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# Heroes of the Soviet Union

1941–45



Henry Sakaida • Illustrated by Christa Hook

# CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION: THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>HERO OF THE SOVIET UNION</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>HEROES OF THE SOVIET UNION BY ETHNIC GROUP/NATIONALITY</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>THE HEROES</b>	<b>9</b>
• Aviators	
• Snipers	
• Tank drivers/commanders	
• Naval troops	
• Spies	
• Partisans	
• Infantrymen	
<b>THE PLATES</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>INDEX</b>	<b>64</b>



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Henry Sakaida • Illustrated by Christa Hook

Consultant Editor Martin Windrow

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**OPPOSITE The Monument to the Motherland towers 270ft (82m) above the burial grounds at Volgograd (formerly Stalingrad). Designed by sculptor Yevgeni Vuchetich, it was dedicated in 1967 and is the tallest freestanding statue in the world. It commemorates the Soviet victory over the German VI Army and pays homage to all the Soviet war dead during the Battle of Stalingrad. (George Mellinger)**

# HEROES OF THE SOVIET UNION 1941-45

## INTRODUCTION: THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR

IT WAS INEVITABLE that the two great 20th-century rivals on the European continent would eventually clash, in what would become known to the Soviets as the Great Patriotic War. When Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933, his goal was to remake the Fatherland into an economic and military powerhouse. His rival, Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, who had come to power only five years earlier, was busy implementing his forced Five Year Plan of rapid industrialization for the Motherland.

Both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union embarked on a frenzied period of war production. While Hitler thought of future conquests, Stalin was preoccupied with national defense. The Bolshevik leader feared an attack from the West, and believed that in order to win militarily, he had to protect his industrial capacity. His planners worked to decentralize production, establishing factories in the Soviet Far East - a wise strategy, as later events proved.

Hitler saw the spread of communism with alarm; likewise, Stalin saw the fascist states of Germany and Italy as equally threatening, and encouraged the spread of communist ideology and supported left-wing coalitions. The two ideologies clashed violently in Spain. In 1936, rebellious Spanish army officers began plotting to overthrow the leftist, pro-Soviet government. The Spanish Civil War erupted in July 1936, and Hitler sided with the anti-government faction (Nationalists), providing military aid. Fearful of losing Spain to fascism, Stalin countered by sending in Soviet "volunteers." Thus, the Germans and the Soviets fought and tested each other's military capabilities in this dress rehearsal for the Great Patriotic War.

There were numerous military expeditions by the Germans and the Soviets into their neighboring territories in the late 1930s, giving both sides an opportunity to flex their military muscle. Hitler annexed Austria in March 1938,



followed by Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland in October. The Soviet Union became involved in an armed incident with the Japanese Kwantung Army in August 1938 near Lake Khassan, on the Soviet-Manchuria border. In May 1939, with tensions still very high, the Soviet and Mongolian military fought a 129-day border skirmish against the Japanese at Khalkin Gol before a peace treaty was signed.

Germany signed a non-aggression pact with the Soviets in August 1939, essentially allowing both nations to partition Europe into two spheres of influence. It gave Stalin free rein to grab Estonia, Latvia, Finland, and parts of Poland. He needed these territories as a buffer against Germany. In return, the Soviets allowed Germany free access to Lithuania and Danzig, as well as Polish territory bordering Germany. Soviet Forces invaded Finland in November 1939 (the Winter War), but were unable to conquer the Finns. An armistice was signed in March 1940, by which time the Red Army had lost over a million men, 1,000 aircraft, and 2,300 tanks and armored vehicles. It was almost inconceivable that a third-rate military power could inflict such damage on the Red Army.

The failed war with Finland influenced both Hitler and Stalin. Hitler became emboldened against the Soviets, while Stalin realized his weaknesses. The Soviet dictator had depleted the ranks of the officer corps in a series of cruel purges starting in 1935, leaving the military almost leaderless. He quickly moved to reinstate surviving officers.

Stalin was taken by surprise by Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. Although he never trusted Hitler to honor the non-aggression pact, he did not believe his counterpart would attack so brazenly. Richard Sorge, the Soviet spy in Japan, had warned his superiors about the impending German attack six months prior to the invasion, but his messages had been ignored.

Stalin rushed troops from the Soviet Far East to defend Moscow. Thousands of men from penal battalions were used as cannon fodder to thwart the German advance. He decreed that not one man was to step back, and enforced this with his NKVD (internal security) troops bringing up the rear. Any soldier falling back was shot on the spot.

Massed land battles involving thousands of tanks and infantry stained the soils of Europe red with blood. To the German soldier being ordered east in 1942 and beyond, the Russian Front conjured up images of a frozen hell. For the Germans, the names of such battlefields as Stalingrad, Leningrad, Smolensk, and Kursk became synonymous with death, while for the Soviets they represented heroism. Gradually, the Germans were pushed back all the way to Berlin.

When the war in Europe ended in May 1945, Germany lay in ruins and over 20 million Soviet citizens had become casualties. However,



"The Motherland Calls You!" reads this poster dating from the start of the Great Patriotic War. Mother Russia was the favorite symbol of Soviet illustrators and she was depicted in many wartime posters.

fresh from victory, declared war against Japan on August 8, 1945. The Japanese were on the verge of collapse, and the Red Army marched through Manchuria and Korea with very little opposition. In about a week, this war too was over. The Soviet victory over Japan allowed the conquerors to take the Kurile Islands from the Japanese.

By the end of all hostilities, 11,633 individuals held the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. But for every Hero, there were thousands more who went unrecognized. Today, on Victory Day in Russia and in the former republics of the Soviet Union, all veterans are remembered and honored.

The consequences of the Great Patriotic War were far-reaching. Most notably, the Cold War, a period of superpower tension and military build-up, lasted until the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.

## HERO OF THE SOVIET UNION

"Hero of the Soviet Union!" This unique and coveted title was the highest distinction any Soviet citizen or foreigner could receive. It was a non-hereditary title awarded by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet on behalf of the Motherland. It was not just a medal to be hung on a person's chest, but a symbol testifying to the recipient's highest contribution to the Soviet state. Even a lowly private wearing the Gold Star Medal was treated with great reverence by general officers.

What made the award unique were the many privileges which came with it: union-level personal pension, first priority on a housing list, 50 percent housing rent reduction, 50 percent reduction in taxes, free personal transportation on public buses and trains, annual free pass to a rest home or resort, free medical treatment at a military hospital, and free personal return ticket (first class) for travel every year. Just by waving the red passport-sized Hero's booklet, the recipient was eligible to move to the front of the queue at entertainment, sports, and cultural events. The title also brought employment and educational opportunities.

The title of HSU was established by the Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars on April 16, 1934. The honoree was originally given the Order of Lenin, the highest award of the USSR, which was instituted on April 6, 1930 by the Soviet Presidium. However, this decoration was also awarded to individuals who had not been awarded the title of HSU. To separate the Hero from the non-Hero, the Gold Star Medal was established on August 1, 1939. Hence, the Hero received both awards during the investiture, along with a large diploma and a small red Hero's award booklet.

In comparison to soldiers of other nations during World War Two, the average Soviet soldier received many medals and continued to receive

Pvt. Alexandr Matrosov was one of over 200 men during the Great Patriotic War who reportedly threw themselves in front of enemy machine guns in an act of extreme sacrifice. Recent research by Russian historians has revealed that Matrosov became a Hero for propaganda purposes.



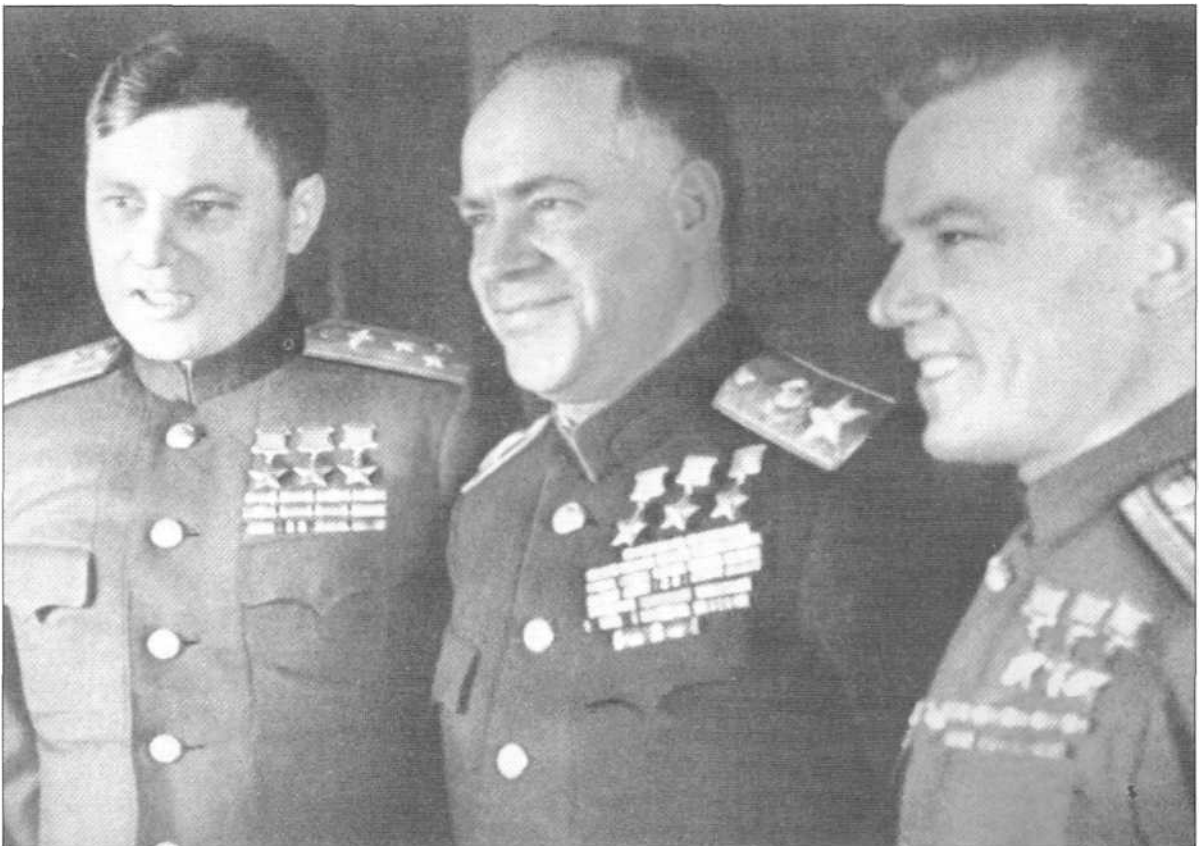
them as veterans long after the war. This is simply a cultural practice put in place after the birth of the Soviet Union. Commemorative and Jubilee medals were practically given away. But a chest full of medals does not a Hero make!

The Gold Star Medal was roughly equivalent to the Commonwealth Victoria Cross, the German Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross, and the US Congressional Medal of Honor. In order to qualify- for the award, the soldier had to perform a great military feat. Marshals and generals could receive it for a successful campaign, colonels and their subordinates for their units' successes. It is incorrect to believe that this honor was reserved mainly for officers. The ranks of Heroes include enlisted men who fought in hand-to-hand combat, as well as Chilians. Over 90 women won this honor.

There was no set rule to qualify for the HSU except in the Red Air Force. In that arm of the military, Stalin issued a directive on August 19, 1941 setting the minimum requirements to receive the HSU title, based upon the number of missions flown and/or aerial victories achieved. A pilot shooting down ten enemy aircraft became eligible. For dangerous daylight ground-attack missions, if a pilot survived 40 missions, he or she could expect to become a Hero. Because of this regulation, Maj. Alexandr Pokryshkin received his third Gold Star Medal on August 19, 1944 after achieving 53 aerial victories. The great Soviet Marshal Georgi Zhukov, whose forces conquered Berlin, was only the second three-times Hero, and he had to wait until June 1, 1945 to receive this honor.

**OPPOSITE** The Germans dismissively called Soviet soldiers "Ivan" and depicted them as brutal foes, attired in a fur cap and armed with the ubiquitous PPSH-41 submachine gun. "Ivan" was toughened by constant action and harsh winter conditions, and driven by Stalin's "no step back" decree, with a thirst for revenge. (Paul McDaniel)

Three of the most famous Soviet soldiers of the Great Patriotic War were, left to right, Lt. Col. Alexandr Pokryshkin, Marshal Georgi Zhukov, and Maj. Ivan Kozhedub. The trio became three-time HSU recipients. Pokryshkin gained 59 aerial victories as the second-highest scoring Soviet pilot, while Kozhedub became the top ace with 62 victories. This publicity photo was taken in Moscow in 1945.







Soviets who surrendered or were captured were ineligible for the HSU. Consequently, there were more than a few injustices suffered by deserving individuals. To cite one example, a fighter pilot named Lt. Mikhail Devyataev was shot down and captured in July 1944. In February 1945, he managed to escape by stealing a German bomber. He did not receive his Gold Star Medal until 1957, when he was "politically rehabilitated" and Stalin had been dead for four years.

Some soldiers became Heroes for propaganda purposes after they were killed in action. According to official Soviet records, Pvt. Alexandr Matrosov sacrificed his life by rushing a German earth-and-timber machine-gun embrasure. By throwing himself in front of the gunport to block the fire, he insured his unit's success. This alleged feat occurred on February 23, 1943, on the 25th anniversary of the Red Army, in a unit named after Stalin. Postwar research revealed that the Matrosov myth was created either to raise morale or to justify the senseless use of troops as "cannon fodder."

The Gold Star Medal with its esteemed title has lost considerable luster with the downfall of the Soviet Union. Many governments and citizens of the former republics, freed from the Soviet yoke, no longer give it

the respect it once commanded, nor honor the privileges that went with it. The Russian Federation still recognizes it, however. The HSU has now become Hero of the Russian Federation, and the Gold Star Medal is still being awarded to Russian fighting men for actions in Chechnya. Posthumous awards are still awarded on Victory Day to former combatants of the Great Patriotic War.

# HEROES OF THE SOVIET UNION BY ETHNIC GROUP/NATIONALITY

The majority of Heroes of the Soviet Union were Russians and Ukrainians. The Soviet Union was a huge nation composed of over 100 separate ethnic groups (Jews were considered a separate nationality). Stalin was content to leave his military composed of mostly Slavic (Russian, Ukrainian, and Belorussian) soldiers, until two wars erupted. The first use of non-Slavic troops proved disastrous.

Prior to the Winter War against Finland, Arctic minorities such as the Saami, Komi, and Nenets, who populated the Kola Peninsula, were exempt from military service. This was partly a measure to preserve their culture, but also reflected their inability to communicate in Russian. At the outbreak of the war against Finland, the Soviets decided to use these peoples because of their familiarity with the frigid terrain and their practice of using reindeers, beasts of burden that would prove much more militarily practicable than horses and tanks.

These hardy and fiercely independent Arctic minorities resented and sometimes openly resisted the heavy-handed Soviet officers who demanded their participation in the war. These peace-loving nomadic hunters, who knew nothing about the outside world, did not understand the concept of warfare, held no allegiance to the Soviet Union, and wanted to be left alone. The Russians failed to understand their culture and viewed these indigenous people with contempt. The natives, likewise, had no love for the Soviets, and believed that they were being used as cannon fodder.

During the Great Patriotic War, the war against the Finns and the Germans on the Arctic Front was slow-paced due to the extremely cold weather conditions. The natives fought battles mostly on their own terms since they realized that their Soviet superiors were incapable of waging war in their territories without their co-operation. Due to the language barrier, orders were sometimes "misunderstood."

When the natives were not engaged in fighting the enemy, they expended efforts to let the Soviets know that their presence was not welcome. A Nenets uprising took place between June and December 1943 involving about 250 men. The NKVD (internal security) officers, leading Soviet naval paratroopers, quelled the rebellion, and all the leaders were shot and the rest imprisoned. Not surprisingly, no one from this ethnic group ever became a Hero.

When the Arctic Front was finally closed, the Soviet High Command was all too happy to dismiss the troublesome indigenous brigades to reserve status in October 1944. Many units were simply abandoned in the field and told to make their own way home. Despite the dismal relationship, ten Komi became Heroes of the Soviet Union.

**Table 1: Ethnic groups in the Red Army and HSUs awarded**

Russian 8,182	Udmurt 10	Kumyk 2
Ukrainian 2,072	Karelian 9	Lak 2
Belorussian 311	Polish 9	Khakassian 2
Tatar 161	Estonian 9	Cherkess 2
Jewish 108	Kalmyk 8	Finnish 2
Kazakh 96	Kabardin 7	Assyrian 1
Georgian 91	Adigei 6	Balkar 1
Armenian 90	Czech 6	Veps 1
Uzbek 69	Abkhazian 5	Dargyn 1
Mordvin 61	Avar 5	Spaniard 1
Chuvash 44	Buryat 5	Korean 1
Azerbaijani 43	Dungan 4	Kumandi 1
Bashkir 39	Lezgin 4	Kurd 1
Ossetian 32	German 4	Moldavian 1
Mari 18	French 4	Nogai 1
Turkmen 18	Chechen 3	Nanai 1
Lithuanian 15	Yakut 3	Svan 1
Tadzhik 14	Altai 2	Tuvan 1
Letts 13	Bulgarian 2	Gypsy 1
Kirghiz 12	Greek 2	Evenk 1
Komi 10	Karachai 2	

Tremendous manpower losses in the first few months of the Great Patriotic War forced Stalin to conscript other non-Slavic minorities from the Soviet Far East, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. These new units would be led by Russian officers. The call to arms was a logistical nightmare, and many units were quickly raised, ill-equipped, and poorly trained. There were over 42 national or territorial divisions.

Complete integration of Russian and non-Russian units was not possible due to the language barrier and other factors. But despite the handicaps, the various ethnic groups worked well enough together to eventually oust the German forces from the Soviet Motherland.

The following are the official statistics of the Awards Department of the Soviet Union concerning the number of HSUs awarded during the Great Patriotic War:

Total HSU titles awarded:	11,633
Infantry:	8,447 (44 double winners)
Aviation:	2,332 (61 double winners)
Navy:	513 (7 double winners)
Antiaircraft defense:	92 (1 double winner)
Partisans, spies, and resistance:	249 (2 double winners)

Table 1 shows the ethnic groups that served in the Soviet military during the Great Patriotic War and the number of members of each who became Heroes. There were also foreign nationals who received the title of Hero of the Soviet Union while helping the Soviets. Most notable of these foreigners were the four Frenchmen of the Normandie-Niemen Fighter Regiment, who flew Yak fighters with the Soviets from 1943—45. The regiment was officially credited with 273 enemy aircraft destroyed. Its top ace, Capt. Marcel Albert, claimed 23 victories and received the HSU title on November 27, 1944.

