



Enemy at the Gates. Paramount Pictures,

Reviewed by David R. Stone

Published on H-War (June, 2002)

First things first. The film *Enemy at the Gates* is a good thing for the study of the Eastern Front during World War II. If even one in one hundred of those who see the film is inspired to pick up William Craig's book *Enemy at the Gates* or any other book on the war in the east, then director and co-writer Jean-Jacques Annaud has done a great service to those who research and teach Soviet history. If it helps even a little to bring the scale and importance of the Soviet-German clash home to Western audiences, the film will right a great historical wrong: the terrible ignorance within the Western public of how central the Eastern Front was to the outcome of World War II. That said, I found *Enemy at the Gates* terribly disappointing. As both entertainment and a historical portrayal of the Battle of Stalingrad, the film fell far short of its potential. After beginning with a visually spectacular sequence depicting young Soviet soldier Vassili [*sic*] Zaitsev's arrival in Stalingrad, the remainder of the film never lives up to the level promised by its opening. This especially hurts because the elements to make a profoundly interesting film were certainly present. The battle of Stalingrad offers all the human drama and pathos one could ask. The filmmakers spared no expense in sets and effects to recreate the look of a devastated Stalingrad, down to Russian-language obscenities scrawled on the walls. The cast is top-notch: Jude Law is remarkably good as Zaitsev; Rachel Weisz and Joseph Fi-

ennes do the best they can with underwritten parts as sniper Tania Chernova and political officer Danilov. Bob Hoskins is superb as a profane and warty Nikita Khrushchev; likewise Ed Harris as the German master sniper Konig. Despite all this, the film wastes these resources in an attempt to recreate the strategy that James Cameron employed in *Titanic*: given an historical moment of great emotional resonance, focus instead on a love triangle worthy of teenagers and presumably aimed at appealing to teenagers. The plot follows Zaitsev as he arrives in Stalingrad as a naive and innocent soldier, only to be immediately plunged into the horrors of battle. In a fortuitous encounter, Zaitsev demonstrates his exceptional marksmanship by picking off five Germans in front of Danilov. Danilov then turns Zaitsev into a sniper-hero to inspire the Soviet soldiers at Stalingrad. They both encounter Tania Chernova, a beautiful young intellectual turned soldier, and compete for her love with heroism and gifts of sturgeon. As Zaitsev's renown and kills grow, the German army calls in Konig, their top sniper, to hunt him down. Strictly as entertainment, I found the film remarkably slow-moving. Others may appreciate the deliberate pace. More serious, from my point of view, were the historical inaccuracies and oversights that mar the film. William Craig's *Enemy at the Gates* (New York, 1973) provides the basic elements of the plot, and the main characters appear in it: Zaitsev, Chernova, Danilov, even the young boy spy

Sacha Fillipov [sic]. Therein lies the problem. While a compelling writer with an eye for detail, Craig is not particularly skeptical of his sources. In his account of the sniper duel, Craig takes Stalinist propaganda at face value. There is no source outside of Soviet propaganda for even the existence of the German supersniper (Konings in Craig's book; Thorwald in others). Craig took the propaganda built up around Zaitsev's 242 kills as a sniper and presented it as truth, from where it made its way onto the screen as an ostensibly true story. There is nothing wrong with setting a fictional story against an historical backdrop; to claim it as true is another matter. In this case, the sniper duel only adds to the plot's contrived elements: Zaitsev and Chernova's chance encounter on a train to Stalingrad, or Chernova's decision to become a sniper instead of a radio operator. She returns to the front lines after she personally happens to intercept a German transmission providing excruciating detail on the death of her parents as part of a mass execution of a trainload of deported Jews. One irritating aspect of the film, as the above incident displays, is its reliance on cliché. Cliches do have the virtue of not being strictly inaccurate--after all, clichés require an element of truth to become clichés. Still, they suggest a certain laziness of presentation. This would include the balalaikas that the Soviet soldiers faithfully break out at quiet moments, and Khrushchev's behest to a failed officer to kill himself to avert execution. It extends to the opening sequence of Zaitsev's introduction to Stalingrad, where panicking soldiers are immediately shot, troops are ordered into obviously suicidal attacks and machine-gunned when they fall back, and due to lack of rifles half the troops are ordered to seize up weapons from their fallen comrades (much more typical of the Russian experience in World War I, not World War II). While these certainly happened on the Eastern Front, their juxtaposition seems forced and unoriginal. While clichés may irritate, they are not the same as actual errors in presentation, which *Enemy at*

