

STALIN'S GENERAL

THE LIFE OF GEORGY ZHUKOV

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

IF RUSSIA HAS A PREEMINENT HERO IT IS GEORGY ZHUKOV, THE MAN WHO beat Hitler, the peasant lad who rose from poverty to become the greatest general of the Second World War, the colorful personality who fell out with both Stalin and Khrushchev yet lived to fight another day. When Jonathan Jao of Random House suggested I write a new biography of Zhukov I was intrigued. While working on my book *Stalin's Wars* I'd formed a questioning view of Zhukov's role in the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany, not least concerning the mythology generated by his self-serving memoirs. If I had a favorite Soviet general, it would be Konstantin Rokossovsky—a rival of Zhukov's who had a very different leadership style. My working title for the new project was "Zhukov: A Critical Biography" and the intention was to produce a warts-and-all portrait that would expose the many myths surrounding his life and career as well as capturing the great drama of his military victories and defeats and his journey on the political roller coaster. But the more I worked on his biography the more sympathetic I became to Zhukov's point of view. Empathy combined with critique and the result is what I hope will be seen as a balanced reappraisal that cuts through the hyperbole of the Zhukov cult while appreciating the man and his achievements in full measure.

This is not the first English-language biography of Zhukov and I have to acknowledge the groundbreaking efforts of Albert Axell, William J. Spahr, and, especially, Otto Preston Chaney. The main limitation of their work was overreliance on Zhukov's memoirs, an indispensable but problematic source. In this biography I have been able to utilize an enormous amount of new evidence from the Russian archives, including Zhukov's personal files in the Russian State Military Archive. I have also benefited from the work of many Russian

scholars, especially V. A. Afanas'ev, V. Daines, A. Isaev, and V. Krasnov, who have all written valuable biographical studies focused on Zhukov's role in the Second World War. Mine, however, is a full-scale biography that gives due weight to Zhukov's early life as well as his postwar political career.

In Moscow my research was greatly facilitated by my friends in the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of General History, especially Oleg Rzheshesky, Mikhail Myagkov, and Sergey Listikov. Professor Rzheshesky was kind enough to arrange for a meeting and interview with Zhukov's eldest daughter, Era. Mr. Nikita Maximov and Alexander Pozdeev accompanied me on a fascinating visit to the Zhukov museum in the hometown that now bears his name. I do not share Boris Sokolov's hostile view of Zhukov but he was generous in advising me of the work of Irina Mastykina on Zhukov's family and private life.

Evan Mawdsley was kind enough to read the first draft and to make some valuable suggestions as well as correct mistakes. The most amusing of the latter was my conviction that Zhukov had fallen in love with a young gymnast rather than a schoolgirl (in Russian *gimnazistka*). Evan's own work on the Soviet-German war has been indispensable, as have the writings of Chris Bellamy, David Glantz, Jonathan House, and the late John Erickson. My main guides through the prewar Red Army that Zhukov served in were the works of Mary Harbeck, Mark von Hagen, Shimon Naveh, Richard Reese, and David Stone.

I am grateful to Ambassador John Beyrle for finding time in his busy day to talk to me about his father, Joseph's, chance meeting with Zhukov in 1945 and for giving me the materials that enabled me to reconstruct the incident.

Opportunities to present my research on Zhukov were provided by the Society of Military History, the Irish Association for Russian and East European Studies, the Society for Co-operation in Russian and Soviet Studies in London, the Centre for Military History and Strategic Studies at Maynooth University, and the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Hull.

Many weeks of research in Moscow and many more months writing would not have been possible without research leave and financial

support from my employer, University College Cork, Ireland.

For this book I was fortunate to have the input of not one but two brilliant editors: my partner, Celia Weston—to whom the book is dedicated—and Jonathan Jao, who gave me a master class in the writing of popular scholarly biography. I have also been privileged to have the services of my agent, Andrew Lownie, who has also encouraged me to take on the challenges of writing for a broader audience.

Finally, an acknowledgment of Nigel Hamilton's *How to Do Biography*. It was only when I read the book for a second time—after I had finished writing about Zhukov—that I realized how many of its valuable lessons I had taken to heart. But neither he nor anyone else mentioned in this preface can be blamed for any defects, which are entirely my own.

