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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Hiroaki Kuromiya**, Indiana University

Marshal Georgy Konstantinovich Zhukov (1896–1974) is a giant figure in military history. He is known as one of Stalin’s military commanders who led the Soviet Union’s victory over Hitler’s mighty Wehrmacht. He is said to have played a decisive role in almost all critical battles, beginning with the defense of Leningrad and Moscow in the autumn of 1941 and ending with the conquest of Berlin in May 1945. Zhukov is the Soviet commander who on 8–9 May 1945 officially accepted Germany’s surrender in Berlin. (This was a second ceremony of German capitulation that was hastily organized at the insistence of Stalin who considered the original ceremony, held on 7 May in Reims, France, inadequate in highlighting the Soviet contribution.) Stalin appointed Zhukov the inspector of the victory parade that took place in Moscow’s Red Square on 24 June 1945. Zhukov took part in the Potsdam Conference in July 1945, establishing a rapport with Western military leaders such as General Dwight David Eisenhower, Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery, and others. Of all the Soviet military leaders, Zhukov became the most popular, or at least officially so, in the Soviet Union.

Zhukov’s reputation may have even increased in the years following the Soviet victory, paradoxically owing to his twice repeated political downfall. Alarmed by Zhukov’s popularity and sensing a political challenger, Stalin reprimanded Zhukov for his arrogance and vainglory, demoting and exiling him from Moscow. Stalin’s 1953 death resurrected Zhukov. Nikita Khrushchev, Stalin’s successor, sought Zhukov’s authority within the Soviet armed forces in order to eliminate Khrushchev’s political rivals and consolidate his power, only to repeat what Stalin had done earlier: sensing a threat in Zhukov and accusing him of “Bonapartist” ambitions, Khrushchev forced Zhukov to retire from his military and political positions. Nevertheless, Zhukov’s reputation remains undiminished in post-Soviet Russia. In 1995 he was posthumously honored with his horse-mounted statue constructed in the Manege Square (*Manezhka*) besides the Kremlin.

Forced retirement allowed Zhukov to take up his pen and write his memoirs. The result is the present book, translated from Russian. This is a re-issue of an old English translation¹ and, as a result, the sections cut by Soviet censors are not included. Those who wish to read a more or less 'complete' edition still have to turn to post-Soviet Russian editions, reprinted numerous times since. Fortunately, the new edition includes an introduction by Geoffrey Roberts, the author of a recent biography of Zhukov² which discusses, among others, the omissions from the old Soviet editions that have been restored since. In addition, the present edition includes an English translation of two essays by Zhukov, "Briefly about Stalin" published in *Pravda* in 1989 and a supplementary reminiscence of the post-Stalin era, "After the Death of Stalin." These additional materials make the present volume worthy of a new examination of Zhukov's celebrated career.

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It is well known that in the power struggle in the wake of Stalin's death Zhukov supported Khrushchev. Zhukov claims to have arrested Khrushchev's chief rival, Lavrenti Beria, the head of the Soviet Secret Police, and supported Khrushchev's criticism of Stalin and de-Stalinization policy in general. In his essay "Briefly about Stalin," Zhukov criticizes Stalin as an "absolute dictator" (487). In the newer post-Soviet editions of his memoir (not translated into English),³ Zhukov openly criticizes Stalin's Great Terror (of 1937–1938) which decimated the Red Army high command. Yet even in his post-Stalin essay Zhukov still claims, as did Stalin, that "foreign intelligence infiltrated the organs of state security. Its agents spread false stories about the alleged anti-Soviet activities of our people that incited irreparable damage to our motherland and to the defence of our country" (488). Nor does Zhukov blame Stalin for his own downfall after World War Two, accusing instead Stalin's subordinates such as Beria (491 and 494). In spite of Zhukov's denunciation of Stalin, Zhukov, like Khrushchev himself, appears to have used de-Stalinization merely as a political weapon. Khrushchev whitewashed his own participation in the deaths of untold numbers of Soviet citizens by attacking Stalin. No one knows whether Zhukov played any role in the mass terror within the Red Army. Zhukov, like others, was denounced by his colleagues. He nevertheless survived the Great Terror. We do know, however, that his harshness towards his colleagues and subordinates is a consistent theme of criticism.⁴

Speaking of his own fate at the time of the Great Terror, Zhukov remains eternally thankful to Stalin, who, he stresses, "never said a bad word about me. I was grateful for his objectivity" (495). This is an extraordinarily curious remark, inasmuch as Zhukov always insisted that he first met Stalin in person only in 1940. In 1937–38, Zhukov was a relatively

¹ G.K. Zhukov, *Reminiscences and Reflections*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1985).