## THE HEROES

### AVIATORS

#### **Mikhail Petrovich Devyataev**

The amazing prison escape of Mikhail Devyataev from German captivity should have been heralded by his superiors as the epitome of Soviet fighting spirit. Instead, he was punished. His story is one of many injustices suffered by brave fighting men and women under Stalin's rigid "no prisoner" decree.

Mikhail Devyataev was born in July 1917 in a settlement in Mordovia, the 13th child in a peasant family of 14 children. His father died in 1919, and the barefoot child knew only hunger and extreme poverty in his youth.

In 1932, Devyataev left his village to enter die Kazan Water Transport School, and took up amateur gliding and sports flying in his spare time.

Mikhail Devyataev as a lieutenant in 1942. While the Russian government pays scant attention to their old Heroes, Devyataev's funeral was attended by President Mintimer Shaimiev of the Republic of Tatarstan and his ministers, along with thousands of mourners. (Nat. Museum of Tatarstan)



He graduated from the trade school and became a stoker aboard an oil transport ship. However, his love of flying and adventure led him to change his career. The local Komsomol (communist youth) organization directed him to Orenburg Aviation School in the Urals. In 1940, he finished the two-year course.

Within months of the outbreak of the Great Patriotic War, Sr. Lt. Devyataev had flown 180 missions, engaged in 16 dogfights, shot down eight enemy aircraft, and received two wounds. His last wound grounded him, but he was determined to fly again. He made his way to Alexandr Pokryshkin's unit and wheedled his way into combat duty.

On July 13, 1944, Devyataev's fighter was hit in combat and he was forced to parachute above Lvov. Though captured and tortured, he revealed nothing. After an escape attempt, he was sent to the Zaksenhausen Death Camp. While there, fellow prisoners managed to change his identity to Nikitenko and he escaped the gas chamber.

Devyataev eventually wound up at S\\inemkonde Death Camp on Uzedom Island where the secret V-1 and V-2 rockets were being manufactured. Prisoners were executed once they had fulfilled their tasks. Under such conditions, he had no choice but to put a daring escape plan into action.

On February 8, 1945, Devyataev and a group of ten other Soviet prisoners were shoveling snow on the airfield. They overpowered the guards, jumped into a Heinkel bomber and, with Devyataev at the controls, took off". A FW-190 fighter was scrambled to shoot them down, but Devyataev evaded his pursuer and finally made it back to the Soviet lines, bringing valuable military information.

After interrogation by the NKVD, Devyataev and his comrades were arrested for having been captured. Sent to a gulag, they were released only after the death of Stalin in 1953. The injustice they suffered was a sore point with many comrades, who could do nothing about it. But the new regime strove to right the wrongs of the past.

Mikhail Devyataev was "politically rehabilitated," thanks to the intervention of Sergey Korolev, the famed Soviet space scientist. On August 19, 1957, Devyataev became a Hero of the Soviet Union. He worked as a captain of the river fleet and gave talks to youth groups.

Mikhail Devyataev died at age 85 on November 24, 2002 in Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan. Thousands of mourners came to his funeral to say farewell to a great role model and living legend.

### **Ivan Grigoryevich Drachenko**

The word "hero" seems inadequate to describe a man whose incredible exploits would have made a dramatic war movie. Ivan Drachenko was one of only four men from the Great Patriotic War who became a Hero of the Soviet Union as well as a Cavalier of the Orders of Glory (equivalent to a HSU).

Drachenko was born on November 15, 1922 to a peasant family in the village of Velikaya Sevastyanovka, in the Cherkassy region, central Ukraine. After completing high school, he entered the Leningrad Air Club and joined the army in April 1941.

In 1943, Drachenko graduated from the Tambov Military Pilot School and participated in the Battle of Kursk. On August 14, 1943, he was seriously wounded in his right eye and captured with five other

comrades. During the 25 days he spent in captivity, he was offered freedom if he joined Vlasov's Army, a renegade group led by the Soviet traitor Gen. Vlasov, who had defected to the Germans to fight the communists. When the wounded pilot refused, he was tortured and his damaged eye gouged out. While being transferred to a POW camp, he and his comrades strangled a guard and escaped.

Upon returning to friendly territory, Drachenko was hospitalized and received a prosthetic eye, a fact he kept hidden (for over seven months) so that he would be allowed to fight on. On June 4, 1944, Guards Jr. Lt. Drachenko, senior pilot in the 140th Guards Ground Attack Air Regiment, flew a photo recon mission in his Sturmovik IL-2 dive-bomber. Over the Romanian town of Tyrgu-Furmos, he discovered a large enemy tank column. During his return flight, he was attacked by nine FW-190s, but he skillfully out maneuvered the enemy and returned to base in his badly damaged aircraft. The following day, he was awarded the Order of Glory 3rd Class.

On June 26, Drachenko flew another recon mission. Near the city of Yassy, he strafed and set fire to an enemy train, then shot down an enemy aircraft. For this feat, he was recommended for the Order of Glory 2nd Class. When this award did not materialize, another request was made, and he received the decoration on September 5, 1944. Due to a record error, the original recommendation for the Order of Glory 2nd Class finally came through, and now the recipient held two classes of the same order.

In October, Drachenko led a flight of six Sturmoviks which destroyed three Tiger tanks that had been stalling the Soviet advance for days, creating a bottleneck in the Carpathians. By this time, he was recommended for the title of HSU for having flown 157 missions (24 dogfights) and destroying 76 armored cars and tanks, six armored troop trains, 654 automobiles, 122 heavy trucks and wagons, seven supply depots and damaging 18 more, four bridges, and killing over 1,600 enemy troops. In addition, he was officially recognized as having shot down five enemy aircraft and destroying nine planes on the ground.

On October 26, 1944, Sr. Lt. Ivan Drachenko received the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. His prosthetic eye was finally discovered and the pilot was relieved of front-line duties.

In 1947, Drachenko moved to Kiev and graduated from Kiev University with a law degree in 1953. He later became a vocational school director, assistant director of the Ukraine Cultural Entertainment Palace, and deputy chairman of the Council of Studies of Labor Resources of the Ukrainian SSR.

On November 26, 1968, Ivan Drachenko turned in his duplicate Order of Glory 2nd Class and received the 1st Class award, making him a Cavalier of the Orders of Glory. He died on November 15, 1994.

Ivan Drachenko in an official portrait in 1968 after he became a Cavalier of the Order of Glory. This title was equivalent to HSU, but was reserved solely for the enlisted man. Shown on his suit is the HSU Medal, along with (left to right): Order of Lenin, Order of the Red Banner, and the three classes of the Order of Glory.





Sultan Amet-Khan continued to fly long after his comrades retired from active duty. He was 50 years old when he died in a flight accident while testing the Tu-16. This official portrait was taken in Moscow in 1945 after receiving his second Gold Star Medal.

### Sultan Amet-Khan

So renowned was this fighter ace and postwar test pilot that both the Tatars and Dagestanians claim him to be their Hero. He was born in October 1920, in the city of Alupka in the Crimean region. His father was a Dagestanian and his mother a Tatar.

In 1938, Amet-Khan graduated from a railway industrial school and worked briefly at a locomotive depot as an assistant boilermaker. During this time, he joined an aero club and learned to fly. In 1939, he enlisted in the army. His request for flight training was accepted and he trained at Kachinsk Aviation School, graduating in 1940.

When the Great Patriotic War began, Jr. Lt. Amet-Khan was stationed at Odessa with the 4th Fighter Regiment and flew missions in the obsolete I-16 biplane in a ground-support role. His next mount was a British Hurricane, which he quickly mastered.

One of Amet-Khan's earliest victories came as a result of *taran* (intentional ramming). On the night of May 31, 1942, near Yaroslavl, in the northern part of central Russia, the young pilot intercepted a Ju-88 bomber which was on a reconnaissance mission. The skilled German pilot maneuvered his plane around on his opponent's tail and counterattacked. When his guns jammed, Amet-Khan made a spontaneous decision to ram,

and sliced off the bomber's wing. He parachuted to safety. Two of the enemy crewmen were captured.

In October 1942, Amet-Khan was assigned to the 9th Fighter Regiment and fought over Stalingrad as a squadron leader. He made a name for himself on March 25, 1943 when he led eight fighters to intercept a group of bombers and escorts headed for Bataisk and Rostov. He knocked down the lead bomber, throwing the rest into confusion. Fighters of the neighboring squadrons came to help Amet-Khan's men. He shot down an escort fighter, and the entire German strike force was slaughtered. The Soviet fighters destroyed 26 enemy aircraft and saved the intended targets - railway stations and staging areas loaded with troops and supplies.

On August 20, 1943, Guards Capt. Amet-Khan shot down two enemy aircraft during the breakthrough of the fortified defense line on the river Mius. Leading eight Airacobras, he attacked 18 Stukas flying to bomb the Soviet advance. The Soviet pilots destroyed five opponents without loss and thwarted the Germans' mission. Four days after this action, Amet-Khan received the title of Hero of the Soviet Union.

One of the more interesting experiences concerning the Tatar Hero was an incident involving a small German scout aircraft. "I will try to make the pilot land and capture him!" radioed the squadron leader. He fired on the German to get his attention, and then used hand signals to give instructions. When the plane tried to escape, Amet-Khan fired shots



**Capt. Grigori Rechkalov, twice Hero of the Soviet Union, was the third-highest scoring Soviet fighter ace, with 56 victories. He poses by his P-39 Airacobra, adorned with 50 red stars (Soviet pilots never defaced their aircraft by painting Swastikas or German crosses). Maj. Gen. Rechkalov retired from the service in 1959 and died on December 22, 1990.**



**Maj. Alexei Maresyev broke both of his legs when he crashed during combat on April 4, 1942. He crawled through the snow for 18 days before being rescued. Despite having both legs amputated, he coned his way back into combat and shot down three more planes. He became a HSU on August 24, 1943 and ended the war with 11 victories. This photo, taken c.1957, shows him wearing the early Type 1 HSU Medal.**



An aircraft mechanic turned fighter pilot, Georgi Kuzmin shared two victories with his wingman four days after the war started while flying the I-153 biplane fighter. He rammed a Ju-88 bomber when he ran out of ammunition and brought it down, saving himself by parachuting. He gained 21 victories, became a HSU on April 28, 1943, and was killed in combat on August 18, 1943 when his parachute failed to open when he bailed out.

across the nose, and the German reluctantly followed orders and landed. His comrade flew guard over the scout while Amet-Khan landed at a nearby base. He quickly returned by car, disarmed and tied up the German, threw him in the back seat, and took off for base. The enemy officer turned out to be a real prize, providing valuable information about German positions.

By war's end, Amet-Khan was a major and had recorded 30 aerial victories and 19 shared kills on 603 missions and 150 dogfights. He had fought over Briansk, Stalingrad, the South-Western, Southern, 4th Ukrainian and 3rd Belorussian Fronts. He received his second Gold Star Medal on June 29, 1945. He retired from the service in 1946 and began a second distinguished career as a test pilot.

Sultan Amet-Khan was killed on February 1, 1971 while testing a Tu-16 and was buried in Moscow.

### **Sergey Danilovich Luganski**

"Never separate from your leader and always maintain your formation!" This sage advice, along with extreme aggressiveness, was the secret to Sergey Luganski's aerial prowess. Luganski, one of the great masters of the dogfight, was born on a farm in Alma Ata in October 1918.

Luganski fell in love with aviation as a teenager and entered flight training at Orenburg in 1938. He graduated two years later just in time to participate in the Winter War against Finland in 1940. He flew mostly ground support missions and did not score a victory.

In October 1941, Lt. Luganski became squadron leader of the 162nd Fighter Regiment. He had a slow start and it was not until the Battle of Stalingrad that he began to score. He rammed a German fighter on September 14, 1942 while flying a Yak-1, and survived unscathed. In the

Capt. Sergey Luganski, twice HSU, was presented with this fighter plane, inscribed "Hero of the Soviet Union Sergey Luganski from the Komsomol of Alma Ata."





summer of 1943 while fighting around Kursk, he was credited with 14 victories in one month. On September 2, 1943, Luganski received the title of Hero of the Soviet Union for having achieved 18 victories, followed by a second Gold Star Medal on July 1, 1944.

In May 1944, Capt. Luganski became the leader of the 270th Fighter Regiment, which he would command until the end of the war. As a great leader and role model, he was taken off combat duty to run his regiment behind a desk - a task he hated.

When the fighting came to an end, Maj. Sergey Luganski had achieved 37 individual and six shared victories in 417 missions and 200 dogfights. He rammed twice and was never wounded.

Maj. Gen. Luganski retired in 1964 and resided in Alma Ata. He died on January 16, 1977.

### **Pavel Artemyevich Plotnikov**

They called him "Dead Eye Plotnikov," and he was the man his regiment commander called for as the last resort. This remarkable Russian bomber pilot was born in March 1920 in the village of Gonba in the Altai region of the USSR. After dropping out of secondary school, he was employed as a metal worker until he enlisted in the Red Army in 1938. In 1940, he graduated from the Novosibirsk Military Aviation School.

Plotnikov received his baptism of fire in October 1941, when the Germans advanced on Moscow. While flying the Pe-2 medium bomber on a reconnaissance mission, he was attacked by two Me-109s. The overconfident Germans flashed past and gave him a thumbs down signal, then circled to finish him off. Plotnikov brought his plane down to zero altitude, skimming over trees. As the two enemy planes closed, he suddenly lowered his flaps, throttled his engines down, and stalled almost to a stop. The pursuers were taken by complete surprise and Plotnikov's gunner shot down one of the 109s; the other fled. Plotnikov was the first bomber pilot in the unit to score a victory over a fighter.

During the Battle of Stalingrad in the summer of 1942, Lt. Plotnikov's reputation as an expert bomber pilot came to the attention of the regiment commander. In a desperate attempt to destroy a concealed fuel depot used to fuel Panzer tanks, Plotnikov was ordered to lead three Pe-2s on a daring raid. He found the target and placed four bombs squarely in the center. "They can now fuel their Panzers with water!" he exclaimed as they raced home.

In early 1943, a large German supply ship arrived in Taganrog Harbor. The port bristled with antiaircraft batteries and enemy fighters constantly patrolled the perimeters. "If any pilot could sink that ship, it would be Plotnikov," exclaimed Col. Ivan Polbin in a planning session with senior officers. Rather than sending in a large formation, only one plane was to be used, so as to fool the enemy into thinking that it was only

The mark of a veteran bomber pilot was his ability to keep formation during a bombing attack while buffeted by intense flak and tracers. When Pavel Plotnikov flew his first combat mission, he could not bring himself to hold a straight line. He eventually overcame his fears and became one of the greatest dive-bomber pilots of the Red Air Force.



Lt. Alexandr Pokryshkin prepares to sortie in a MiG-3 in 1942. The MiG-3 was inferior to the German Me-109, and Pokryshkin faulted Soviet aircraft designers for not making better fighters. His candor was deemed "unpatriotic" by his superiors. He then kept his opinions to himself and worked hard within the system to improve fighter tactics. By the end of the war, he had amassed 59 victories in 550 missions and 137 dogfights. After a distinguished postwar military career, Marshal Pokryshkin died in November 1985. (RGAKFD)



on a recon mission. Plotnikov arrived high over the target, dived down through a hail of flak, and dropped his bombs. The ship disappeared in a thunderous blast and the pilot made good his escape.

In November 1943, Lt. Plotnikov amazed his comrades by shooting down another fighter. Two Pe-2s were assigned to destroy the railway station at Smela along the Dnieper River. Due to icing on his aircraft's wings, Plotnikov was forced to fly at 160ft (50m) altitude. He then saw two Me-109s attacking his wingman and went to his aid. Plotnikov entered a cloud, caught one of the enemy from behind and, with four solid bursts, sent the fighter down. When the downed 109's wingman turned to attack him, he flew into clouds. Plotnikov's wingman dropped his bombs on the station. As the German searched for him in vain, Plotnikov dropped his bombs on the burning station for the coup de grace.

In 1944, Col. Polbin was leading nine bombers back to base after successfully attacking an enemy armored column. The regiment commander saw nine German bombers and fighters on their way to bomb the Soviet positions. Polbin ordered an attack using the "Plotnikov Method." Plotnikov, flying in the first formation, lit up a fighter with two bursts, achieving his third fighter victory. The Pe-2s shot down five Germans and scattered the rest, preventing the enemy from reaching their target.

By May 1944, Sr. Lt. Plotnikov, now an assistant squadron leader of the 82nd Guards Bomber Regiment, had flown 225 missions and was credited with three aerial victories. On August 19, 1944, he received the title of Hero of the Soviet Union.

By war's end, Pavel Plotnikov had flown 343 missions, and received his second Gold Star Medal on June 27, 1945. He retired as a major-general in 1975 and now resides in Moscow.



Fyodor Ohlopkov, shown here shortly after the war, did not become a Hero until 1965, three years before he died. He killed more enemy soldiers than the top sniper Ivan Sidorenko. (National Archives Sakha)

## SNIPERS

### Fyodor Maveyevich Ohlopkov

In the remote snow-covered regions of the Soviet Far East, hardy men became famous for their big-game sharpshooting skills. One such man was a Yakut hunter named Fyodor Ohlopkov, who was born in March 1908 in a remote area of Yakut ASSR. He left the collective farm with his younger brother Vasily, and it took them almost a week to reach the nearest train station. They enlisted in September 1941 and were assigned to the 234th Rifle Regiment. As soon as they arrived in Moscow, they were shipped off to the frontlines.

A few days after the two entered battle, Fyodor's brother was cut down by a sniper's bullet and died in his brother's arms. Vowing revenge, Fyodor took up a sniping rifle. As a skilled hunter before the war, he needed no training. By March 14, 1943, his personal score stood at 147.

Sgt. Ohlopkov was often called upon to eliminate German snipers, a most dangerous task. It was a human chess game requiring patience, cunning, quick reflexes, and nerves of steel. The loser was rewarded with a bullet and instant death. The Yakut sniper was victorious every time. In the last week of October 1943, he felled 27 Germans. On January 13, 1944, his score reached 309. As his victims continued to mount, Sgt.

Ohlopkov's exploits were prominently featured in military newspapers.

With his keen hunting sense, Ohlopkov was in a position to instruct young snipers, and he often took one along with him to teach the art of killing from afar. He cautioned the rookies to adopt their own techniques and not imitate others, master the art of camouflage, and never enter an area unless they knew the terrain and had an exit plan.

