in many German concentration camps. One should note that the older generation of historians who lived through WWII time witnessed not just German atrocities, but also carpet bombing of German cities by Allies, american bombing of Tokyo that, even, by american estimates, has killed 100000 mostly civilians in only one night. This older generation of historians is more cautious in their opinions because they know that people can not be easily separated from the time when they lived and fought.

In summary, this book can be helpful with many reservations for readers who know very little about Eastern Front and want to familiarize themselves with the subject. For more complete and objective material, look somewhere else.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.it and like it very muchBy Dennis A. PorterBook arrived well within the expected delivery time frame. Have perused, it and like it very much.

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