² Geoffrey Roberts, *Stalin's General: The Life of Georgy Zhukov* (New York: Random House, 2012).

³ The most widely read version is G.K. Zhukov, *Vospominaniia i razmyshleniia*, 11th ed., 3 vols. (Moscow: Novosti, 1992).

⁴ See, for example, Vladimir Daines, *Zhukov* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2005), 75–81.

unknown commander (in 1938, at the age of 31, he was promoted to Deputy Cavalry Commander of the Belarusan Military District). Is it possible that Stalin had already noticed Zhukov's talent at that time? There is no answer yet.

Stalin was almost certainly responsible for Zhukov's debut as a battle field commander. This happened in 1939 when Stalin sent Zhukov to Mongolia to fight a small-scale war against the Japanese (the Battle of Khalkhin Gol, or Nomonhan, 11 May – 16 September 1939).⁵ In this war 7,000 to 8,000 Soviet soldiers and a larger number of Japanese (ranging from 8,717 by Japanese counts and 25,000 by Soviet ones) were killed. Even though the Japanese were ultimately routed and the Soviet victory was proclaimed as decisive, the combined casualties of killed, missing in action, and wounded were larger on the Soviet side than on the Japanese side.⁶ Zhukov was praised as the commander responsible for this brilliant victory.

Yet much about this battle, which marked Zhukov's debut, is still unknown, and mystery surrounds it. The relevant archival documents remain largely classified. All indications suggest that there is much about which Zhukov and Russian historians are reticent. First of all, the Soviet victory was likely made decisive by the fact that the commander of the main Japanese division that fought against the Red Army was a Soviet agent. The commander, Michitarō Komatsubara, was sexually trapped in the 1920s when he was Japan's military attaché in Moscow and appears to have been forced to serve the Soviet cause.⁷ There are other mysteries. Zhukov states that he was called to Moscow on 2 June 1939, told to fly to Mongolia, and arrived in Tamtsak-Bulak, Mongolia (where the Soviet Headquarters were located) on the morning of 5 June (177-178 [of Volume 1] of the book under review). In fact, it was on 24 May that K.E. Voroshilov, the Commissar of Defense, decided to dispatch Zhukov to Khalkhin Gol in view of the difficulties the Red Army was having in the war against the Japanese. According to a story Zhukov told subsequently to the writer Konstantin Simonov, who was embedded with the Soviet forces in Mongolia as a journalist, it was S.K. Timoshenko (1895–1970), who recommended Zhukov. Stalin did not immediately know who he was.⁸ This story is not mentioned in any edition of Zhukov's memoirs. Is it credible? Hardly. Did Stalin entrust this important task to someone he didn't even know? Zhukov arrived in Mongolia not on 5 June, as he insists in all versions of his recollections, but much earlier. Already on 30 May he reported to Moscow that Soviet air

⁵ The most detailed account is Alvin D. Coox, *Nomonhan: Japan against Russia, 1939* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1985). The most recent English-language account is Stuart D. Goldman, *Nomonhan, 1939: The Red Army's Victory That Shaped World War II* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2012). In addition, numerous books are available in Japanese.

⁶ See Hiroaki Kuromiya, "The Mystery of Nomonhan, 1939," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 24:4 (December 2011) 671.

⁷ See Kuromiya, "The Mystery of Nomonhan."

⁸ K.M. Simonov, *Glazami cheloveka moego pokoleniia: razmyshleniia o I.V. Staline* (Moscow: Novosti, 1988), 318.

forces had been annihilated by their Japanese counterparts.⁹ Why did he alter the dates of his command in Khalkhin Gol? It is difficult to believe that these important dates are simple errors. Zhukov is known to have had privileged access to the Soviet archives in writing his memoirs. There is something unexplained here.

