

ALEXANDER MIKHAILOVICH VASILEVSKY

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Copyright: Johanna Granville, "Alexander Mikhailovich Vasilievsky." In *The Encyclopedia of Russian History*, edited by James R. Millar. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004 (page 1633).

Vasilevsky, Alexander Mikhailovich (1895-1977) was one of the Soviet military heroes of World War II. A lifelong member of the Communist Party beginning in 1938, Vasilevsky was born in the village of Novo-Pokrovka, now Ivanovo Oblast. He graduated from military school in 1914. He served as a junior officer in the tsarist army during World War I. From 1918 to 1931 he commanded a company, then battalion, then an infantry regiment in the Red Army. From 1931 to 1936 Vasilevsky held executive posts in combat training organs in the People's Commissariat of Defense and Volga Military District. From 1937 to 1941 he served on the General Staff, from 1941-2 as Deputy Chief, and from 1942 to 1945 (during World War II or "the Great Patriotic War") as Chief of the General Staff of the Soviet Armed Forces and concurrently, Deputy People's Commissar of Defense of the USSR.

Upon instructions from the Supreme Command Headquarters, Vasilevsky helped to elaborate many major strategic plans. In particular, Vasilevsky was among the architects (and participants) of the 1943 Stalingrad offensive. He coordinated actions of several fronts in the Battle of Kursk and the Byelorussian and Eastern-Prussian offensive operations.

Under Vasilevsky's leadership, a strategic operation aimed at routing the Japanese Kwantung army was successfully carried out in August-September 1945.

Increasingly, after the German invasion of June 1941, officers with world-class military skills, who either emerged unscathed by Stalin's purges or were retrieved from Stalin's prisons and camps, came to the fore. This included Vasilevsky. Although Stalin was loath to trust anyone fully, this innate distrust did not prevent him from tapping the resources of his most talented military strategists during World War II. In the first year of the war when the USSR was on the defensive, Stalin often made unilateral decisions. However, by the second year, he depended increasingly on his subordinates. As Marshal Vasilevsky recalls, "He came to have a different attitude toward the General Staff apparatus and front commanders. He was forced to rely constantly on the collective experience of the military. Before deciding on an operational question, Stalin listened to advice and discussed it with his deputy [Zhukov], with leading officers of the General Staff, with the main directorates of the People's Commissariat of Defense, with the commanders of the fronts, and also with the executives in charge of defense production." His most astute generals, Vasilevsky and Zhukov included, learned how to nudge Stalin toward a decision without talking back to him.

While serving as a member of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party between 1952 and 1961, Vasilevsky also held the post of First Deputy Minister of Defense from 1953 to 1957. Twice named Hero of the Soviet Union, he was also twice awarded the highest military order of Victory and presented with many other orders, medals, and ceremonial weapons. He retired the following year and died fifteen years later.

Bibliography

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