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TIMELINE:
THE LIFE AND CAREER OF
GEORGY ZHUKOV

- 1896** *December 1:* Birth of Georgy Konstantinovich Zhukov in Strelkovka, Kaluga Province, Russia
- 1903** Begins elementary school
- 1908** Migrates to Moscow to work as a furrier
- 1914** *August:* Outbreak of World War One
- 1915** *August:* Conscripted into the tsar's army and assigned to the cavalry
- 1916** *October:* Wounded in action and decorated for bravery
- 1917** *March:* Tsar Nicholas II abdicates following military mutiny in Petrograd
November: Bolsheviks overthrow the Provisional Government and seize power
- 1918** *October 1:* Joins the Red Army
- 1919** *March:* Becomes a candidate member of the Communist Party
October: Wounded in action in the Russian Civil War
- 1920** Marries Alexandra Dievna
March: Enrolls in Red Commanders Cavalry Course at Ryazan
May: Becomes a full member of the Communist Party
October: Promoted to platoon and then squadron commander
- 1921** Death of Zhukov's Father
March: Decorated for bravery

- 1922** *June:* Appointed squadron commander in the 38th Cavalry Regiment
- 1923** *March:* Promoted to assistant commander of the 40th Cavalry Regiment
July: Appointed commander of the 39th Buzuluk Cavalry Regiment
- 1924** *October:* Attends Higher Cavalry School in Leningrad
- 1928** Birth of daughter Era
- 1929** Birth of daughter Margarita
Attends Frunze Military Academy in Moscow
- 1930** *May:* Promoted to command of 2nd Cavalry Brigade of the 7th Samara Division
- 1931** *February:* Appointed assistant inspector of the cavalry
September: Japan invades Manchuria
- 1933** *January:* Hitler comes to power in Germany
March: Appointed commander of the 4th (Voroshilov) Cavalry Division
- 1935** Awarded the Order of Lenin
- 1937** Birth of daughter Ella
May: Arrest and execution of Marshal Tukhachevsky and start of military purges
July: Japan invades China
July: Appointed commander of the 3rd Cavalry Corps in Belorussia
- 1938** *March:* Transferred to the command of the 6th Cossack Corps
June: Appointed deputy commander of the Belorussian Military District
- 1939** *May:* Posted to the Mongolian-Manchurian border
June: Appointed commander of the 57th Special Corps at Khalkhin-Gol
July: 57th Corps reorganized into 1st Army Group with Zhukov in command
August 20: Launch of attack on Japanese forces at Khalkhin-Gol
August 23: Signature of Nazi-Soviet Pact

August 30: Made a Hero of the Soviet Union for his victory at Khalkhin-Gol

September 1: German invasion of Poland

September 17: Soviet invasion of eastern Poland

December: Soviet invasion of Finland

1940 *March:* Soviet-Finnish peace treaty

May: Appointed commander of the Kiev Special Military District

May: Restoration of the titles of general and admiral in the Soviet armed forces

June 2: First meeting with Stalin

June 5: Promoted to general of the army

June 22: France surrenders

June 28: Leads Soviet occupation of Bessarabia and North Bukovina

December 18: Hitler issues his directive on Operation Barbarossa

December 25: Delivers report, “The Character of Contemporary Offensive Operations”

1941 *January:* Takes part in General Staff war games

January 14: Appointed chief of the General Staff

February: Elected alternate member of the Central Committee at the 18th Party conference

May 15: Draft of Soviet plan for a preemptive strike against Germany

June 22: German invasion of the Soviet Union

June 30: Fall of Minsk

July 10: Establishment of Stavka, campaign headquarters of the Supreme Command

July 29: Removed as chief of the General Staff and appointed to command of Reserve Front