Zhukov's apparently deliberate obfuscation does not stop here. In his memoirs, he never mentions the name of Brigade Commander M.A. Bogdanov (1898–1969), who as Chief of Staff of the First Army Group became the architect of the decisive offense successfully carried out in August 1939.¹⁰ Bogdanov was accordingly decorated with a Red Banner order after the victory. Taking part in the border negotiations with Japan and Manchouguo (Manchukuo) after the war, Bogdanov is said to have fallen to a "Japanese provocation," committed the "gravest error, and caused damage to the prestige of the Soviet Union." He was tried and sentenced to four years in the Gulag, but in August 1941 was amnestied with his convictions expunged and his decorations restored. He returned to active duty and took part in World War Two, during which time Bogdanov was again arrested for an operational failure for which he appeared not to be responsible, and was sentenced to 10 years in the Gulag. Soon he was again released with the convictions dropped. For his service he was repeatedly decorated.¹¹ Yet as commander he was completely overshadowed by Zhukov and others and is generally unknown even to specialists.

Why did Zhukov ignore Bogdanov so completely? Given Bogdanov's record of arrests, Zhukov may not have wanted to have been associated with him. Yet Bogdanov was exonerated twice. It is very odd that Zhukov nevertheless wrote Bogdanov off entirely. Professional rivalry may explain this strange omission. Yet one suspects that there is more here. According to Japanese sources, Bogdanov fled Harbin, where the final negotiations for border demarcation were held and concluded to the satisfaction of the Soviet-Mongol side. On the day of the signing of the proposed accord (30 or 31 January 1940), however, Bogdanov confided to his Japanese counterpart that Major Masanobu Tsuji of the Kwantung Army, an exceedingly mysterious figure, and White Russian émigrés had threatened to assassinate him. Bogdanov is said to have fled in fear on that day without signing the agreement. Officially it is stated that Moscow refused to accept the accord.¹²

⁹ Kuromiya, 669.

¹⁰ This issue was earlier raised appropriately by Viktor Suvorov, *Ten' pobedy* (Donetsk: Stalker, 2002), 32 (Zhukov's "mystery of debut"). Note, however, that Suvorov, best known for his contention that in 1941 Stalin had plans of preemptive strike against Nazi Germany, is otherwise not a reliable writer. For Zhukov's deliberate omission of Bogdanov, see also Daines, 116.

¹¹ *Velikaia otechestvennaia: Komdivy. Voennyi biograficheskii slovar'*, v. 1 (Moscow: Kuchkove pole, 2011), 350–351.

¹² Shirō Kitagawa, *Nomonhan: moto Manshūkoku gaikōkan no shōgen* (Tokyo: Tokuma shoten, 1979), 143–47.

This may be what Russian sources refer to as “Japanese provocation.”¹³ Given the fact that the White émigré community in Harbin was deeply penetrated by Soviet agents, it is not at all clear who was provoking whom. Would it have been possible for such a high-ranking Soviet military commander to have defected in fear of assassination? Not really. Mongolian sources paint a somewhat different picture. On 2 February 1940, Bogdanov wrote a report to Ulaanbaatar after he “defected” from Harbin in which he stated that he simply could not accept the Japanese conditions for border demarcation.¹⁴ Unless one assumes that Zhukov knew some undisclosed secret on the Bogdanov case, it is difficult to comprehend his utter silence.

Zhukov’s self-aggrandizement is already evident in the wake of the Khalkhin Gol battle. The seemingly one-sided victory hid numerous problems within the Soviet armed forces. The number of Soviet casualties were deliberately underestimated and those of the Japanese were vastly inflated. A Soviet observer called the Soviet victory a “Pyrrhic victory” wrought in spite of serious internal problems of command, logistics, supply, and equipment.¹⁵ The Army Commander Grigorii M. Shtern (1900–1941), Zhukov’s superior who, like Zhukov himself, was decorated as a ‘Hero of the Soviet Union’ for his contribution to the victory, “understood this and ordered a comprehensive study of the Battle of Nomonhan [Khalkhin Gol] and the problems the Soviet forces faced there. Unfortunately, this report which was critical of the Soviet forces was suppressed largely by Zhukov, who instead wrote a self-serving report. Shtern, who supported the original report, was subsequently repressed.¹⁶ Zhukov’s self-serving report delayed an examination of the Red Army’s weaknesses until they were abundantly exposed in the Winter War against Finland (in which Zhukov did not take part).

Shtern, Zhukov’s senior in rank but junior in age, had fought in both the Spanish Civil War and the Battle of Lake Khasan (in 1938) against the Japanese, and therefore was far more experienced in actual battles than Zhukov. Shtern was also forthcoming about the negative impact of the Great Terror on the Red Army.¹⁷ Shtern went on to fight in the Winter War. All along there were numerous denunciations of Shtern who nevertheless survived the

¹³ Another possibility is that, according to Japanese sources, on 26 and 27 January 1940 “the receptive Bogdanov” privately met with the Japanese delegates and “worked out a compromise in principle.” Apparently Moscow rejected Bogdanov’s compromise “in order to impress the Mongolians.” See Coox, 984.