Yakut sniper Fyodor Ohlopkov in snow camouflage, winter 1943. He preferred headshots, claiming they were 100 percent fatal. An expert machine gunner, he slew hundreds of enemy soldiers. (National Archives Sakha)



On June 23, 1944, Sgt. Ohlopkov participated in the assault on Vitebsk. He was hit in the chest and nearly killed. This, his twelfth major wound in combat, ended his career. He spent months recovering in hospital and was demobilized at the end of the war.

Sgt. Fyodor Ohlopkov's official wartime biography credits him with 429 individual kills. However, he was equally skilled with automatic weapons, and his commander would sometimes send him out alone to repulse enemy attacks: the Yakut cut down the Germans like a farmer cutting grass with a scythe. It would be fair to say that Ohlopkov accounted for well over 1,000 enemy dead.

Despite being one of the top Red Army snipers, the highest honor escaped him for some time. However, on May 6, 1965, this oversight was corrected, and he received the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. He died on May 28, 1968.

Due to the stealthy nature of their craft, snipers found that their kills were difficult to verify. However, Ivan Sidorenko is generally acknowledged to have been the top sniper of the Great Patriotic War, epitomizing the "one shot, one kill" creed. Capt. Sidorenko is pictured here in his official portrait taken in 1944 after he became a Hero. (Kiev War Museum)

### **Ivan Mikhailovich Sidorenko**

The top sniper in the Red Army was born into a peasant family on September 12, 1919 in the village of Chantsovo in the Smolensk region. Sidorenko finished ten grades of school and then studied at the Penza Art College. He dropped out of school in 1939 and was conscripted into the Red Army. He attended the Simferopol Military Infantry School in the Crimea in 1941, and when the war started, he was rushed to Moscow to help defend the nation's capital.

Initially attached to a mortar company, Jr. Lt. Sidorenko took it upon himself to go hunting for the enemy. The self-taught sniper bagged so many enemy soldiers that his commanders took notice and ordered him to train others for the task. Men from various units in the division were selected for their keen eyesight, knowledge of weapons, and physical endurance. Sidorenko taught them theory and then took them out in the field for practical lessons.

When the sniper trainees had completed their course, they were given a partner and assigned to certain sectors in the defensive positions around Velizh. The Germans immediately felt the impact and rushed their own snipers to the area to counter this menace.

As the assistant commander of the Headquarters of the 1122nd Infantry Regiment, Sidorenko fought on the 1st Baltic Front and organized the sniper movement. From 1941 until 1944, he eliminated about 500 enemy soldiers and trained over 250 snipers.

Not content to be an instructor, Sidorenko kept in practice by going out in the field, taking a young trainee with him. Using incendiary bullets, he was credited with burning a tank and three tractors. He was wounded three times, seriously on the third occasion in Estonia in 1944. While



convalescing, he was awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union on June 4, 1944.

Because of his value as a sniper instructor, Capt. Sidorenko was now prohibited from returning to the front. In late 1944, his superiors ordered him to attend the military academy. However, his wound had not healed properly and the war ended while he was still hospitalized.

At the end of hostilities, Maj. Sidorenko retired from the military and settled in the Cheliabinsk region in the Urals where he worked as foreman of a coalmine. In 1974, he moved to Dagestan.

### Vasily Grigoryevich Zaitsev

The most famous Soviet sniper of the Great Patriotic War was Vasily Zaitsev, born in the village of Emino in the Chelyabinsk region in March 1915, the son of a peasant. As a youth, he was a shepherd during the summers and became an expert deer and small-game hunter. Although Zaitsev was not one of the Red Army's top snipers, his name and deeds have become well known through the Hollywood film *Enemy at the Gates*.

Zaitsev joined the Soviet Pacific Fleet in 1936. When the war started, he made his combat debut in September 1942 in the Battle of Stalingrad with the 1047th Rifle Regiment. His superiors took note of his sharpshooting skills after he had killed more than 30 Germans as an ordinary rifleman. Given a sniping rifle, he began to amass an incredible number of kills during a three-month period. For morale purposes, his successes were heavily publicized.

When a good sniper began to take a large toll, the opposing side would send in their own sniper to eliminate the menace. Thus, snipers

BELOW LEFT Sgt. Maj. Nikolai Ilyin, sniper in the 50th Guards Infantry Regiment, was a locksmith before the war. He scored 216 kills at Stalingrad and received the title of HSU on February 8, 1943. He died in action on August 4, 1943. This heavily retouched photograph has an obvious error. His epaulettes show that he is a private, yet at the time of his HSU award, he was a sergeant. (Kiev War Museum)

BELOW Vasily Zaitsev's accomplishment in Stalingrad was portrayed in the 2001 action movie *Enemy at the Gates*. Sniper duels were very common, but the story of Zaitsev's duel with the head instructor of a German sniper school was a myth. (Kiev War Museum)





**Table 2: Top Soviet Snipers  
in the Great Patriotic War**

<i>Name</i>	<i>Confirmed Kills</i>	<i>Date HSU awarded</i>
Capt. Ivan Mikhailovich Sidorenko (Russian) 1919–	500	June 6, 1944
Sgt. Mikhail Ivanovich Budenkov (Russian) 1919–	437	March 24, 1945
Sgt. Fyodor Maveyevich Ohlopkov (Yakut) 1908–68	429	June 5, 1965
Sr. Sgt. Fyodor Trofimovich Dyachenko (Ukrainian) 1917–	425	February 21, 1944
Lt. Vasili Ivanovich Golosov (Russian) 1911–43	422	October 26, 1943*
Sr. Sgt. Stepan Vasilievich Petrenko (Ukrainian) 1922–84	422	March 24, 1945
Sr. Sgt. Piotr Alekseyevich Goncharov (Russian) 1903–44	380	January 10, 1944

\* Posthumous decoration

The best Soviet sniping rifle of the war was the standard Mosin-Nagant in 7.62 x 54mm caliber. A private takes aim at his intended victim in 1943 in a sunflower patch.

often had to fight personal duels with counterparts, in a deadly cat-and-mouse game. Although these sniper duels were quite common, in the case of Zaitsev, one engagement with a German super sniper took on mythical proportions.

The story goes that Zaitsev's successes became known to the Germans. They sent their best sniper, supposedly the top instructor from their sniper school (often identified as a Waffen-SS Colonel Heinz Thorwald or a Major Koenig), to kill Zaitsev. The story, which had mass appeal, ended with Zaitsev killing his opponent, but despite intensive research, the identity of his opponent has never been verified.

Jr. Lt. Vasily Zaitsev was credited with 225 kills at Stalingrad between October 10 and December 17, 1942. Among his victims were 11 German snipers. He was seriously wounded in January 1943, with an injury to his shooting eye. A skilled surgeon saved Zaitsev's eyesight, but as far as his career was concerned, he was not allowed to return to his combat specialty. Instead, his skills were put to use as a sniper trainer. He helped train 28 snipers, and wrote two textbooks on the art of sniping, which are still studied today in the Russian military. On February 22, 1943, he became a Hero of the Soviet Union.

After finishing the war as Capt. Zaitsev, he was demobilized and went to work at a textile factory in Kiev. He died on December 15, 1991 and is buried in Kiev's Lukyanivski Military Cemetery.

OPPOSITE Although he was a famous tank killer, Dmitri Lavrinenko did not receive his HSU title until May 1990. Such oversights were not uncommon and were due to political machinations and poor record handling.

## Soviet snipers in the Great Patriotic War

Table 2 lists the top Soviet Snipers in the Great Patriotic War from official Soviet sources. There are other names with scores, but these are not listed here because the source is unknown. For example, there is an Ivan Nikolayevich Kulbertinov (489) and an Afanasi Gordienko (417); they were not HSUs. The sniper's modus operandi made verifying a kill almost impossible. The kills were usually "confirmed" by the sniper's spotter.

### TANK DRIVERS/COMMANDERS Dmitri Fiodorovich Lavrinenko

The most famous Soviet tank killer of the Great Patriotic War was Dmitri Lavrinenko, who was born in October 1914, the son of a peasant from the Krasnodar region. He finished seven grades of secondary school and later became a schoolteacher in a small village. The life of a teacher did not satisfy him, however, so he left to become a cashier at a bank. In 1934, he joined the Red Army and went to tank school.

In 1940, the Soviet Union began forcibly to annex Bessarabia, an area that is now largely in the former Soviet republics of Moldova and Ukraine. Lavrinenko participated in the armed expedition as a member of the tank corps.

In June 1941 when Germany invaded the Soviet Union, Lt. Lavrinenko was ready. As a member of the 4th Tank Brigade, the T-34 commander's tactic was to close in on the enemy, even when outnumbered, and aggressively hunt them down.

Lt. Lavrinenko's tank-killing spree heightened in October in the battles around Orel and Mzensk where his brigade fought furiously against Gen. Heinz Guderian's Panzers. Within four days, Lavrinenko destroyed 16 tanks.

In November, Lavrinenko joined with his tank platoon to hold the defensive position of Gen. Ivan Panfilov on the outskirts of Moscow at the small village of Gusenovo. In one fateful battle, Lavrinenko faced down eight Panzers rushing toward his platoon's position. His first shot destroyed the lead tank. He fired six more times, destroying a tank with each shot; only one German tank escaped. In the vicious fighting, most of Panfilov's men were killed, but the Germans never broke through; this was Hitler's first defeat.

On December 18, 1941, Lt. Dmitri Lavrinenko died in battle near the village of Goriuny. near



The Soviets - and even the Germans - considered the T-34 the best tank of the Great Patriotic War. (Paul McDaniel)





There were tank battalion commanders who did their fighting behind a desk, and then there was Dmitri Tsirubin, who led his men by example. There was a high mortality rate among the lead tanks, but Tsirubin seemed to live a charmed life. (Igor Moiseyev)

Moscow. In 28 engagements, he had destroyed 52 enemy tanks, an amazing feat in 1941. For reasons unknown, although recommended for the title of Hero of the Soviet Union shortly after his death, the honor was not conferred upon Lavrinenko until May 5, 1990. He is buried in the village of Denkovo of the Istra area of the Moscow region, and School #28 was named after him at the village/station of Besstrashnaya.

Lavrinenko may not have been the Soviet Union's top tank killer. Some believe it was Capt. Konstantin Samokhin, who reportedly had 69 kills, but was not a HSU.

### **Dmitri Malahovich Tsirubin**

Absolutely fearless and leading his men by example, Dmitri Tsirubin was the ideal tank commander. The career tank corps officer was born in the village of Titovka in the Mogilev region of Belorussia, in May 1916. He finished eight grades of school and went to work as a bookkeeper on a state farm. He joined the army in 1937 and fought against the Finns in the Winter War.

At the start of the Great Patriotic War, Tsirubin was a political officer in a tank battalion. It was not until 1944 that he became engaged in heavy fighting, for which he was well decorated.

In the summer of 1944, Maj. Tsirubin fought in Operation *Bagration* in Belorussia. As a battalion commander in the 15th Guards Tank Brigade of the 1st Don Guards Tank Corps, his T-34 was the first to fight its way into the city of Bobruysk. In July, due to heavy casualties among the brigade's officers, he was elevated to battalion commander.

Crossing the Svisloch River to establish a bridgehead, Tsirubin's unit came under fierce attack by tanks and infantry of the 12th Panzer Division. Maj. Tsirubin personally destroyed two Panzers and killed nine enemy soldiers. His tankers massacred the enemy infantrymen during the counterattack.

As the Germans retreated toward the west, Maj. Tsirubin was right behind them, his battalion being the first to cross the Neva River. The German counterattack failed after Tsirubin's men killed over 120 of them. During his forward advance, the fearless tank commander destroyed two antitank guns while his unit liquidated two infantry companies armed with rocket-propelled antitank grenades (*Panzerfausts*).

In the village of Nestepovo, the Soviet T-34 tanks were forced to stop at an antitank ditch. Tsirubin jumped out of his tank and found a safe passage point. He discovered two Germans in the ditch armed with *Panzerfausts* and eliminated them. Jumping back into his tank, he led his tankers forward and engaged two enemy tanks, destroying one of them.

For his bravery and valor, Maj. Dmitri Tsirubin was awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union on March 24, 1945. After the war, he continued in the tank corps and retired in 1956 as a lieutenant-colonel.





### **Mikhail Vasilevich Kopitin**

Mikhail Kopitin was a career tank officer who made a name for himself in the T-34 tank. He was born in November 1920 in the village of Murom, in the Vladimir region east of Moscow. He joined the army in 1940.

Armed with T-34/85 tanks, Sr. Lt. Kopitin, leading the 1st Tank Company of the 229th Tank Regiment, found himself in the middle of the Lvov-Sandomir Offensive in July 1944. The Soviets were pushing the Germans out of Ukraine, into Poland. The following is the citation/recommendation for Kopitin, which resulted in the award of the title Hero of the Soviet Union:

"Comrade Kopitin, the commander of a tank company, has always been at the most important locations in battle. His courage, bravery, and skillfulness always let him win in spite of the superiority of the enemy. Self-sacrifice and willingness to help are the main features of his character.

"On August 3-4, 1944, the Mechanized Brigade fought a severe battle for the village of Zheduv against the superior forces of the enemy. The Brigade was able to fend off numerous enemy tank and infantry attacks. It drove a wedge into the entrenched enemy's defense, but together with headquarters staff, became separated from the main force. Comrade Kopitin quickly analyzed the situation, and by his own initiative, decided to help.

"Leading five other tank crews, he expended much ammunition and exterminated the enemy soldiers. It was a brave maneuver whereby Kopitin demonstrated his courage and helped unite the headquarters unit to the rest of the force.

**ABOVE LEFT** Mikhail Kopitin had a long and distinguished career in the Soviet tank corps. In 1972, he retired as a general in the reserves and made Moscow his home.

**ABOVE** The great Soviet tank driver/commander, Lt. Semion Konovalov, was a mailman before the war. On July 13, 1942, as a member of the 15th Tank Brigade, he used his KV tank to destroy 16 tanks, two armored cars, and eight trucks loaded with enemy infantrymen near the village of Nizhnemitiakin in the Tarasov area. He became a Hero on March 31, 1943. Konovalov survived the war and now lives in Kazan.

Tanks on stone pedestals are frequently seen in Russia and in the former Soviet republics. It was customary to so honor the first tank that broke into a major city. Here, young Pioneers stand under the first tank to enter Donetsk to liberate it from the Germans.



"In that battle, comrade Kopitin personally destroyed five tanks, to include two Panther tanks, three T-4 tanks, two self-propelled guns, one armored troop carrier, and more than a hundred soldiers and officers. He captured one T-3 tank in good order and his company suffered zero losses.

"During the following ten days since that battle, to August 14, 1944, comrade Kopitin has additionally destroyed several more Panthers, four T-4 tanks, three self-propelled guns, five armored troop carriers, and four auto cars.

"For his heroic deeds and skillful management of his company, I nominate comrade Kopitin for the government award of Hero of the Soviet Union."

On September 23, 1944, Sr. Lt. Mikhail Kopitin received the title of HSU. His unit advanced on Berlin, then turned and strove toward Prague when the war ended.

This 1965 postage stamp honors Soviet Navy Seaman Ivan Sivkov, a rifleman of the 2nd Volunteer Detachment of the Northern Fleet. On August 2, 1941, he took his wounded commander to safety and then covered the withdrawal of his comrades alone. He used his last grenade to blow himself up, taking some of the Germans with him. He became a HSU on January 17, 1942.



## NAVAL TROOPS

### Viktor Nickolayevich Leonov

Viktor Leonov was the model of a successful Soviet "buccaneer." A dashing rogue, he battled the Germans and the Japanese, writing some memorable chapters of modern Soviet naval history. He was born in 1916 in the town of Zaisk of the Moscow region and joined the Soviet Navy in 1937.

Lt. Leonov's first combat assignment was with the 181st Special Reconnaissance Detachment of the Northern Navy Headquarters. Leading his men on commando-type raids, he destroyed German ammunition and supply depots, communication centers, and harassed enemy troop

concentrations along the Finnish and Russian coasts. On one occasion, on July 28, 1941, he and his men raided the German strongpoint at Cape Pikshuyev. When a German company came to the rescue, they were ambushed by Leonov's men and fled from the battlefield, leaving over 40 dead.

In November 1941, Leonov's detachment smashed the motor transport depot in the settlement of Titovka. In destroying 25 trucks, two fuel storage depots and a storehouse, the Soviets also killed over 100 of the enemy with no loss to their own.

On March 7, 1942, in another typical lightning raid, Lt. Leonov led his men to destroy another enemy depot in the region of Zapadnaya Litsa, leaving over 70 Germans dead.

In April, another series of successful operations followed. Landing his men from fast torpedo boats, Leonov secured the landing of the 12th



Viktor Leonov detested **the** useless political officers assigned to his unit and forced them to fight or quit. During the Soviet era, he was well known and respected, but with the passing of the **USSR**, he was overlooked. His death in 2003 was not even mentioned in the Moscow newspapers.

Marine Brigade on enemy territory, during which his men killed over 60 Germans. Leonov and his unit spent the month destroying enemy anti-aircraft sites, mapping the coastline, and capturing prisoners for interrogation.

In one of the more spectacular missions of his career, Lt. Leonov was given the assignment of silencing the four 155mm guns at Cape Krestovyi, which had shut down the entire bay to the Soviets. Leonov landed his men and they force-marched to the rear, intent on taking out the enemy's 88mm gun battery located near their primary target.

On the night of October 12, 1944, Leonov and his men overwhelmed the 88mm gun site and captured 20 men. When German reinforcements arrived, the Soviets simply turned the captured guns on the rescuers and destroyed them. A few hours later, Leonov's unit linked up with another recon detachment, and together they assaulted the primary target, forcing the German battery commander to surrender and capturing over 60 Germans in the process. As a result of this operation, the Soviets were able to land their forces and break through to capture the port of Liinahamari on the Finnish coast. On November 5, 1944, Leonov received the title of Hero of the Soviet Union.

When the European conflict ended, Sr. Lt. Leonov was sent to fight the Japanese. He landed with 140 of his men, under the command of Capt. Kulebyakin, on a Japanese airfield at Port Vonsan, not realizing that they were opposed by over 3,500 enemy soldiers. Knowing that they were in a most unfavorable situation, Kulebyakin asked to meet with the Japanese colonel in charge, and demanded his surrender! When the colonel called their bluff and decided to take the ten Soviets hostage, Leonov broke into the conversation and said forcefully, "We've been fighting in the West throughout the war and understand our situation. We will not allow ourselves to be taken hostage! You will all die like rats when we break out of here!" The colonel backed down and surrendered.