the Gates suffers from in significant numbers. Quite often, errors in small particulars that grate on those in the know are utterly irrelevant to what the general public will take away from the film. While these mistakes call into question the filmmakers' credibility, historians must accept that no one will come away with a faulty understanding of Stalingrad because Nikita Khrushchev's name is misspelled in the end credits. There are other problems of this type: the commissar Danilov tells Zaitsev that the Soviet people are reading about him "in the Crimea"; the Germans had completely occupied the Crimea by July 1942, well before the events of the film. Zaitsev also hears of Danilov's promotion to the General Staff--an odd career move for a junior political officer still at the front. Graduate students more knowledgeable than I in these fields tell me that German aircraft bear Western Front markings, not Eastern Front, and that Zaitsev's particular telescopic scope is anachronistic. There are certainly more. Again, those errors are irritating to those who catch them, but minor to any broad audience. More serious are the errors that would lead to serious misunderstandings of the battle and its context. They are many. Most significant is the picture the film gives of what truly mattered at Stalingrad, and what the battle was like. First, it presents a picture of Stalingrad as a sniper's battle. While snipers were certainly significant, this ignores the more important lessons of Stalingrad: the terrible overextension of German manpower and material resources required by Hitler's drive on the Caucasus oil fields, the astonishing endurance of individual Soviet soldiers, and the steadily increasing abilities of the Soviet high command, which was able to plan and organize an astoundingly successful counteroffensive to trap Paulus's Sixth Army in the city. It is illustrative that after the climactic sniper's battle at the close of *Enemy at the Gates*, the audience is simply told against a backdrop of cheering soldiers that two months later the Soviets won the battle. Given what has

come before, the viewer is forced to assume the Soviets sniped the Germans to defeat. <p> The nature of the battle is also lost. It is a cliché that the modern battlefield appears empty--think, for example, how rare it is to see combat photographs that manage to catch soldiers from opposing sides. <cite>Enemy at the Gates</cite> teaches something else; the modern battlefield not only looks empty, but <cite>is</cite> empty. Stalingrad becomes for Zaitsev and König a vast arena in which to wander about, searching for one another. The fact that hundreds of thousands of German and Soviet soldiers were dying in the <cite>crowded</cite> ruins of Stalingrad, with the front lines often separated by a hallway or alley, is a fact that makes only intermittent appearances--it would detract from the utterly personal and contextless nature of the sniper duel. <p> There are other historical problems as well. Ron Perlman's exceedingly grizzled veteran sniper Kulikov tells a chronologically muddled story of his training at a German sniper school (presumably as part of the pre-1933 collaboration) while Hitler and Stalin strolled arm in arm (not literally, we presume, but figuratively only after 1939). Upon the outbreak of war (in 1941), he was then arrested and beaten to force him to confess he was a German spy (typical of 1937). Thanks to this, he has a mouthful of steel teeth. This last at least is based on some reality: future Marshal Konstantin Rokossovskii lost numerous teeth before getting out of the NKVD's clutches. <p> The Soviet high command is seriously distorted. While Chuikov or Vasilevskii never make an appearance, this is excusable: no film can possibly show every aspect of a battle, or all the personalities involved. What is inexcusable is the impression created that the Stalingrad campaign was run by Nikita Khrushchev. Bob Hoskins does quite well at portraying Khrushchev in all his warty peasant earthiness, but Khrushchev was simply not the essential figure that the film portrays him as being. <p> Finally, at the film's climax, Danilov sacrifices himself in despair over his loss of faith in Marx-

ism-Leninism. This is not because he has decided that human interests outweigh class interests, or that the theory of surplus value is nonsense, but because sexual jealousy will make an egalitarian society impossible. This does not, I find, ring especially true when coming from a zealous young Stalinist. <p> To end on a brighter note, <cite>Enemy at the Gates</cite> has at the very least boosted the number of my students who drop by the office to ask questions about Stalingrad. I only wish it had done a better job of giving them good answers.

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Citation: David R. Stone. Review of *Enemy at the Gates*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. June, 2002.

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