August 8: Stalin becomes supreme commander of the Armed Forces

August: Leads counteroffensive at Yel’nya

September: Fall of Kiev and blockade of Leningrad

- September 11:* Appointed commander of the Leningrad Front
- October 11:* Appointed commander of the Western Front
- December 5:* Beginning of Moscow counteroffensive
- 1942** *January:* Launch of first Rzhev-Viazma operation
- June:* Germans launch southern offensive toward Baku and Stalingrad
- July:* Second Rzhev-Viazma operation
- July 17:* Beginning of the battle for Stalingrad
- July 28:* Stalin issues Order No. 227—*Ni Shagu Nazad!* (Not a Step Back!)
- August 26:* Appointed Stalin's deputy supreme commander
- November:* Third Rzhev-Viazma Operation (Operation Mars)
- November 19:* Operation Uranus—Red Army counteroffensive at Stalingrad
- 1943** *January:* Supervises operations to end the German blockade of Leningrad
- January 18:* Promoted to marshal of the Soviet Union
- February:* Final surrender of Germans at Stalingrad
- July:* Battle of Kursk
- November:* Liberation of Kiev
- 1944** Death of Zhukov's mother
- June:* Operation Bagration; D-Day landings in France
- August:* Warsaw uprising
- September:* Supervises Soviet invasion of Bulgaria
- November 12:* Appointed commander of 1st Belorussian Front
- 1945** *January:* Launch of Vistula-Oder operation; capture of Warsaw
- February 18:* Stavka halts 1st Belorussian's advance on Berlin
- April 16:* Launch of attack on Berlin
- April 25:* Soviet and American forces meet on the Elbe
- April 30:* Death of Hitler
- May:* Red Army captures Berlin and Zhukov accepts German surrender
- May 30:* Appointed commander of Soviet occupation forces in

Germany

June 24: Zhukov leads Victory Parade in Red Square

July–August: Attends Potsdam conference

1946 *February:* Elected to the Supreme Soviet

March 22: Appointed commander-in-chief of Soviet ground forces

June: Dismissed as commander-in-chief of Soviet ground forces and posted to Odessa

1947 *February:* Expelled from membership of the party Central Committee

1948 *January:* Censored for extracting war booty from Germany

February: Transferred to the command of the Urals Military District

1950 Reelected to the Supreme Soviet

Meets Galina Semonova in Sverdlovsk

1952 *October:* Attends 19th Party Congress and is reelected to Central Committee

1953 *March:* Returns to Moscow and appointed deputy defense minister

March: Stalin dies

June: Arrests Beria

1954 Death of Zhukov's sister, Maria

September: Oversees nuclear test and exercise at Totskoe

1955 *February:* Appointed minister of defense

May: Signing of Warsaw Pact

July: Attends Geneva summit and meets Eisenhower

1956 *February:* Elected to the Presidium at the 20th Party Congress

1956 *February 25:* Khrushchev gives Secret Speech to 20th Party Congress

November: Oversees Soviet military intervention in Hungary

1957 *January–February:* Tours India and Burma

June: Leads defense of Khrushchev against attempted coup by the antiparty group

- June:* Birth of daughter Maria
- October:* Central Committee dismisses Zhukov for distancing army from the party
- 1958** *February:* Retired from the armed forces by the Presidium
- 1959** Attacked at 21st Party Congress by Minister of Defense Malinovsky
- 1961** Attacked at 22nd Party Congress by Khrushchev
- 1964** *October:* Fall of Khrushchev
- 1965** Divorces Alexandra Dievna
- 1966** Marries Galina Semonovna
- November:* Awarded fifth Order of Lenin
- 1967** *December:* Death of Alexandra Dievna
- 1968** *January:* Suffers stroke
- 1969** *April:* Publication of first edition of Zhukov's memoirs
- 1971** *September:* Khrushchev dies
- 1973** *November:* Death of Galina Semonova
- 1974** *June 18:* Dies in the Kremlin hospital
- Publication of the revised edition of Zhukov's memoirs

STALIN'S GENERAL

**SIC TRANSIT GLORIA:
THE RISES AND FALLS OF
MARSHAL GEORGY ZHUKOV**

OF ALL THE MOMENTS OF TRIUMPH IN THE LIFE OF MARSHAL GEORGY KON-stantinovich Zhukov nothing equaled that day in June 1945 when he took the salute at the great Victory Parade in Red Square. Zhukov, mounted on a magnificent white Arabian called Tspeki, rode into the square through the Spassky Gate, the Kremlin on his right and the famous onion domes of St. Basil's Cathedral directly ahead. As he did so a 1,400-strong orchestra struck up Glinka's *Glory* (to the Russian Motherland). Awaiting him were columns of combined regiments representing all the branches of the Soviet armed forces. In the middle of the square Zhukov met Marshal K. K. Rokossovsky, who called the parade to attention and then escorted Zhukov as he rode to each regiment and saluted them.