Sr. Lt. Viktor Leonov received his second HSU on September 14, 1945. According to his citation, "he took part in the seizure of the ports of Yuka and Raisin where he showed himself as a courageous and firm officer who masterfully guided the battle operations."

As a testament to his leadership, Leonov lost only nine men under his direct command - mostly from the assault at Cape Krestovyi (seven killed) - until the end of the war against Japan.

Leonov entered the Naval Reserve in 1956 and later retired as a captain 2nd rank. For years he was a popular commentator on Soviet Naval history and a greatly respected role model for communist youth, but with the collapse of the Soviet Union, his importance faded. He died on October 7, 2003 in Moscow.

### **Mikhail Grigoryevich Malik**

While the vast majority of Heroes of the Soviet Union earned their honors on the bloody battlefields of Europe, a few gained Hero status fighting against the Japanese in a war lasting one week. Mikhail Malik was one of them.

Mikhail Malik was born in May 1911 in the city of Nikolayesk na Amure in the Khabarovsk region of the Soviet East, across the channel from Sakhalin Island (captured from Japan in 1945 and now a part of Russia).

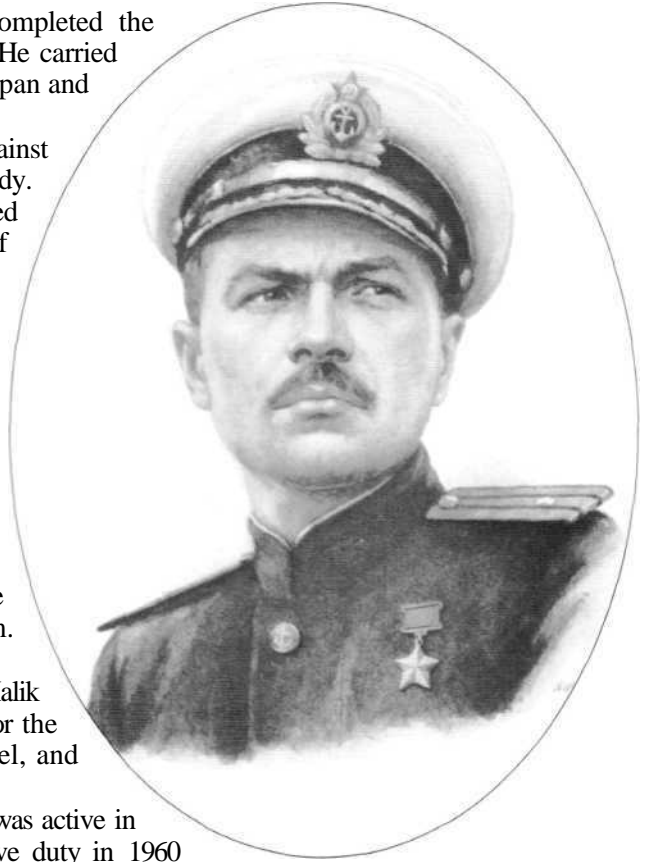
He joined the Soviet Navy in 1933 and completed the specialized course in the Baltic Flotilla in 1935. He carried out his duties along the coast facing the Sea of Japan and did not participate in the European conflict.

When the Soviet Union declared war against Japan on August 8, 1945, Capt. Lt. Malik was ready. As commander of a torpedo boat battalion, he led his men on a lightning raid against the port of Seisin. They succeeded in sinking seven Japanese ships. On August 11, Malik led six boats, crossed the mined area protecting the Korean port of Rasin and, despite the strong counter fire, sank three transports and damaged two. During combat, his battalion transported over 2,000 marines in 21 landing operations at the ports of Yuki, Rasin, **Seisin**, Odentsin, and Tenzan.

Malik was the first to detonate the Japanese acoustic mines lying on the seabed to the entrance of Port Rasin by depth charging them. His innovation allowed others to do the same.

On September 14, 1945, Capt. Lt. Mikhail Malik received the title of Hero of the Soviet Union for the fulfillment of operations without loss of personnel, and for inflicting great damage on the enemy.

After the war, Malik lived in Vladivostok and was active in military and youth affairs. He retired from active duty in 1960 with the rank of captain 1st rank and went into the reserves. He died in October 1980.



Mikhail Malik became a Hero in the war against Japan, which lasted one week. He spent his entire life in the Soviet Far East.

### **Alexandr Ivanovich Marinesko**

Soviet submarines achieved very little success during the war, although they did have their moments. One of the most intriguing and controversial figures in Soviet submarine history was Alexandr Marinesko. Vilified by the Germans as a war criminal, he was arrested and imprisoned by his own government. He eventually became a Hero of the Soviet Union well after his death.

Alexandr Marinesko, a Ukrainian from Odessa, was born in 1913 and joined the navy in October 1933. By 1939, he had completed special courses in submarine warfare and was posted to the Baltic Navy. He served aboard the submarine M-96 and later the S-13. Although he saw action from the start of the Great Patriotic War, his first successes did not come until 1945.

By that time, Marinesko was in deep trouble with the authorities. His problems began in late 1944 when he was based at Turku, Finland. When S-13 was ready to sail, he was absent without leave for three days. Apparently, he was seeing a woman and drinking heavily. When he did not report for duty, the shore patrol began looking for him, and he returned to his boat on January 3, 1945. The NKVD suspected that he had either defected or had become a spy for the Finns. The navy and the NKVD had a difference of opinion as to his punishment, but first, he had duties to perform and was sent out to sea.



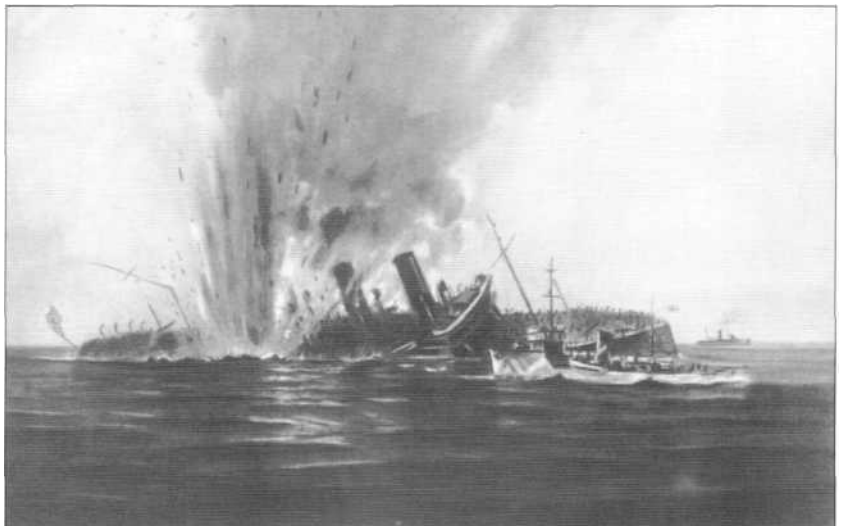
ABOVE Alexandr Marinesko was a good submarine officer who was victimized by his own government for alleged political crimes and died a broken man in 1963. Intense lobbying by his comrades finally led to a posthumous HSU award in 1990.

ABOVE RIGHT There was no shortage of volunteers for submarine service because of the great food prepared by the boats' cooks. After sinking a 5,000-ton transport in October 1943, the crew of S-31 is treated to a fine feast and serenaded by naval musicians.



On January 30, 1945 near Danzig Harbor, Capt. 3rd Class Marinesko fired three torpedoes into the 25,484-ton German liner *Wilhelm Gustloff* and sank her. He had disobeyed his superiors and strayed from his assigned sector. The liner carried over 7,000 Chilians and 1,300 German submarine personnel. For many years afterwards, the Sonets denied responsibility for sinking this ship.

On February 10, Marinesko intercepted the 14,600-ton German subsidian- cruiser *General Steuben* of the German Nord Shipping Line and



A painting depicts the sinking of the German liner *Wilhelm Gustloff* on January 30, 1945 by Marinesko's S-13.



Petty Officer Alexandr Morukhov joined the navy in 1939. As head machinist mate aboard the submarine M-35, he took part in 34 combat patrols in which eight enemy ships were sunk. During a dive, his submarine suffered damage to the vertical rudder, sending it further down into the crushing depths. He skillfully repaired the controls and regained control of the submarine, saving the lives of the entire crew. He became a HSU on July 22, 1944.

sent her to the bottom. There were more than 3,000 wounded, refugees, and medical personnel aboard. Marinesko had had no idea that his victim was a Chilian ship.

In addition to sinking four enemy ships in his career, Marinesko carried out landings of spy and special operations groups behind enemy lines, and covered the flank of advancing Red Army units. Although recommended for the title of Hero of the Soviet Union, the highest honor was denied, and the severe disappointment and mounting problems with the NKVD caused him to drink excessively.

In September 1945, Marinesko was demoted to Sr. Lt. and transferred to a minesweeper. He was arrested for political crimes on trumped-up charges, convicted, and sent to a gulag in Siberia where he spent many years at hard labor. After his release, the disgraced former submarine commander moved to Leningrad and worked for a steamship company. He died in November 1963.

On May 5, 1990, Alexandr Marinesko finally received the title of Hero of the Soviet Union from President Mikhail Gorbachev. His record of 52,000 tons of enemy shipping destroyed made him the top Soviet submarine ace of the Great Patriotic War.

### **Victor Dmitriyevich Kuskov**

Many service personnel earned their Hero status not by performing courageous acts during hand-to-hand fighting, but by inspiring others through their selfless devotion to duty. Victor Kuskov was one such man.

Kuskov was born in November 1924 in the Kalinin region. His family were peasants and he finished seven grades of school to become an accountant on a collective farm. He joined the navy in July 1942 and trained with the Northern Fleet. He was then posted to the 1st Naval Guard

Victor Dmitriyevich Kuskov never considered himself to be a Hero and always told others that he was simply doing his job.





Caesar Lazarevich Kunikov, marine battalion commander of the Azov Motorboat Flotilla, became famous for his daring raids. During the cold night of February 4, 1943, his men landed at Malaya Zemlia and repulsed 18 counterattacks, despite being vastly outnumbered. They successfully held the bridgehead for advancing forces of the Red Army. Kunikov was severely wounded in combat and died on February 12. He became a HSU on April 17, 1943.

Battalion as the motor mechanic of a torpedo launch.

Kuskov fought during the whole war aboard ships on the Baltic Front. The motor launch in which he served took part in 42 battles and sank three enemy ships.

In one of the battles, Kuskov was concussed when an enemy shell hit the motor compartment of his boat, damaging an oil pipe. Overcoming pain, he covered the hole in the leaking oil pipe with his hands. The hot oil burned his hands, but he unclasped them only after his boat was able to escape from enemy fire.

On July 1, 1944, Kuskov again exhibited heroism when his boat was hit by another enemy shell. Although badly wounded, he stayed in the motor compartment to fight the fire and flooding. When the boat began to sink, he and another comrade worked to put life jackets on the wounded crew and help them into the water. He held the seriously wounded commander of the boat in his arms for over two hours until rescued by a friendly ship.

For his courageous conduct and devotion to duty, Victor Kuskov was awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union on July 22, 1944.

After the war, Sr. Lt. Kuskov finished the

military marine political college and finally retired in 1955. He died on September 25, 1983.

## **SPIES**

### **Richard Sorge**

"Germany will attack the Soviet Union no earlier than June 15, 1941..." warned the secret report to Joseph Stalin, six months prior to the invasion. Stalin chose to ignore the report from the master spy - with disastrous consequences. To cover his mistake, Stalin made every effort to erase the existence of Dr Richard Sorge.

Richard Sorge was born to a Russian mother and a German father in Baku (Russia) in 1895. Educated in the Fatherland, he fought in World War One in the German Army, and was seriously wounded by the Russians. While recovering in hospital, he read the works of Karl Marx, which eventually steered him to communism.

Sorge was a scholar who obtained his doctorate in political science at the University of Hamburg in 1920. Upon graduation, he secretly joined the German Communist Party. His first job as a history teacher came to an end when he was fired for promoting communism and trying to recruit members. His next job at a coalmine also ended for the same reason.

When the police came looking for him, the communist agitator fled to Moscow, where he was recruited by Soviet intelligence. Sorge returned to Germany, married, and became a journalist. In 1923, the German communists tried to overthrow their government, and Sorge



organized many of their activities. The rebellion was crushed, but Sorge escaped detection. In 1924, he became a Soviet citizen, joining the Soviet Communist Party in the following year, but he still maintained his cover as a German citizen and journalist.

In 1930, Sorge was sent to China to spy on the political leaders and the military of the Chinese Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek. The Soviets were interested in overthrowing the Nationalists. While in Shanghai, Sorge established a close relationship with the German Embassy and recruited a number of embassy personnel to help him. So good was his cover that the Japanese in Shanghai thought he was working for German intelligence.

The Soviets were very impressed by Sorge's ability to obtain secret information from both the Germans and the Japanese. This "renaissance man" was charming, highly intelligent, and seemed to know just about anyone of importance. His lavish cocktail parties were very popular and he hobnobbed with the rich and influential. He was a keen political scientist who impressed all who met him.

Sorge was ordered to Japan to set up a new spy ring. He avoided detection by having no more than four people in his ring, who were all loyal to him. He settled in comfortably and remarried.

In 1935, after a militant faction of Japanese Army officers killed some key officers who opposed war with China, Sorge was employed by the German Embassy as a consultant to make sense of the situation. His analysis impressed the officials, including the German ambassador, and he began receiving privileged information, which was duly sent by Sorge to his handlers in Moscow. The double agent correctly predicted the Japanese war with China, which began in July 1937.

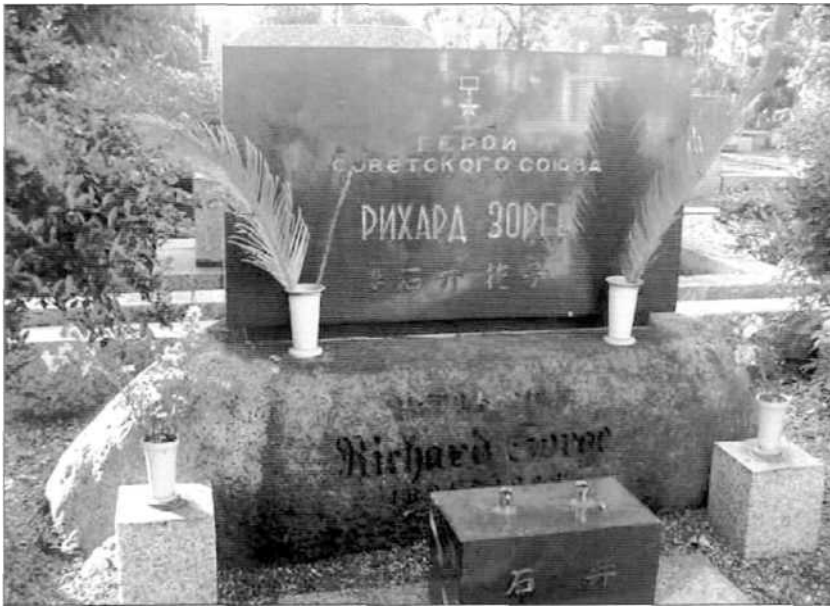
In December 1940, in one of the greatest coups of Soviet intelligence, Sorge passed along to Moscow the secret German plans for the invasion of the Soviet Union. However, Stalin chose to ignore Sorge's report and relied wholly on his advisors, who did not believe that war was imminent. The Soviets had signed a non-aggression pact with Germany in August 1939. When the Germans attacked on June 22, 1941, Stalin was stunned and his spy in Tokyo devastated. (Sorge had also sent word about the proposed Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, but Stalin chose not to alert the Americans.)

On October 15, 1941, Sorge sent a message stating that the Japanese Kwantung Army in Manchuria would not be invading the Soviet Union to help Germany. This time his report was believed. Stalin pulled his divisions out of the Soviet Far East to defend Moscow.

Sorge's spy ring was eventually discovered after the Japanese caught one operative, who led them to the others. In October 1941, the master spy was arrested along with his Japanese wife, Hanako. Under torture, Sorge confessed and spent the next three years in prison. The Japanese



Richard Sorge, in a photo taken in 1943 while imprisoned by the Japanese. His execution came as a welcome relief to Joseph Stalin. (RGAKFD)



Richard Sorge's grave in the Tama Cemetery, Tokyo, Japan. It was erected on the orders of Premier Nikita Khrushchev. Stalin tried to erase all evidence of Sorge. (Warrick Barrett)

made three overtures to the Soviets, hoping to trade Sorge for one of their own spies. However, the Soviets rebuffed the offers, maintaining that Sorge was unknown to them.

On November 7, 1944, Sorge was hanged in Sugamo Prison in Tokyo. His execution came as a relief to Stalin. In 1964, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev saw the French film *Who Are You, Dr. Sorge?* and asked the KGB if the story was true. When it was confirmed, he awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union to Richard Sorge on November 5, 1964. In addition, his widow Hanako Ishiye, who had been married to Dr Sorge for over ten years, received a Soviet pension. She died of pneumonia in Tokyo in July 2000 at the age of 89.

### **Nikolai Ivanovich Kuznetsov**

Nikolai Kuznetsov was to the Soviets as SS Col. Otto Skorzeny was to the Germans; both men had nerves of steel and won fame for their daring exploits behind enemy lines.

Kuznetsov was born in 1911 into a peasant family in what is now the Yekaterinburg region of Russia. He graduated from the Ural Polytechnic Institute in 1938, and later from the Institute of Foreign Languages.

Before the start of the war, Kuznetsov was recruited to work in counter-espionage due to his fluent German, which he spoke like a native. He introduced himself to German Embassy officials as a native German who came to the Soviet Union with his parents as a young child, and was now working at an aviation factory in Moscow. This attracted the attention of German espionage agents; Kuznetsov, in turn, could finger the agents to his superiors. In addition, Kuznetsov befriended a German in the embassy who was recruited to work for the Soviets.