¹⁴ Ts. Batbaiar and D. Gombosüren, *Mongol, Manzhgogiin xiliin kheleltsee 1935–1941 on (tsereg-diplomatyn tүүkh)* (Ulaanbaatar: Altan Üseg, 2004), 74–75.

¹⁵ Vasilii Novobranets, *“Ia preduprezhdal o voine Stalina”: zapiski voennogo razvedchika* (Moscow: Iauza-Eksmo, 2008), 53.

¹⁶ Kuromiya, 672. For Shtern’s criticism of “Zhukov’s position paper at the study session of December 1940,” see Coox, 992.

¹⁷ On Shtern, see Jakub Wojtkowiak, *Polowanie na “dálniewostoczników”: Represje wobec korpusu oficerskiego dalekowschodniego zgrupowania radzieckich sił zbrojnych w latach 1936–1939* (Poznań: Instytut Historii UAM, 2007), 187–88, 328, 336, 353–56, 377, 379, and 387.

Great Terror of 1937–38. A Jew from Kyiv who in 1918 briefly supported the Left Socialist Revolutionaries (a radical populist party which broke with the Bolsheviks in the spring of 1918), Shtern was arrested in June 1941 and executed in October 1941 as a “Trotskyite and German spy.” Of course, these were false charges and Shtern was fully rehabilitated after Stalin’s death.¹⁸ Nevertheless, in his memoirs Zhukov has no words for Shtern. He later told Simonov that during the Khalkhin Gol battle there was a tactical dispute between Shtern and himself. According to Zhukov, he challenged an order of Shtern’s that would have minimized the human costs, demanding that Shtern submit it in writing, after which Zhukov would appeal to Moscow.¹⁹ Shtern did not write the order, contending that it was merely a “recommendation.” Shtern, a “reserved and polite man,” understood that Zhukov, his junior, had Moscow’s backing and avoided conflict with him.²⁰

This episode is suggestive. Soviet observers have deplored the fact that Soviet sacrifices were much too great. As a Khalkhin Gol survivor noted later, “Zhukov did not care about any losses [of human lives] we suffered.”²¹ Taking over the command, Zhukov condemned ineffective Soviet and Mongolian officers as Japanese spies and apathetic soldiers as traitors. Then they were shot.²² Stalin appears to have known this about Zhukov: his willingness to achieve a given goal whatever the human costs might be. It was this lack of concern about human lives that united Stalin and Zhukov. After World War Two Zhukov boasted to Eisenhower: “When we come to a mine field our infantry attacks as if it were not there.” Eisenhower concluded correctly: “As far as I could see, Zhukov had given little concern to methods that we considered vitally important to the maintenance of morale among American troops: systematic rotation of units, facilities for recreation, short leaves and furloughs, and, above all, the development of techniques to avoid exposure of men to unnecessary battlefield risks, all of which, although common practices in our Army, seemed to be largely unknown in his.”²³

In his introduction to the present book, Roberts notes that Zhukov’s “anodyne self-description masked the reality of Zhukov as a tough, brutal and unrelenting commander,

¹⁸ It made him politically vulnerable that at the time one uncle lived in Germany and another in the United States. In 1940 his German uncle turned to the Soviet consulate in Berlin with a letter asking Shtern to assist him in acquiring Soviet citizenship. See L.E. Reshin and V.S. Stepanov, “Vostrebovannyi kompromat na G.M. Shterna,” *Voenna-istoricheskii zhurnal*, 1994, no. 3, 22.

¹⁹ Simonov, 319–320.

²⁰ See A.T. Stuchenko, *Zavidnaia nasha sud’ba* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1968), 68–69.

²¹ Petro G. Grigorenko, *Memoirs*, tr. by Thomas P. Whitney (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982), pp. 109–110. In July 1938 the 603-th Regiment of the Soviet 82nd Infantry Division even tried to rebel against its commanders. See Daines, *Zhukov*, p. 104.

²² See Arekusei [Aleksei] Kirichenko, *Shirarezaru nichiro no nihyakunen* (Tokyo: Gendai shichō shinsha, 2013), 85.