When the Great Patriotic War started, Kuznetsov underwent training to assume the guise of a German officer. He became Oberleutnant Paul Wilhelm Siebert and was parachuted behind German lines to join a detachment of partisans. His secret orders, which no one but the

*(continued on page 41)*



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B Sniper Fyodor Ohlopkov, Vitebsk, Belorussia, May 1944



Mikhail Gakhokidze, Sevastopol, June 1942



D Spy Robert Klein, Cherkassy, central Ukraine, September 1943



Sailor Nikolai Golubkov, Fuyuan, north-east China, August 1945

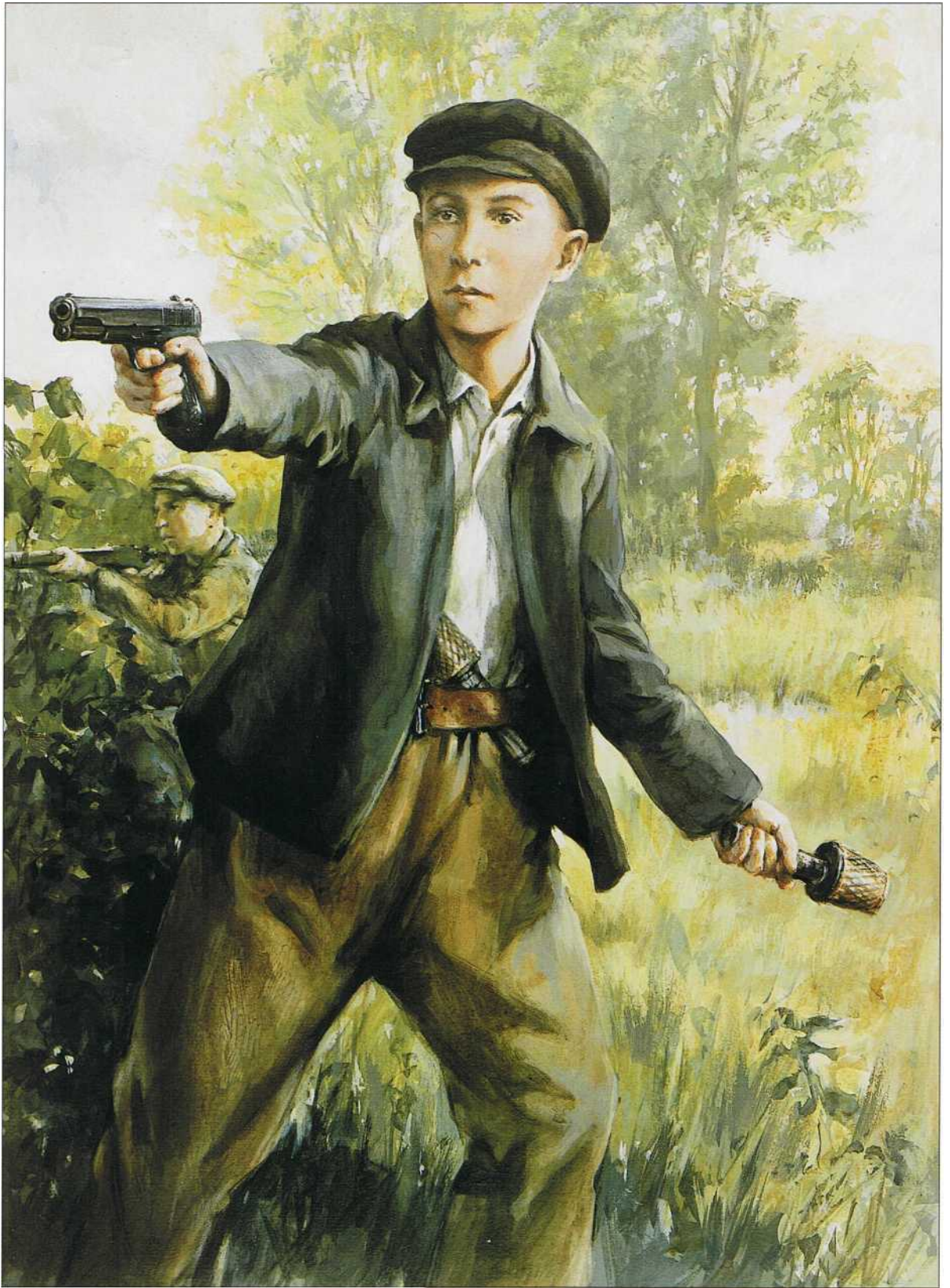


F Pilot Alexei Petrovich Maresyev, April 1942





Medic Anatoli Alexandrovich Kokorin, Northern Front, August 1941



H Partisan Marat Kazei, Khorometskoye, Belorussia, May 1944

partisan commander knew about, were to enter the enemy-occupied Ukrainian city of Rovno, and establish a spy network, which he did. Kuznetsov became acquainted with many German officers, who were useful sources of information.

On April 20, 1943, Kuznetsov made plans to sacrifice his life in an attempt to assassinate Erich Koch, the Nazi ruler of occupied Ukraine. The plan fell apart, however, and Koch escaped.

Through an acquaintance in the German Secret Service, Kuznetsov uncovered a plot to assassinate the "Big Three" (Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill), during their meeting in Tehran in 1943. Although this was a great intelligence coup, the master spy felt unfulfilled and wanted to take a more active approach in fighting the enemy.

The partisan commander gave permission to Kuznetsov to kill Paul Dargel, the first assistant to Erich Koch. Kuznetsov's first attempt was unsuccessful: he shot and killed two men at point-blank range, neither of whom was his intended victim. On September 30, 1943, ten days after that failed attempt, he tried again by throwing a grenade at Dargel. The explosion wounded his victim, who was sent to Berlin by plane. Kuznetsov managed to escape, but was wounded by shrapnel.

The failures to assassinate Koch and his assistant caused Kuznetsov much despair. On November 11, he again tried to kill one of Koch's assistants with submachine gun fire, but he missed and his victim got away.

On November 17, Kuznetsov finally succeeded - in a grand way. He entered the home of Oberführer of the SS Alfred Funk and shot him in his study. Flush with success, Kuznetsov helped kidnap Gen. von Ilgen, commander of special troops. Koch's personal driver was also captured. In another successful operation, Kuznetsov provided information on a planned punitive expedition led by Gen. Prizmann. The partisans were waiting for the German expedition and in the ambush killed the general. After this, the Germans retreated from Rovno to Lvov, and Kuznetsov followed.

One of Kuznetsov's last successes was the assassination of Gen. Otto Bauer, the vice-governor of Galitsia, in Lvov. Kuznetsov, his driver, and another comrade sprayed the general's car with submachine gun fire and killed him. The three men made for the front lines to meet Soviet troops, but became surrounded in the village of Boratyn by a unit of the Bandera (anti-communist Ukrainian Nationalists). They fought until their ammunition supply was exhausted. The three men then used grenades to blow themselves up - along with the approaching enemy.

On November 5, 1944, Nikolai Kuznetsov received the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. He is buried in Lvov on the Hill of Glory.

**Nikolai Kuznetsov is shown as a senior lieutenant in the Soviet Air Force prior to the war, although he never served with the air force. He assumed various identities to fool the Germans, and had nerves of steel. (Kiev War Museum)**



## **PARTISANS**

### **Sidor Artiomovich Kovpak**

One of the best known and most beloved leaders of the partisan movement in Ukraine was Sidor Kovpak, who looked more like a professor than a fierce warrior. He was born into a peasant family in June 1887 in the Ukrainian village of Kotelva. After service in both World War One and the Civil War, he became a teacher and was involved in Communist Party affairs.

When the Great Patriotic War began, Kovpak was 54 years old. Due to his administrative skills and tenacity for getting things done, he organized a partisan movement in Ukraine. The Kovpak Partisan Group had over 1,500 personnel, and the old man himself took an active part in the fighting. He received his first title of Hero of the Soviet Union on May 18, 1942 for many successful missions against the enemy.

The partisans had a particularly tough time in Ukraine due to the divided loyalties of the citizens there. Seeking to liberate Ukraine from the Soviet Union, thousands of anti-communist Ukrainians joined the UPA, the military arm of the Ukrainian Nationalists. Kovpak's group fought against the UPA in the Carpathian Mountains during 1943. The UPA fought in battalion strength, mostly as irregulars. The Nationalists murdered Jews and pro-Soviet Ukrainians, while Kovpak's unit targeted the Nationalists and Germans. This complex situation resulted in many civilian casualties, victims of German, Nationalist, or Soviet forces. For his successful Carpathian campaign, Kovpak received his second HSU on January 4, 1944.

Maj. Gen. Kovpak became commander of the 1st Ukrainian Partisan Division and was credited with liberating the Jews of the Skalat Labor Camp in 1944. When Kovpak made forays into Poland, Lt. Gen. Wilhelm Koppe, senior SS commander of occupied Poland, ordered the formation of special punitive group "Beyersdorf" to destroy Kovpak's partisans. Reinforced by police and other army units, this group was credited with inflicting massive casualties on the partisans. However, by this time, the Germans were in retreat, pursued by the Red Army, and the partisan movement was disbanded.

Sidor Kovpak served as a member of the Supreme Court of the Ukrainian SSR in 1944 and held various high political posts after the war. His last position was Deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. The great partisan general died on December 11, 1967 and was buried in Kiev. His bronze bust was erected in the town of Kotelva, and monuments to him can be seen in Kiev and Putivl.

### **Fyodor Alexeyevich Malyshev**

One of the most famous partisans in Belorussia was Fyodor Malyshev. He was born in April 1914 in the village of Zapolye in the Gomel region of Belorussia, into a peasant family. As a graduate of the Minsk Polytechnic



**Sidor Kovpak in an official portrait taken in Kiev, Ukraine, shortly after the war. His guerilla campaign in Ukraine was hampered by divided loyalties; he not only battled the Germans, but also anti-communist Ukrainian Nationalists.**

**OPPOSITE ABOVE Fyodor Malyshev in a postwar photograph. As of 2003, he was one of only 22 Heroes still living in Minsk, the capital of the Belarus Republic.**

**OPPOSITE This teenage partisan is armed with a rifle, a belt of ammo for the heavy Maxim machine gun, and a grenade. Partisans who were captured could expect torture and death, so they often carried a grenade to commit suicide.**



Institute, this mechanical engineer had devoted his life to building labor-saving devices. During the Great Patriotic War, he was asked to use his talents to destroy the enemy.

When the war started, Malyshev was working as an engineer at a peat plant near Vitebsk. His fellow workers, including the director of the company, were soon called to duty, but not him. When he tried to enlist, he was told, "Wait your turn, your time will come!" When the Germans captured Vitebsk on July 4, 1941, Malyshev joined a partisan detachment. Later, he was assigned to a commando team.

The Germans advanced so rapidly that they had to rush fuel, food, and munitions to the front by train to keep up the momentum. In the opposite direction came ambulance trains loaded with plunder and the wounded. Special trains took Soviet citizens and prisoners to concentration camps. The Brest-Gomel Railway Line was a critical transport artery for German Army Group Center. The Germans had to keep this vital link open; Malyshev's unit worked ceaselessly to destroy it.

On August 19, 1942, Malyshev destroyed his first enemy train. The Germans had positioned soldiers, local Belorussian police, and villagers along the tracks to thwart saboteurs. After several trains had passed, Malyshev recognized someone from his village. Assuring his leader that he would not be betrayed, Malyshev hid an explosive mine under his shirt, and mingled with the villagers. When a German guard walked slowly toward him, two villagers blocked the guard's view while he planted the explosive under the tracks. When everyone ran down the embankment at the approach of a train, Malyshev also ran. The resulting explosion was spectacular.

In the records of the 125th Partisan Brigade, the event was described: "An enemy troop train consisting of 60 carriages was blown up today. All traffic in that section of the railway was stopped for two days and nights. The Nazis cordoned off the area where the train had been derailed, and were engaged for 36 hours in carrying out their dead, dismantling the smashed carriages, and clearing the track. The train had been carrying an anti-Partisan punitive detachment."

By November 1942, Malyshev was responsible for destroying 16 trains, a success rate that led to his appointment as leader of a demolition squad. Desperate to keep the railway lines open, the

Railroads were favorite targets for partisans. These two men prepare an explosive mine to derail a German supply train. Partisan sabotage in Ukraine and Belorussia caused tremendous supply problems for the Germans.



Valentin Kotik was a hot-tempered and reckless youth when the war started. Assigned a handler, the boy's energy was channeled to support activities, which he hated. He took extreme risks by organizing his own ambushes and sabotage operations with his friends, often without his superiors' knowledge. (Kiev War Museum)



Germans hunted the partisans day and night, and it became increasingly difficult to derail trains. But despite the heavy pressure, Malyshev and his men destroyed their 18th train in April 1943.

The constant stress took a toll on Malyshev. Although he was known for his steady nerves, the constant hunger, exposure to the elements, and running from the enemy undermined his health. In the fall of 1943, he was flown to Moscow for treatment. A robust figure before the war, Malyshev now weighed only 90lb (40kg). After two months, he was released. He looked forward to action, but his superiors forbade him to return to combat. Eager to restore the local economy after the Gomel region was liberated, Soviet officials appointed Malyshev as director of the peat works there.

On April 15, 1944, Fyodor Malyshev was awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. In all, he and his men destroyed 19 heavily guarded supply trains, which caused untold damage to the German war effort in Belorussia. After the war, he worked as head of a laboratory at the Peat Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the Belorussian SSR.

### **Valentin Alexandrovich Kotik**

The youngest person ever to win the title of Hero of the Soviet Union was Valentin Kotik. His family lived in the village of Khmeliiovka in the Khmel'nitski region of western Ukraine, where he was born on February 11, 1930. His father was a carpenter while his mother labored on a collective farm.

When the Germans invaded Ukraine at the start of the Great Patriotic War, the 11-year-old Kotik decided to free his pet squirrel in a forest for fear that he would not be able to take care of it. While in the forest, he spied four military men in

strange uniforms, speaking a language he did not understand. He led some Red Army soldiers to the scene. A firefight ensued, and three of the enemy were killed and the other was captured. This incident convinced the fifth-grade student to take an active part in the war effort.

His family had a tenant, Ivan Muzaliov, a former captive of the Germans. Young Valia was suspicious of him, and suspected him of working for the Germans. In fact, Muzaliov was helping to organize a resistance group with the director of the local wood plant. Muzaliov noted that Kotik was only 11 years old, hot tempered, and impulsive. The boy had no direction at this time and posed a danger to himself, collecting leaflets dropped by Soviet planes and secretly posting them in public places. The lad made no attempt to conceal his hatred of the enemy.

One day Muzaliov found leaflets in the boy's boot and asked if he had been distributing them. 'Yes! And what of it?' shouted Valia defiantly. It was then that the tenant revealed his true identity and his efforts with the local underground. From that day on, Kotik's life took a new course. He organized the local children to collect weapons and ammunition found on the battlefields, and count enemy tanks, vehicles, and troops passing through the area.

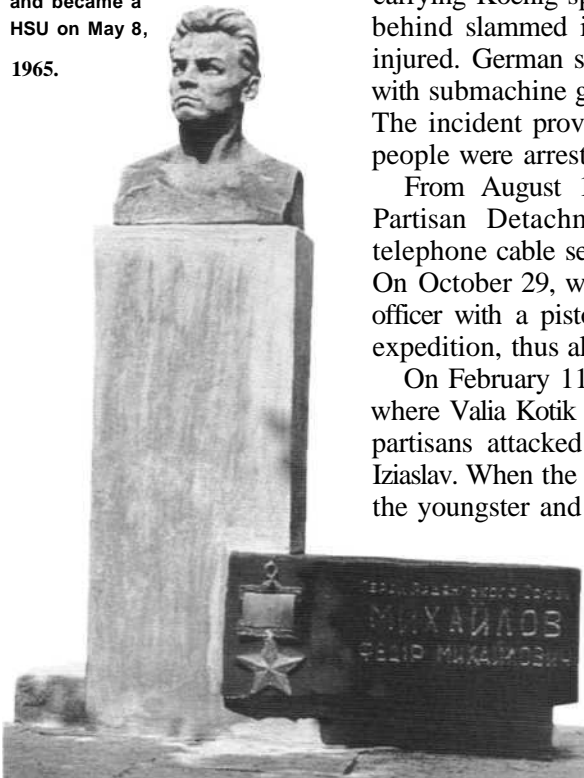
Kotik soon graduated to armed aggression when he suggested an ambush to two of his friends. He learned that the head of the Shepetovka occupation military police, Oberleutnant Fritz Koenig, was on his way to interrogate some partisans captured in a nearby town. The three boys jumped onto the road and threw grenades at the fast-approaching vehicles, then fled into the forest. The lead vehicle carrying Koenig spun out of control, and a heavy truck following close behind slammed into its rear; it is unknown if Koenig was killed or injured. German soldiers jumped out of the truck and sprayed the area with submachine gun fire, but by then, the three boys had disappeared. The incident provoked severe German retaliation, and many innocent people were arrested and executed.

From August 1943, Kotik served as a scout for the Shepetovka Partisan Detachment. In October, he located the underground telephone cable serving the local German headquarters and blew it up. On October 29, while on sentry duty' in the forest, he killed a German officer with a pistol and warned his comrades of the enemy punitive expedition, thus allowing them to fight.

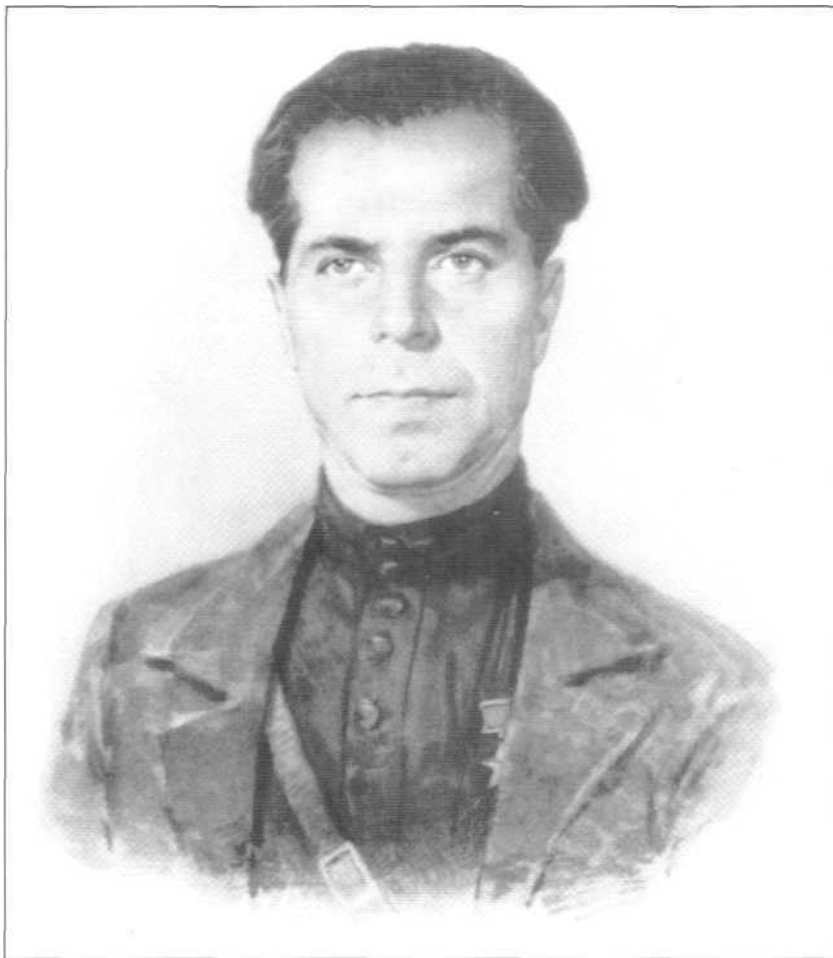
On February 11, 1944, the Red Army liberated Shepetovka, the area where Valia Kotik lived and fought. In the dawn hours of the 17th, the partisans attacked the Germans in a surprise raid on the village of Iziaslav. When the ammunition storehouse was seized, Muzaliov ordered the youngster and others to guard it. In the furious battle, Valia Kotik stood at his post and was fatally wounded. He was buried in the garden of the school where he had studied.

On June 27, 1958, Valentin Kotik was honored with the title of Hero of the Soviet Union, the youngest ever to be so honored. The 14-year-old became a role model for the Young Pioneer movement, the organization for children operated by the Soviet Communist Party.

This stone monument honors Fyodor Mikhailov in the city of Slavuta, Ukraine. He was a medical doctor who organized an underground network in the region with over 200 participants. On July 22, 1942, he was betrayed by a collaborator and arrested. Dr Mikhailov was executed that day, and became a HSU on May 8, 1965.



Dmitri Medvedev almost became a casualty of Stalin's purges before the war. "Retired" for political reasons, he was reactivated when the war started. He was a hands-on partisan leader, not only planning missions but also accompanying his group on daring sabotage raids.



### **Dmitri Nikolaevich Medvedev**

If there was ever a "big fish" in the Soviet partisan war, Dmitri Medvedev was it, and the Germans never caught him. He was born in 1898 in the Bryansk region, joined the Communist Party in 1920, and worked in the intelligence service. He worked abroad for two years (1936-38), probably in Spain, before he was called home by the NKVD to be investigated for political reasons. He survived the purges, but retired due to stress and a bad back in 1939.

When the war began, Medvedev's health problems apparently cleared up and he was recalled to active duty. As a skilled organizer, he formed 18 reconnaissance and sabotage units. He formed his own unit, called "Mitya," which operated between September 1941 and January 1942. The unit's first success occurred on September 15, 1941 when they ambushed a German convoy and killed a general. In retaliation, the enemy executed hundreds of innocent Chilians. This ruthless action actually helped Medvedev, whose unit tripled in size in only two weeks.

The partisan leaders of Mitya helped form other underground units in the Bryansk, Orel, and Mogilev regions. Troop and supply trains were frequently derailed, causing blockages in the transportation system. Scouts reported this information to the Soviet Air Force, which sent out bombers to demolish the stationary targets.



Not content to stay behind to orchestrate destruction, Medvedev took an active role in the field. He took command of a new partisan unit called "The Victors," which he led between May 1942 and March 1944. He parachuted behind enemy lines in June, aggravating his old back injury in the process. But despite the pain, he carried on. His unit operated around Rovno - where Erich Koch, the Nazi ruler of Ukraine, had his headquarters - and kept Moscow informed of German movements by radio three or four times a day. Medvedev was able to place more than 100 agents among the enemy intelligence units and occupation forces in the city.

In more than 120 heavy engagements against the Germans around Rovno, Medvedev's unit killed more than 2,000 of the enemy, including 11 generals and high officials, and destroyed 81 freight trains. Due to his valor and leadership, Dmitri Medvedev was awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union on November 5, 1944.

When the war ended, Medvedev turned his energies to social work and writing. He died on December 14, 1954 and is buried in Moscow. Memorial plaques in Bryansk and Moscow honor his memory.

### **Leonid Alexandrovich Golikov**

This teenager is revered as one of the Young Pioneer heroes of the Novgorod area. Leonid Golikov was born in the village of Lukino and finished five grades of secondary school before he left to work at a plywood plant in the town of Staraya Russa.

In March 1942, Golikov, then aged 15, joined the 67th Partisan Detachment of the 4th Leningrad Partisan Brigade. He started out as a scout and quickly learned to plant explosives. He was personally credited with the destruction of 14 important bridges and nine enemy supply trucks. In addition, Golikov was an expert marksman who killed many enemy soldiers in skirmishes.

On January 24, 1943, on the highway near the village of Ostraya Luka in the Pskov region, Golikov's group ambushed the enemy, and then fled. However, Golikov did not hear the order to retreat and stayed at his post all night. Early the next morning, he observed a German car on the road. The young scout killed the driver with a burst of his submachine gun. The passenger jumped out, but Golikov shot him dead too.

Golikov seized the dead officer's briefcase and pistol and returned to his unit. Upon examination of the briefcase, it was discovered that young Leonya had killed a general. The seized documents proved to be a treasure trove of valuable information.

Later that day, Golikov was killed while taking part in another battle. He was buried in Ostraya Luka. Monuments were dedicated to him in Novgorod and in Moscow, and a street was named after him in Novgorod.

On April 12, 1944, Leonid Golikov became a Hero of the Soviet Union.

Leonid Golikov was a teenage partisan whose death was used to inspire the Young Communist movement. His most notable success was when he single-handedly ambushed a German staff car, killing the driver and his passenger, a general officer, and retrieving valuable documents.





**Piotr Gavrilov's name will forever be associated with the defense of the Brest Fortress. His heroism so impressed his captors that they used him to inspire their own troops! (Belarussian State Museum)**

## **INFANTRYMEN**

### **Piotr Mikhailovich Gavrilov**

So heroic was Piotr Gavrilov in combat that the Germans who captured him spared his life to inspire their own comrades! The son of a Tatar peasant family, he was born in June 1900 in the village of Alvedino, Tatarsakaya ASSR, and joined the Soviet Army in 1918, taking an active part in the Civil War. Gavrilov graduated from the M. V. Frunze Military Academy in 1939 and fought against the Finns in the Winter War.

When the Germans attacked the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, one of the key strategic targets was Brest, an ancient fortress city situated along the Western Bug River, separating Belorussia from Poland. Spearheading the surprise sledgehammer assault was the German 45th Infantry Division of Army Group Center.

Maj. Gavrilov, commander of the 44th Infantry Regiment, was stationed at Brest Fortress when the invasion began. Not only were the defenders outnumbered ten to one, but also many key officers were off duty, spending the weekend in town. Field Marshal von Kluge, commanding the German 4th Army, was determined to vanquish the fortress by dinnertime.

After a ferocious artillery barrage, German infantry rushed the outer walls. Maj. Gavrilov's men stood firm and repulsed successive waves of enemy infantry. He organized the medical treatment of the wounded and ran from position to position to assess the rapidly deteriorating defensive situation. Another fierce German barrage from over 500 artillery pieces across the river pounded the fortress. By the end of the day, the enemy had gained a foothold.

Disorganized and isolated pockets of Soviet soldiers fought back tenaciously. Gavrilov continued to lead the remnants of his regiment, retreating under fire to various places within the fortress, and fighting on. While hunger and thirst took their toll of the defenders, the Germans still could not capture the fortress.

The frustrated Germans issued a final ultimatum to surrender on June 29. When this fell on deaf ears, the Germans attacked with dive bombers and tanks. Hundreds of civilians were captured, along with many wounded soldiers. Maj. Gavrilov went into hiding with his adjutant. Days after the fortress fell, the two men stumbled upon a dozen survivors. They hid during the day and fired on the Germans at night.

The exhausted men were surprised one day by an enemy patrol and a brief fight occurred. Only Gavrilov and two others survived. The fort was now completely surrounded and they expected to be hunted down the next morning. That night, the three men made their way to the front gate where the enemy encampment was located. They shook hands, bade farewell, threw grenades at the soldiers huddled around a campfire, and then ran. In the confusion, Gavrilov escaped from the fort, but could not cross the river. He made his way back toward the fort



and found refuge in a horse stable, hiding himself under a pile of horse manure.

Crazed with hunger, Gavrilov ate horse feed and drank from the fort's moat. He became violently ill five days later. His groans attracted some Germans, who kicked at the dung heap. Gavrilov fired his pistol and the Germans fled, only to quickly return in force. From his hiding place, Gavrilov shot at the Germans and threw grenades. He was finally captured after a grenade blast knocked him unconscious.

Amazed that anyone could survive for so long, the German officers treated their prisoner like a prized trophy. Maj. Gavrilov spent the rest of the war in a prison camp until he was liberated in May 1945. He served in the army until 1946.

On January 30, 1957, Piotr Gavrilov was finally awarded the well-deserved title of Hero of the Soviet Union. The award, long denied to former prisoners of war, only became possible after Stalin's death. Gavrilov died on January 26, 1979. He was buried in the cemetery in the grounds of Brest Fortress.

### **Mookhudin Umurdinov**

The name Mookhudin Umurdinov is still spoken with reverence today in the Fergana Valley of Uzbekistan, long after this Hero's death. He was born on April 10, 1912 in the small farm village of Baistan. Having completed ten years of school, young Mookhudin worked briefly as a fireman in Dagestan before joining the Red Army in 1937. He served until 1939, then returned home. After the start of the Great Patriotic War, he rejoined the military.

On January 7, 1942, Umurdinov was shipped off to the Soviet-Manchuria border to help guard against a possible Japanese attack. He

**A two-man antitank team in action. Their single-shot weapon is a 14.5mm PTRD-41, which fired an incendiary bullet that could penetrate 1in (25mm) of steel plate.**



Mookhudin Umurdinov's HSU medal was purchased by author Henry Sakaïda in 1997 from a dealer in Germany. The medal and award booklet were returned to the Hero's son, Rahmatjon Umurdinov, via the US Embassy in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, on August 9, 2002. The medal had been stolen from his home after a flood when the village was evacuated.

served as a scout for three months, then was assigned as a cook. When the Germans advanced toward Moscow, his unit was pulled out and thrust into the Orel-Kursk battles.

On June 5, 1943, Sgt. Umurdinov of the 1022nd Rifle Regiment crossed a river with his platoon under murderous fire. In the action, the company commanders as well as the platoon leader were killed. Umurdinov took over and led his six surviving comrades forward. Pinned down by heavy machine-gun fire, one of his men created a diversion while he searched for the nest. The Germans were firing from a concealed position behind a haystack. The Uzbek sergeant took a flamethrower and set the haystack on fire. When the enemy tried to escape, he mowed them down with his submachine gun.

Sgt. Umurdinov and his men could not advance due to the enemy's superior numbers. "We returned to the trenches and stayed there until nightfall," he later wrote. "In the evening, moving quietly along the edge of the precipice, we hit upon the German trenches. After a fight, we occupied that trench and held it for about 24 hours. We made forays in order to eliminate their snipers up in the trees. After destroying them, we advanced two kilometers [1.2 miles] and killed 104 Fascists. This allowed the seven of us to stop

the attack of a large enemy unit. We held our position until relieved."

On August 4, Umurdinov, now a platoon leader, led a paratrooper group against the village of Plescheyevo. In hand-to-hand fighting, they killed over 20 of the enemy. On the 14th, Sgt. Umurdinov again exhibited great leadership when his men stormed the village of Krivoshein and routed the enemy.

Recommended for the title of Hero of the Soviet Union, Umurdinov received the Gold Star Medal on June 4, 1944. He was one of only 69 Uzbeks to become a Hero during the war.

Umurdinov returned to his village after demobilization and started a family. As a radio technician, he worked to bring electricity to his village. He also served as chairman of a collective farm until he died on May 21, 1981. A street and a school in his native land bear his name.

In May 1997, 16 years after Umurdinov's death, his Gold Star Medal was stolen when the family evacuated their home due to flooding. The medal was smuggled out of Uzbekistan and landed in the hands of a German medals dealer. In December of the same year, the author purchased this medal. The serial number on the medal helped locate the family.

On August 9, 2002, Rahmatjon Umurdinov, the third son of the Hero, received his father's medal and order booklet from the hands of USMC Gen. Peter Pace, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, during a ceremony at the Uzbek National Military Museum. The return was orchestrated by the author, US Ambassador John Edward Herbst,

and Assistant Public Affairs Officer Stefanie Altman. The medal's return was hailed as a miraculous tribute to a great Uzbek Hero.

### **Alexandr Andreyevich Divochkin**

One of the greatest little battles of the Great Patriotic War was won by a man who used his cunning to fool the Germans into thinking that they were up against a formidable opponent. That man was Alexandr Divochkin, who was born in the village of Lopatino in the Moscow region in November 1914.

Divochkin worked as a construction worker in a factory, but then opted for a military career. In 1936, he joined the army and took part in the Winter War against the Finns. The young officer was a natural leader, and he joined the Communist Party in 1940. At the start of the Great Patriotic War, Jr. Lt. Divochkin served as commander of a batten' of the 15th Motorized Infantry Regiment of the NKVD troops.

In August 1941, on the outskirts of Leningrad, German forces advanced steadily. Their infantry, supported by tanks, met little resistance as they breached the lines held by the Soviets. However, near the village of Petrozavodsk the Germans encountered a mighty obstacle named Alexandr Divochkin.

In the furious fighting, nearly all of the artillery teams holding back the Germans were knocked out. The young lieutenant ran from cover to cover to assess the rapidly deteriorating defensive situation. All the while, tank shells exploded on their positions with no end in sight.

When the commander was killed, Jr. Lt. Divochkin took over. A shell exploded in the boxes of artillery ammunition, starting a fire. Divochkin

**BELOW** Alexandr Divochkin in his official HSU portrait with the collar rank insignia of a senior lieutenant, taken in September 1941. (RGAKFD)

**BELOW RIGHT** This sketch from a 1943 Komsomol book depicts Alexandr Divochkin in combat against advancing German tanks, an action that earned him the Hero's title.



risked his life to smother the flames with sand, then set about positioning his gun and firing it. Shells exploded close to him, but he continued with this task. He then ran over to another gun and started firing it too, thus giving the illusion that the Soviet position remained intact.

For over two hours, Divochkin gave orders and worked the two guns as the Germans came within grenade-throwing distance. By this time, the Soviets had regrouped and started a counter-attack. Divochkin continued to fire to support his troops. When the fighting stopped, they counted over 70 dead Germans, many more wounded and left on the battlefield, and many heavy machine guns captured.

On August 26, 1941, Jr. Lt. Alexandr Divochkin became a Hero of the Soviet Union, one of the earliest recipients of the war. In 1943, he graduated from the M. V. Frunze Military Academy and commanded a parachute regiment until war's end. He died on August 19, 1946 and is buried in Moscow.

### The Heroes of Taranovka Station

The Battle of Taranovka Station became one of the most famous small battles of the Great Patriotic War. It started on March 2, 1943 when the Germans made a determined attack to capture the village and railroad station at Taranovka in the Kharkov region of Ukraine. The 78th Guards Infantry Regiment held the village, but only a 25-man platoon defended the station.

Lt. Piotr Shironin and his men found themselves in a precarious situation at the station. They were cut off and on their own. His men positioned themselves around a 45mm field gun they had found; its crew had been killed earlier in an air strike. The Germans threw 35 tanks and armored vehicles at the defenders, but the platoon fought back savagely. Artillery in the village gave support to the outnumbered platoon by laying down a carpet of fire; engineers mined the approaches to the area.

Sr. Sgt. Sergey Nechipurenko and Pvt. Alexandr Tjurin knocked out three tanks with the field gun, but the enemy's self-propelled gun found their mark. Tjurin was wounded and the gun and his comrade were lost. As this vehicle was about to overrun their position, Pvt. Andrei Skvortsov sacrificed his life by throwing himself under the gun's tracks and destroying the vehicle with an antitank grenade.



**Table 3:  
The Heroes of Taranovka Station**

- Lt. Piotr Shironin (survived battle, died June 30, 1968)
- Sr. Sgt. Ivan G. Vernigorenko (survived, died January 26, 1984)
- Sr. Sgt. Sergey G. Zimin (KIA)
- Sr. Sgt. Sergey V. Nechipurenko (KIA)
- Sr. Sgt. Alexandr P. Boltushkin (KIA)
- Sgt. Vasily S. Grudinin (KIA)
- Sgt. Nikolai I. Kiryanov (KIA)
- Sgt. Ivan V. Sedih (KIA)
- Sgt. Alexandr I. Suhin (KIA)
- Pvt. Vasily L. Isakov (survived, died of wounds August 30, 1943)
- Pvt. Ivan P. Bukayev (survived, died August 11, 1971)
- Pvt. Alexandr F. Toropov (survived, died May 27, 1946)
- Pvt. Alexandr N. Tjurin (survived, died June 18, 1980)
- Pvt. Alexsei I. Kraiko (KIA)
- Pvt. Pavel A. Gertman (KIA)
- Pvt. Ivan P. Vizgalin (KIA)
- Pvt. Yakov D. Zlobin (KIA)
- Pvt. Vasily D. Tantsurenko (KIA)
- Pvt. Ivan N. Silayev (KIA)
- Pvt. Nikolai I. Subbotin (KIA)
- Pvt. Stepan P. Fazdeyev (KIA)
- Pvt. Vasily M. Pavlov (KIA)
- Pvt. Ivan M. Chertenkov (KIA)
- Pvt. Andrei A. Skvortsov (KIA)
- Pvt. Piotr T. Shkodin (KIA)

**OPPOSITE** Lt. Piotr Shironin's 25-man platoon faced down 35 German tanks and armored vehicles and defeated them in one of the most heroic actions of the war. Every man in the platoon became a Hero. (Kiev War Museum)

Georgi Gubkin as a major after the war. Besides his HSU Medal, he also wears on his left chest, the Order of Lenin, Order of the Red Banner, Medal for Bravery, and the Medal for Victory over Germany. On his right chest, he wears (left to right) the Order of the Patriotic War 1st Class, Order of Alexander Nevsky, and the Order of Bogdan Khmel'nitsky 3rd Class (all awarded for combat leadership). (RGAKFD)



The German advance was stopped cold and the invaders became mired in ferocious fighting. Pvts Piotr Shkodin, Nikolai Subbotin, Vasily Tantsurenko, and Sgt. Ivan Sedih each threw themselves under the approaching tanks with antitank grenades and demolished them.