²³ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948), 467–468.

who cursed, threatened and occasionally hit people to impose his will” (xxxiii). However, Roberts goes on to defend Zhukov: “During the Great Patriotic War the Soviets executed some 158,000 of their own troops, a good many of them on Zhukov’s orders. While he never expressed regret for his harsh actions during the war, there is no evidence that Zhukov was personally cruel or callous with regard to the lives of his soldiers” (xxxiii–xxxiv). The corresponding figures for Germany and the United States are 15,000 and 1. Does the extraordinary Soviet figure suggest that the Soviet soldiers as a whole were far more cowardly and prone to insubordination and desertion than the German and American soldiers? If so, why? If not, why the appalling brutality? How does one explain the fact that the conqueror (the Soviet Union) lost some 7.5 million soldiers’ lives in the War, whereas the conquered (Germany) lost 4-5 million? ²⁴ The German figures include the casualties on all fronts, land and sea, in a war fought much longer than the war fought by the Soviet Red Army.

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As the most celebrated commander of the Soviet military forces, Zhukov may indeed deserve the accolade. Like most historians, Roberts certainly thinks so. Yet this brief examination of just one episode of Zhukov’s brilliant career suggests that Zhukov’s career should be examined extremely carefully. One suspects that Zhukov deliberately avoided discussing numerous issues and misrepresented many others. For example, Zhukov says in a note which was only recently published that he knew Beria “quite well” (p. 499). Why and in what manner did he know Beria “quite well”? Zhukov does not explain.²⁵

Unfortunately the present book does not add much to our understanding of the real Zhukov, who remains elusive. Nor does Roberts’s introduction seek to delve into Zhukov’s dark and unknown side. After stating that “eight million fatalities” were suffered by the Red Army during the War, Roberts goes on to declare: “The death toll could be said to have made this [the Soviet Union’s victory in World War Two] a pyrrhic victory but the alternative of Nazi enslavement would have been far worse” (p. xiii). With this Roberts shuts down any questioning of the Soviet war efforts. Stalin’s statutes are almost all gone in today’s Russia, but Zhukov’s giant statute stands in the center of Moscow. The heroization of Zhukov in Russia is such that it is unlikely that a fuller, un-retouched picture of Zhukov’s life will emerge any time soon.

²⁴ Here I rely on V.N. Zemskov, “O masshtabakh liudskikh poter’ SSSR v Velikoi Otechestvennoi voine (v poiskakh istiny),” *Voенно-istoricheskii arkhiv*, 2012, no. 9, 67–68 (the three to four million deaths of Soviet POWs are not included) and Rüdiger Overmans, *Deutsche militärliche Verluste im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 2000), 285–286 and 294. Although these figures are by no means final or undisputed, all of the available data without exception suggest that there were far more Soviet casualties than German ones.

²⁵ Beria’s son Sergo depicts a close relationship between Zhukov and Beria. Many years after Beria’s death, contradicting his own written account (501–502), Zhukov told Sergo that he had no direct or indirect part in his father’s arrest and that, if Beria had had survived, he would have stood by Beria. Zhukov then asked Sergo whether he indeed thought that he, Zhukov, had anything to do with that “shit” (*der’mo*, i.e. Khrushchev). See Sergo Beriia, *Moi otets Beriia v koridorakh stalinskoi vlasti* (Moscow: OLMA-PRESS, 2002), 342.

The opening of the formerly closed Soviet archives in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union has been a great boon to scholarship. Yet one lesson we have learned is that the 'archival revolution' has turned out not to be so revolutionary. The more one knows about Soviet history the more enigmatic it becomes. Although much has come out, one suspects that Moscow still very jealously guards the most important secrets. Access to archives related to intelligence, diplomacy, and military affairs is still very tightly controlled. Even if one secures access to, say, the Archives of the Foreign Ministry, one is barred from consulting any guide and is allowed to read only that which the Russian authorities have deemed appropriate. Under such circumstances, one has to approach Zhukov and many other subjects with a great deal of healthy skepticism.

Hiroaki Kuromiya is the author of several books on the history of the Soviet Union, including *Między Warszawą a Tokio: Polsko-Japońska współpraca wywiadowcza 1904–1944* (Toruń: Adam Marszałek, 2009), co-authored with Andrzej Pepłoński. He and Georges Mamoulia have recently completed a book: *The Eurasian Triangle: Russia, The Caucasus, and Japan, 1904–1945*.

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