The enemy finally pulled back after failing to take the railway station, losing 16 tanks and armored vehicles. They also suffered over 100 dead and many more wounded. Lt. Shironin was badly wounded, and only five others from his platoon survived.

All 25 men under Shironin's command were awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union on May 18, 1943, see Table 3. This was one of the few instances where the HSU was awarded en masse to an entire unit. A monument to these brave men was erected at Taranovka, and the railroad station was given the name Shironino after the platoon's commander.

### **Georgi Nikitovich Gubkin**

Georgi Gubkin gained fame for his "high noon" duel with a German officer during the winter of 1944. He was born in the village of Semidomka (a tiny settlement of only seven houses) in the Amur region in April 1919. He was a teacher before the Great Patriotic War.

When the war started, Gubkin joined the army and was sent to the Khabarovsk military school. He entered combat with the 297th Infantry Regiment as a lieutenant in July 1942.

A year later, Lt. Gubkin distinguished himself during the vicious Battle of the Kursk Salient. Operation *Citadel*, the German tank-led offensive designed to take Kursk in three days, was stopped cold. Before the enemy could launch a counterattack, the Soviets delivered a preemptive strike using heavy artillery and rockets. Gubkin led his company to stop the enemy from breaking through and creating a breach in the forward artillery positions.

In a desperate attempt to keep the tanks at bay, Gubkin directed his antitank gunners by braving intense enemy fire and jumping from one position to another. As enemy infantrymen advanced, he joined in the hand-to-hand fighting. When one of the Panther tanks was about to overrun their position, Gubkin was determined to sacrifice his life to destroy it. He crawled forward to detonate his last antitank grenade beneath the tank. Gubkin hugged the ground as the Panther rolled right over him, then lobbed his grenade after it had cleared. The tremendous explosion destroyed it, saving the company's position. For his heroism, Gubkin was decorated and promoted to captain.

On August 17, 1944, the battalion commanded by Capt. Gubkin became the first Soviet

unit to break through to the border of Germany. For this feat, he received a congratulatory letter and a decoration from President Roosevelt.

During the winter of 1944, in a lull in the fighting, Capt. Gubkin was notified that a German officer had sent a challenge, asking him to meet in no man's land for a duel. After a series of communications with the Germans, the stage was set. The Germans were fully aware of Gubkin by name and that his unit was the first to cross into the Fatherland. The German was a Luftwaffe officer and ace forced to fight as an infantryman, a situation he found most degrading.

In a scene reminiscent of a Hollywood Western, the two men walked slowly toward each other as comrades from both sides watched. When they were within killing range, both stopped and stared. Gubkin went for his gun first, followed by his opponent. The Russian emptied his Tokarev and the German fell wounded. As both sides began exchanging fire, the Soviets dragged the wounded Luftwaffe officer to their side, where he was treated and interrogated.

Capt. Gubkin led his men further into Germany, advancing close to Konigsburg. In February 1945, he was seriously wounded and did not return to combat. He eventually married the nurse in his unit who helped operate on him.

On March 24, 1945, Capt. Georgi Gubkin received the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. He was also made Honorary Citizen of the towns of Shakiai and Kudirkos-Naumestis of the Lithuanian SSR. He continued in the military until he retired in 1962.

### **Vasily Kharinaevich Khantaev**

The life story of this ethnic Mongolian (Buryat) was a success in more ways than one. Vasily Khantaev was born in August 1924 in the small village of Baitog in the Irkutsk region of eastern Siberia. In his youth, he helped his parents on the farm and attended school. Upon graduation, he became a bookkeeper in a transportation company.

At the beginning of the Great Patriotic War, Khantaev rushed to join the army. He found himself on the frontlines in August 1942 as an artilleryman and fought in the Battle of Kursk. On July 10, 1943, he was wounded and wrote home to his parents: "In the great battle of Kursk, I got a little scratch. Soon, I will get well and return to the front. Very soon we'll drive away the fascist invaders from our land!" After recovers<sup>1</sup>, he took part in the liberation of cities and villages in Ukraine and Poland.

Jr. Sgt. Khantaev arrived on the outskirts of Berlin with the 70th Proskurov Order of the Red Banner, Order of Suvorov Mechanized Brigade. A master gunner, he commanded a 76mm antitank team made up of a Buryat, Russian, Uzbek,

Heroes after the war were literally grabbed off the streets by grateful citizens who brought them home as honored dinner guests to hear their stories. When Vasily Khantaev came to Moscow to participate in the Victory Parade, he was seized by a beautiful Russian girl named Galina, who brought him home to her family. The couple fell in love, married, and he took her back to Siberia where they started a family.  
(Ludmila Khantaeva)







Author Henry Sakaida, left, bought and returned the stolen Gold Star Medal of Vasily Khantaev to his daughter Ludmila Khantaeva (second left). The photo was taken in Ulan Ude, the capital of the Buryat Republic, in the government administrative building on August 7, 2003. During the research, he brought together Darima Socktoeva of Ulan Ude, and Craig Fotheringham of California (right), who were married there on August 9.

Belorussian, and an Armenian. The team set to work, opening fire from an open position and destroying two steam locomotives with six enemy snipers in them.

On April 26, 1945, Team Khantaev destroyed 11 enemy machine-gun positions hidden in houses and apartment buildings. During the house-to-house fighting, Khantaev could not use his gun for fear of killing his own troops. Grabbing a submachine gun, he yelled, "Forward! For the Motherland!" and charged toward the enemy stronghold leading his men. He killed nine Germans armed with *Panzerfausts* (antitank weapons), facilitating the advance of Soviet tanks and infantry. But the day was not over yet.

Fierce enemy fire prevented the Soviets from crossing a major square in the city. Khantaev was ordered to destroy the enemy positions. Their first shot destroyed a Panther tank, but the Germans retaliated by showering the gun crew with grenades, killing all but Khantaev. Although wounded in the head, the sergeant carried on alone, and destroyed a tank. When another German tank rounded the corner to attack his position, some Soviet infantrymen ran up and helped him turn his gun around. Facing each other, it was Khantaev who fired first and the third tank was demolished.

There was no respite. Two enemy armored cars advanced toward Khantaev while an anti-aircraft gun was working feverishly to knock him out. Khantaev loaded and fired while infantrymen brought ammunition. He destroyed the armored

A Hero and his comrades pay their respect to German composer Johann Strauss at his gravesite in Germany in early 1945. (Paul McDaniel)



cars and antiaircraft gun with his accurate aim, allowing the Soviet tanks to take the square.

On May 1, Khantaev moved his gun ahead of the infantry and destroyed an enemy column comprising four armored personnel carriers, nine vehicles loaded with *Panzerfausts*, and seven motorcycles.

During the Battle of Berlin, Khantaev eliminated over three companies of Germans and personally captured 49 men, including the district Volksturm commander. Col. Gen. Rybalko, commander of the 3rd Guards Tank Army, recommended that the young Buryat sergeant be awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. On June 27, 1945, Vasily Khantaev became one of only five Buryats to win the Gold Star Medal.

After the war, Vasily Khantaev worked as a director of a state farm, and later became chief engineer in charge of supplies in the Ulan Ude office of the USSR Academy of Sciences. He died in 1991.

### **The Reichstag Heroes**

The storming of the Reichstag was of great symbolic importance to the Soviet Union. It signified the final nail in the coffin of Nazi Germany's "Thousand Year Reich." While most of the Soviet soldiers who fought in the rubble of Berlin cared little about the Reichstag or even knew what it was, to Marshals Georgi Zhukov and Ivan Koniev, it was the prize plum. The honor of taking it fell to Zhukov whose forces beat those of his rival to the enemy capital.

Many Soviet commanders wanted to be the first to plant their unit's standard in the Reichstag. For 35-year-old Lt. Col. Naum Peysakhovski, the leader of the 164th Rifle Regiment, it was personal. With revolver in hand, the fearless Jewish officer yelled, "Follow me!" as he led a charge through a hail of gunfire toward the objective, upon reaching the building he continued fighting. His brave charge inspired the troops and led to his becoming a Hero.





**OPPOSITE AND ABOVE**

Under a hail of machine-gun fire, Soviet troops rush toward the Reichstag to plant the Banner of Victory. The building had been vacant for many years due to fire damage, but it became a symbolic target for the Soviets to capture.

The Red Banner No. 5 of the Military Council of the 3rd Shock Army had been reserved and carefully guarded for hoisting above the Reichstag. However, on April 30, 1945, the building was still being held tenaciously by diehard Waffen-SS troops.

Capt. Stepan Neustroyev, leading a company of shock troops of the 756th Rifle Regiment, was ordered to give a report to his superior, Col. Fyodor Zinchenko, to confirm the flag raising. A report had been given to the senior officers, stating that the banner had been raised at 1445 hours over the Reichstag. Assuming that the building had fallen, the Military Council of the 1st Belorussian Front made a premature announcement and recommended commendations for those involved.

Trying to calm his commander, Neustroyev explained that there were quite a few red flags in the building, planted in positions occupied by the various units that had fought their way inside. In reality, Banner No. 5 was still at headquarters nearby, and the troops responsible for hoisting this flag were pinned down in the square in front of the Reichstag. Zinchenko was furious. He issued an order to bring the banner at once.

The two appointed standard-bearers of the regiment, Sgt. Mikhail Yegorov and Jr. Sgt. Meliton Kantaria, arrived shortly with the special banner. "This is to be the Banner of Victory! Get up there and hoist it high where it can be seen from all over!" ordered Neustroyev. They saluted and rushed out with the banner, accompanied by their comrades.

This staged daylight photo of the banner raising was taken a few days after the first red banner was planted at night. Soldiers from various platoons fought their way in and planted small red flags throughout the building before the arrival of the Banner of Victory, but these events were not dramatic enough for propaganda purposes, so they were virtually ignored. When an enlisted man, who was awarded the Order of Glory 1st Class (equivalent to the HSU), came forward in the 1970s to claim that he was the first man to plant the red flag in the building, he was told that the official history would not be rewritten.



A while later, the two sergeants returned with bad news. Sgt. Yegorov explained to the colonel that it was too dark inside the Reichstag and they didn't have flashlights to find their way to the roof! Zinchenko could barely contain his anger. "The Supreme Command of the Armed Forces of the USSR, on behalf of our Motherland and the entire Soviet people, has ordered you to hoist the Banner of Victory over Berlin. This historic moment has come, and you have not found the way to the roof!" he hissed incredulously.

Col. Zinchenko then ordered Capt. Neustroyev to take personal charge of the assignment. Sgt. Maj. Ilya Syanov's company of machine gunners fought their way into the building and cleared the way to the top amid wild gunfire and grenade explosions. At 2250 hours, Yegorov and Kantaria, climbing on the shoulders of Lt. Alexei Berest, unfurled and secured the Banner of Victory on the roof of the Reichstag.

Even while the flag was being positioned, intense fighting continued in the various parts of the huge darkened building. The fanatical defenders contested every floor and room. Sr. Lt. Konstantin Samsonov

led his men to root out the remaining staunch defenders from the cellars in a 30-hour skirmish.

Capt. Neustroyev was not through yet. Word was sent that the defenders would negotiate surrender, but not to the 22-year-old captain. The German general insisted on dealing with an officer of equal rank. Not wishing to accommodate their request, the resourceful captain solved this problem by putting a leather coat on Lt. Berest, an imposing man, and ordering him to act like a general. The ruse worked and the Germans surrendered the Reichstag on May 2. On May 8, 1945, the Great Patriotic War finally came to an end.

When the fighting was over, Marshal Zhukov found over 20 reports and recommendations for the title of Hero of the Soviet Union on his desk. The documents showed different and contradictory accounts of the time and location of hoisting the Banner of Victory). Zhukov announced that no one was to receive the HSU title until the confusion was sorted out. For the time being, the men would receive the lesser award of the Order of the Red Banner.

Col. Fyodor Zinchenko, commander of the 756th Rifle Regiment, which stormed the Reichstag, was awarded the title of HSU on May 31, 1945, as was Lt. Col. Naum Peysakhovski of the 164th. However, the other men connected with the banner raising did not receive the HSU title until a year later, on the first anniversary of the end of the Great Patriotic War.

On May 8, 1946, Capt. Stepan Neustroyev, Sgt. Mikhail Yegorov, and Jr. Sgt. Meliton Kantaria became Heroes of the Soviet Union, followed by Sgt. Maj. Ilya Syanov a week later. Lt. Alexei Berest, who surely deserved the award, was ignored. In 2002, veterans of Rostov sent a petition to President Putin to recognize Berest with the title of Hero of Russia. Berest had died long before, killed in 1970 while saving a girl from under the wheels of a train.



The men who stormed the Reichstag to raise the Banner of Victory are congratulated by Maj. Gen. F. A. Volkov. They are, left to right: Maj. Stepan Neustroyev (shaking hands with Maj. Gen. Volkov), Capt. Konstantin Samsonov, Sgt. Maj. Ilya Syanov, Sgt. Mikhail Yegorov, and Jr. Sgt. Meliton Kantaria.

# THE PLATES

## A: The Gold Star Medal and the Order of Lenin

The Gold Star Medal (A1 and A2) depicted here is the Type 2 (Late Suspension) variety, which was implemented on June 19, 1943 to replace the Type 1 (Early Suspension). The basic difference is the size of the square suspension. The Type 1's suspension is shorter at  $\frac{2}{3}$ in (15mm) while the Type 2 is longer at  $\frac{3}{4}$ in (19.5mm). Both suspensions are  $\frac{2}{3}$ in (15mm) wide. It is believed that the suspension was elongated to accommodate the heavy weight of the gold star, the suspension on the Type 1 having proved inadequate. Color photographs of the Type 1 Gold Star Medal can be found in Elite 90, *Heroines of the Soviet Union*.

The medal is quite small in comparison to other Soviet medals. From the center of the star to the tip measures  $\frac{2}{3}$ in (15mm). The star is made of  $\frac{3}{4}$ oz (21.5g) of 23K solid gold (950/1000). The reverse is inscribed "Hero USSR" in Cyrillic lettering with the serial number stamped above. These medals were produced at both the Leningrad and Moscow mints. The suspension is made from gold-plated sterling silver. The medal was attached to the clothing by means of a screw post and a screw back plate.

The Type 2 variety was last awarded on December 24, 1991 to Leonid Solodkov (serial number 11,664). The Gold Star Medal No. 5500 depicted here was awarded to Soviet tank commander Dmitri Tsurubin (page 22). The Russian Federation, formed after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, still awards the Gold Star Medal. The solid red ribbon was changed to white, blue, and red to reflect the national colors of the Russian Federation.

It may be confusing for the reader to know that the Order of Lenin was the USSR's highest award while the title of HSU was its highest distinction. The Gold Star Medal was not an order and was instituted solely to identify the Hero.

There are six types of the Order of Lenin. Depicted here (A3, A4 and A5) is the Type 5 variety (Circular Five-sided Suspension), serial number 32,431, which was awarded to

Hero of the Soviet Union Maj. Dmitri Tsurubin along with his Gold Star Medal. Types 1 through 4 were awarded without a ribbon suspension and were attached to the clothing by a screw post and a circular screw back plate. The Type 5 was hung from a five-sided suspension (ribbon), and this type was awarded from June 19, 1943 until the early 1950s. It is made of 23K solid gold with a portrait of Lenin in platinum attached to a circular field of blue/gray enamel, surrounded by wheatears, with a red enamel banner which has the name "Lenin" on it. The serial number is stamped at the top, while the mint's name (Moscow Mint) is inscribed in raised Cyrillic lettering at the bottom.

## B: Sniper Fyodor Ohlopkov, Vitebsk, Belorussia, May 1944

Sgt. Fyodor Ohlopkov, a native Yakut hunter, prepares to claim his 400th individual victim. Ohlopkov's weapon is a Mosin Nagant 7.62 x 54mm rifle fitted with a compact 3.5-power PU scope. Unlike the standard Mosin Nagant, his weapon has a turned-down bolt. The Soviet sniper, when engaged in the hunt, was paired with an observer, who was also a sniper. The observer's task was to scout the terrain for victims, record the kills, and protect his comrade. After a kill, they traded places, the observer becoming the shooter. Each man carried about 120 rounds, some of it armor piercing and incendiary. Snipers' targets were not limited to enemy soldiers. They frequently disabled vehicles by setting their gas tanks on fire or putting a bullet through the engine or radiator. Most sniper engagements were at distances of around 100yd (100m) in urban settings and 400yd (400m) in rural ones.

The two men are wearing summer camouflage clothing, which was first introduced in 1943. They are both wearing the M1940 steel helmet.

Yakut snipers aimed for the target's head, whereas the majority of other snipers went for a body shot (chest). Asked why they preferred a headshot, the Yakuts answered that they were used to shooting small game, and that a man's



On April 20, 1945, Maj. Anatoli Rogozin of the 36th Tank Brigade broke through into Munchenberg. Pursuing the enemy, his tanks were the first to get into the outskirts of Berlin and seize the Silesian Railway Station. In the street fighting, they destroyed ten tanks and armored troop carriers. Maj. Rogozin became a HSU on May 31, 1945.

head was about the size of a squirrel. A shot to the head from a 7.62 x 54 bullet was always fatal.

#### **C: Mikhail Gakhokidze, Sevastopol, June 1942**

On June 11, 1942, during the Battle of Sevastopol, a platoon of the 386th Rifle Regiment, holding a strategic position, was about to be overrun by the Germans. Knowing that the fate of his comrades was in his hands, Lt. Mikhail Levanovich Gakhokidze led a four-man team of reinforcements and went to the platoon's rescue.

Lt. Gakhokidze was a native of Georgia, which has a reputation for producing warriors with swarthy good looks, hot tempers, and luxurious mustaches. In the illustration, Gakhokidze has just killed a German soldier, taken his MG-42 light machine gun, and has turned it on the advancing enemy. Firing from the hip, he would mow down over 40 Germans and turn the tide of battle, saving his platoon.

The German MG-42 was a fearsome and very deadly weapon, which fired 1,500 rounds of 7.92mm ammunition per minute. It accounted for about 70 percent of the German Gruppe's firepower. Most of this weapon was pressed from sheet metal and welded.

Mikhail Gakhokidze became a HSU on June 20, 1942 and survived the war. He lived and worked in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, until he died on December 31, 1972.

#### **D: Spy Robert Klein, Cherkassy, central Ukraine, September 1943**

"Under the Führer's order, not a single vehicle will pass to the right bank of the Dnieper!" thundered Robert Klein, a Soviet officer posing as a colonel of the German General Staff, to thwart the retreat of the German 4th Tank Army. It is a day in September 1943 on a bridge over the Dnieper River at Cherkassy, central Ukraine. "We must keep the bridgehead on the left bank and wait for the approaching reinforcements. According to the Führer's new plan, the offensive is going to start from this point!"

When the bridge commander asked to see his written order, Klein's partisan driver, seated in the Kubelwagen, secretly reached for a grenade. Playing his role to the hilt, Klein drew a presentation nickel-plated pistol and screamed, "On the Führer's order!" and shot toward the officer to get his attention. He was now prepared to kill him with a second shot to maintain his cover. Convinced of his special assignment, the commander obeyed. Klein stayed at the bridge for over six hours and directed the removal of explosives wired along the bridge. As a direct result of his ruse, the Germans suffered tremendous losses when the Soviets attacked. On January 4, 1944, Robert Klein, a Soviet citizen of German ancestry, was awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union; he died in 1990.

Klein wears the dress uniform of the German GHQ staff officer. His peaked service cap has red carmine piping to the band and crown. The standard officer field blouse is the M36 pattern with contrasting green collar. To show that he is a member of the General Staff, his shoulder boards have carmine red underlay. The collar patches are of unique design, with elaborate embroidery in fine aluminum hand-stitched thread on a carmine red rather than the normal dark green underlay.

He wears the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross at his throat. The leather belt is a standard army officer's issue. On his left



**Lt. Marcel Lefevre was one of four fighter aces of the Normandie-Niemen Regiment of French pilots to become a HSU. He claimed 14 victories (11 confirmed) before being shot down on May 28, 1944 and dying in hospital of his injuries on June 5. He received the title of HSU on June 4, 1945. The Normandie-Niemen unit flew 5,240 missions, claimed 273 victories, lost 46 pilots, and won the eternal gratitude of the Soviet Union. (Normandie-Niemen Museum)**

hip is a small leather pistol holster (obscured here). High-ranking officers, never expecting to fight in the field, favored the small and light Walther PP and PPK, or the Mauser H&C as a side arm. Klein's breeches have the "Lampassen" stripes of the General Staff (worn by all generals, but also by non-general rank officers on the staff), consisting of two broad red stripes with a narrow red stripe between them. He wears the standard officer's leather jackboots.

#### **E: Sailor Nikolai Golubkov, Fuyuan, north-east China, August 1945**

Warrant Officer Nikolai Golubkov was one of very few Heroes who won the title while fighting against the Japanese. On August 8, 1945, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan, which was on the verge of collapse. WO Golubkov, commander of a ship anti-aircraft battery of the Amur Flotilla, landed with his men at Fuyuan on the north-eastern Chinese coast. As the Soviet marines charged inland, their path was blocked by several machine-gun nests in earth-and-timber emplacements. When the attack began to stall, Golubkov stood up and shouted, "For the Motherland, for Stalin!" and rushed forward.

He is wearing a plain naval visored cap with a red star. Sailors wore the traditional blue and white striped cotton



**Capt. (3rd rank) Yaroslav Iosseliani commanded the M-111 in the Black Sea Navy. He made 11 combat sorties and sank 12 enemy ships. He became a HSU on May 16, 1944. His submarine was awarded the Order of the Red Banner.**

**OPPOSITE** The Americans provided the Soviets with Lend Lease equipment such as tanks, vehicles, aircraft, armaments, foodstuffs, and clothing. Jeeps like the one shown here were especially prized for their versatility. (Paul McDaniel)

shirt under a dark blue jumper top, with black trousers. Our Hero is armed with the PPSH-41 submachine gun and stick grenades.

He succeeded in lobbing a grenade through the slit opening of a machine-gun nest, but received fatal wounds. The resulting explosion destroyed the target and allowed the marines to overrun the Japanese positions. For his sacrifice, Nikolai Golubkov was awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union on August 14, 1945.

**F: Pilot Alexei Petrovich Maresyev, April 1942**

During the war, many determined pilots refused to be sidelined after serious injury - the Luftwaffe's famed Stuka pilot Hans Ulrich Rudel, lost a leg, while Britain's Douglas Bader lost both - and returned to combat. Like Bader, Alexei Maresyev had both legs amputated, and yet went on to fly again.

On April 4, 1942, Lt. Maresyev was flying a mission in a Yak-1 when his division engaged a dozen Me-109s. His plane was hit and he tried to make an emergency landing in a forest, which proved impossible. His aircraft plowed into trees and he was catapulted from the cockpit, breaking both legs. In an epic struggle against nature, he crawled through the snow for 18 days on his belly, using the sun as his compass. In this illustration, he is wearing a heavy pile-lined canvas flight suit and a leather flight helmet, which gave protection from the extreme cold. He was eventually discovered by peasants.

Surgeons were forced to amputate both legs due to gangrene. After a painful rehabilitation, he flew the LaGG-5 with the 63rd Guards Fighter Regiment and shot down three enemy planes in a short period of time. On August 24, 1943, he became a Hero of the Soviet Union. By war's end, Maj. Maresyev had scored 11 aerial victories in 92 missions.



After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, he served as first deputy chairman of the Union of Veterans and Disabled People of Russia. He died on May 18, 2001 in Moscow just minutes before an organized celebration of his 85th birthday was about to commence. Hundreds of elderly war veterans and supporters in attendance at the Central Russian Army Theater wept openly at the news. "There is nothing extraordinary in what I did!" remarked Maresyev shortly before his death.

### **G: Medic Anatoli Alexandrovich Kokorin, Northern Front, August 1941**

Young Anatoli Kokorin's goal was to become a doctor. He was born in 1921 in the village of Borovichi in the present Novgorod region. He completed his secondary education and enrolled in a medical university. Having graduated in 1940, the young man joined the Red Army to become a military physician.

The Great Patriotic War came suddenly and Pvt. Kokorin found himself in combat immediately. He was assigned to the 14th Motor Infantry Regiment of the 21st Motor Infantry Division of NKVD troops on the Northern Front.

During a fierce firefight in a forest on August 8, 1941, with complete disregard for his own life, he saved the lives of six wounded officers and men. He pulled them to safety and administered first aid, then asked his comrades to take them to the rear. The Germans then counterattacked fiercely and Kokorin was hit and wounded. Pvt. Kokorin is shown lying severely wounded against a tree, wearing the M1935 enlisted man's pullover shirt, with khaki breeches and leggings. As a medic, he carries no weapon, only medical supplies.

Knowing that he would not survive, he grabbed a grenade and hid it behind his medical bag. Soon, several enemy soldiers came through the woods, checking for their

wounded. When the Germans surrounded him, he detonated the grenade, killing and wounding several of them. On August 26, 1941, Pvt. Anatoli Kokorin was posthumously awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union.

### **H: Partisan Marat Kazei, Khorometskoye, Belorussia, May 1944**

The Great Patriotic War was fought not only by Soviet men and women, but also by children. Young teenagers, many of whom were in the Pioneer movement, were idealistic and eager to prove themselves. One such lad was Marat Kazei, who was born in October 1928 in the village of Stankovo in the Minsk region of Belorussia.

When the war started, Kazei was just about to enter the fifth grade of school. Because he was just a child, the partisans were not inclined to give him adult responsibilities. Mostly, children were used in support roles such as gathering intelligence, passing leaflets, and acting as couriers. In November 1942, Kazei joined the 25th Anniversary of the October Revolution Partisan Detachment and worked as a scout.

On May 11, 1944, in the village of Khorometskoye, Kazei was on a scouting mission when his group was spotted by the Germans. A fierce fight ensued, but the small and lightly armed group was outnumbered. Kazei is depicted here, dressed in civilian clothing. After exhausting his ammunition, he threw one grenade, and then took his own life with the second. Due to the stealthy nature of their activities, the partisans' accomplishments were often unrecorded. In the case of Marat Kazei, he was given the title of Hero of the Soviet Union on May 8, 1965, the 20th anniversary of the end of the Great Patriotic War. A monument was dedicated to Kazei in Minsk from donations collected by the student Pioneers. He was the second-youngest child to win the HSU.



# INDEX

Figures in bold refer to illustrations.

- air force 9-16  
Amet-Khan, Captain Sultan 12, **12**, 14  
Anschluss, the 3  
antitank gun, 14.5mm PTRD-41 **49**  
Arctic ethnic groups  
    and Soviet military service 8  
assassinations 41  
Austria, German annexation of (Anschluss) 3
- Bagrati*on, Operation 22  
Bandera 41  
*Barbarossa*, Operation *see* German invasion of Russia  
Bauer, General Otto 41  
Belorussia 22, 42-4  
Berest, Lieutenant Alexei 58, 59  
Berlin, Battle of 56-9  
Bessarabia 21  
Brest Fortress 48  
Budenkov, Sergeant Ivan Mikhail 20
- Cavalier of the Order of Glory 10  
Chiang Kai-shek 31  
China 31  
*Citadel*, Operation 53  
communist partisans **H**, **42**, 42-7, **43**, **44**, **46**, **47**, 63
- Danzig 4  
Dargel, Paul 41  
Devyataev, Lieutenant Mikhail Petrovich 7, **9**, 9-10  
Divochkin, Lieutenant Alexandr Andreyevich **51**, 51-2  
Drachenko, Lieutenant Ivan Grigoryevich 10-11, **11**  
Dyachenko, Sergeant Fyodor Trofirmovich 20
- Enemy at the Gates* 19  
espionage 30-2, **D**, 41, 61  
Estonia 4  
ethnic groups  
    and Hero of the Soviet Union award 8-9
- Finland 4, 8, 25, 26, 27  
Funk, SS-Oberführer Alfred 41
- Gakhokidze, Lieutenant Mikhail **C**, 61  
Gavrilov, Major Piotr Mikhailovich **48**, 48-9  
*General Steuben* 28  
German communists 30  
German invasion of Russia 4, 30, 31  
German shipping losses 28-9  
Gold Star Medal 5, 6, 7, **A**, 60 *see also* Hero of the Soviet Union award  
    restored to relatives of heroes 50-1, **55**  
Golikov, Leonid Alexandrovich 47, **47**  
Golosov, Lieutenant Vasilii Ivanovich 20  
Golubkov, Warrant Officer Nikolai E, 61-2  
Goncharov, Sergeant Piotr Alekseyevich 20  
Gorbachev, President Mikhail 29  
Gordienko, Afanasi 21  
Great Patriotic War 3-5  
Gubkin, Captain Georgi Nikitovich **53**, 53-4  
Guderian, General Heinz 21
- Hanako Ishiye 31, 32  
Hero of the Soviet Union award *see also* Gold Star Medal  
    and ethnic groups 8-9  
    numbers awarded 5, 9  
    qualification for 6  
    significance of award 5  
Hitler, Adolf (1889-1945) 3
- Ilgen, General von 41  
Ilyin, Sergeant Major Nikolai **19**  
infantrymen 48-59  
Issellani, Captain Yaroslav **62**  
Ishiye Hanako 31, 32
- Japan 4, 5, 31  
jeeps from US 63
- Kantaria, Sergeant Meliton 57, 59, **59**  
Kazei, Marat **H**, 63  
Khantaev, Sergeant Vasily Kharinaevich **54**, 54-6  
Khantaeva, Ludmila **55**  
Khrushchev, Nikita 32  
Klein, Robert **D**, 61  
Kluge, Field Marshal Günther von 48  
Koch, Erich 41, 47  
Koenig, Major 20  
Kokorin, Medic Anatoli Alexandrovich **G**, 63  
Komi Arctic ethnic group 8  
Koniev, Marshal Ivan 56  
Kononov, Lieutenant Semion **23**  
Kopitin, Lieutenant Mikhail Vasilevich **23**, 23-4  
Koppe, Lieutenant General Wilhelm 42  
Kotik, Valentin Alexandrovich **44**, 44-5  
Kovpak, Major General Sidor Artiomovich 42, **42**  
Kozhedub, Major Ivan 6  
Kulbertinov, Ivan Nikolayevich 21  
Kulebyakin, Captain 26  
Kunikov, Caesar Lazarevich **30**  
Kurile Islands 5  
Kursk, Battle of 53, 54  
Kuskov, Victor Dmitrievich **29**, 29-30  
Kuzmin, Georgi **14**  
Kuznetsov, Nikolai Ivanovich 32, 41, **41**
- Latvia 4  
Lavrinenko, Lieutenant Dmitri **21**, 21-2  
Lefevre, Lieutenant Marcel **61**  
Lenin, Order of 5, **11**, **A**, **53**, 60  
Leonov, Lieutenant Viktor 24-6, **25**  
Lithuania 4  
Luganski, Captain Sergey **14**, 14-15  
Lvov-Sandomir Offensive 23
- Malik, Captain Lieutenant Mikhail Grigorovich 26-7, **27**  
Malyshev, Fyodor Alexeyevich 42-4, **43**  
Manchuria 4, 5, 31  
Maresyev, Major Alexei Petrovich **13**, **F**, 62-3  
Marinesko, Captain Alexandr Ivanovich 27-9, **28**  
Matrosov, Private Alexandr 5, 7  
Medal for Bravery **53**  
Medal for Victory over Germany **53**  
Medvedev, Dmitri Nikolaevich **46**, 46-7  
Mikhailov, Dr. Fyodor **45**  
Mitya sabotage unit 46  
Moldova 21  
Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression treaty 4, 31  
Monument to the Motherland **3**  
Morukhov, Petty Officer Alexandr **29**  
Mosin-Nagant rifle **20**, **B**, 60  
Muzaliov, Ivan 45
- naval troops 24-30  
Nechipurenko, Sergeant Sergey 52  
Nenet Arctic ethnic group 8  
Neustroyev, Captain Stepan 57, 58, 59, **59**  
NKVD {Narodny Komissariat Vnutrennykh Del} (Soviet secret police) 4, 10, 27, 29, 46, 51  
non-aggression treaty (Soviet-German) 4, 31  
Normandie-Niemen Fighter Regiment 9
- Ohlopkov, Sergeant Fyodor Maveyevich **17**, 17-18, 20, **B**, 60-1  
Order of Alexander Nevsky **53**  
Order of Bogdan Khmeinitzky **53**  
Order of Glory **11**  
    Cavalier of the 10  
Order of Lenin 5, **11**, **A**, **53**, 60  
Order of the Patriotic War **53**  
Order of the Red Banner **11**, **53**, 59, 62
- Panfilov, General Ivan 21  
Panzer Divisions 21, 22  
partisans **H**, **42**, 42-7, **43**, **44**, **46**, **47**, 63  
Pearl Harbor attack 31  
Petrenko, Sergeant Stephan Vasilievich 20  
Peysakhovskii, Lieutenant Colonel Naum 56, 59  
Pioneer movement 24, 45, 47  
Plotnikov, Lieutenant Pavel Artemyevich **15**, 15-16  
Pokryshkin, Lieutenant Colonel Alexandr **6**, **6**, **16**
- Poland 4  
Polbin, Colonel Ivan 15, 16  
poster propaganda **4**  
Prizmann, General 41  
propaganda 4, 4, 5, 7
- Rechkalov, Captain Grigori **13**  
Red Air Force 6  
Reichstag 56, 56-9, **57**, **58**  
Rogozin, Major Anatoli **60**  
Russian Federation 7
- S-31 submarine crew **28**  
sabotage 43, 44, 45, 46, 47  
Sakaida, Henry  
    restores Gold Star medals to relatives of heroes 50-1, **55**  
Samokhin, Captain Konstantin 22  
Samsonov, Captain Konstantin 58, **59**  
Sedih, Private Ivan 53  
Shironin, Lieutenant Piotr 52, 52, 53  
Shkodin, Private Piotr 53  
Sidorenko, Lieutenant Ivan Mikhailovich **18**, 18-19, 20  
Sino-Japanese War 31  
Sivkov, Navy Seaman Ivan **24**  
Skalat Labor Camp 42  
Skorzeny, SS Colonel 32  
Skvortsov, Private Andrei 52  
snipers 17-21, 60-1  
Sorge, Dr. Richard 4, 30-2, **31**  
    grave of **32**  
Soviet air force 9-16  
Soviet-Finnish War 4, 8  
Soviet-German non-aggression treaty 4, 31  
Soviet infantrymen 7, 48-59  
Soviet-Japanese conflict 4, 5, 24, 26, 27, 61  
Soviet navy 24-30  
Soviet Union *see also* Russian Federation and Arctic ethnic minorities 8  
    ethnic groups 8-9  
    losses during war with Finland 4  
Spanish Civil War 3  
spies 30-2, **D**, 41, 61  
Stalin, Joseph (1879-1953) 3  
    and Richard Sorge 30-2  
Stalingrad 2  
Strauss, Johann **55**  
Subbotin, Private Nikolai 53  
submarine warfare 27-9, **62**  
Sudetenland, German annexation of 4  
Svinemkonde Death Camp 10  
Syanov, Sergeant Major Ilya 58, 59, **59**
- T-34 tank 21, **21**, 22, 23, **24**  
tank crews 21-4  
Tantsurenko, Private Vasily 53  
Taranovka Station, battle of 52-3  
    heroes of 52  
Thorwald, Waffen-SS Colonel 20  
Tjurin, Private Alexandr 52  
Tsirubin, Major Dmitri **22**, **22**  
    medals of **A**, 60
- Ukraine 21  
Ukrainian nationalists 41, 42  
Umuridinov, Sergeant Mookhudin 49-51, **50**  
USSR *see* Soviet
- V-1/V2 rockets 10  
The Victors partisans 47  
Vlasov, General 11  
Volkov, Major General **59**  
Vuchetich, Yevgeni 2
- Who are you, Dr. Sorge?* 32  
*Wilhelm Gustloff* 28, **28**
- Yegorov, Sergeant Mikhail 57, 58, 59, **59**  
Young Pioneer movement 24, 45, 47
- Zaitsev, Lieutenant Vasily Grigoryevich **19**, 19-20  
Zaksenhausen Death Camp 10  
Zhukov, Marshal Georgi **6**, **6**, 56, 59  
Zinchenko, Colonel Fyodor 57, 58, 59

The history of military forces, artifacts, personalities, and techniques of warfare



Full color artwork



Photographs



Unripped detail

## Heroes of the Soviet Union

1941–45

The Great Patriotic War began on June 22, 1941, when the Germans invaded the Soviet Union. Over 10 million Soviet soldiers took part in the war and of those about 12,600 earned the Soviet Union's highest military award – the Hero of the Soviet Union – for deeds of great daring and self sacrifice. This book covers the male recipients of the Hero of the Soviet Union award during the Great Patriotic War. Snipers, fighter pilots, partisans and spies are all covered including Richard Sorge, the master spy, and Vasily Zaitsev, the most famous Soviet sniper of the Great Patriotic War.