When the salutes were finished Zhukov joined the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin on the plinth above Lenin's Mausoleum and gave a speech celebrating the Red Army's victory over Nazi Germany. The sky was overcast and there was a drizzling rain that worsened as the day wore on. At one point Zhukov's hat became so wet he was tempted to remove it and wipe the visor but desisted when he saw that Stalin was making no such move.

As a former cavalryman Zhukov relished the salute portion of the proceedings. Giving a speech that would be seen and heard by millions of people across the world was a different matter. The idea made him nervous and he prepared as thoroughly as he could, even rehears-

ing the speech in front of his daughters, Era and Ella, who were so impressed they burst into spontaneous applause. The delivery of the speech was carefully crafted, with prompts in the margin directing Zhukov to speak quietly, then louder, and when to adopt a solemn tone.

Zhukov seemed more than a little nervous but it was a commanding performance nonetheless. His delivery was halting but emphatic and reached a crescendo with his final sentence: “Glory to our wise leader and commander—Marshal of the Soviet Union, the Great Stalin!” At that moment artillery fired a salute and the orchestra struck up the Soviet national anthem.

After his speech Zhukov reviewed the parade standing beside Stalin. Partway through there was a pause in the march while, to a roll of drumbeats, 200 captured Nazi banners were piled against the Kremlin wall, much like Marshal Kutuzov’s soldiers had thrown French standards at the feet of Tsar Alexander I after their defeat of Napoleon in 1812. The parade over, the day ended with a fabulous firework display.¹

Stalin’s choice of Zhukov to lead the parade evoked no comment. He was, after all, Stalin’s deputy supreme commander and widely regarded as the main architect of the Soviet victory over Adolf Hitler’s Germany, a victory that had saved Europe as well as Russia from Nazi enslavement. Newsreel film of the parade that flashed across the world only reinforced Zhukov’s status as the greatest Soviet general of the Second World War.

When the German armies invaded Soviet Russia in summer 1941 it was Zhukov who led the Red Army’s first successful counteroffensive, forcing the Wehrmacht to retreat and demonstrating to the whole world that Hitler’s war machine was not invincible. When Leningrad was surrounded by the Germans in September 1941 Stalin sent Zhukov to save the city from imminent capture. A month later, Stalin recalled Zhukov to Moscow and put him in command of the defense of the Soviet capital. Not only did Zhukov stop the German advance on Moscow, but in December 1941 he launched a counteroffensive that drove the Wehrmacht away from the city and ended Hitler’s hope of subduing the Red Army and conquering Russia in a single Blitzkrieg campaign.

Six months later Hitler tried again to inflict a crippling blow on the Red Army, this time by launching a southern offensive designed to capture the Soviet oilfields at Baku. At the height of the German advance south Zhukov played a central role in masterminding the Soviet counteroffensive at Stalingrad in November 1942—an encirclement operation that trapped 300,000 German troops in the city. In July 1943 he followed that dazzling success with a stunning victory in the great armored clash at Kursk—a battle that saw the destruction of the last remaining reserves of Germany's panzer power. In November 1943 cheering crowds welcomed Zhukov as he and the future Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev drove into the recaptured Ukrainian capital of Kiev. In June 1944 Zhukov coordinated Operation Bagration—the campaign to liberate Belorussia from German occupation. Bagration brought the Red Army to the gates of Warsaw and the capture of the Polish capital in January 1945 and marked the beginning of the Vistula-Oder operation—an offensive that took Zhukov's armies through Poland, into eastern Germany, and to within striking distance of Berlin. In April 1945 Zhukov led the final Soviet assault on Berlin. The ferocious battle for the German capital cost the lives of 80,000 Soviet soldiers but by the end of April Hitler was dead and the Soviet flag flew over the ruins of the Reichstag. It was Zhukov who formally accepted Germany's unconditional surrender on May 9, 1945.

Following Zhukov's triumphant parade before the assembled legions of the Red Army, Navy, and Air Force in June 1945 he seemed destined for an equally glorious postwar career as the Soviet Union's top soldier and in March 1946 he was appointed commander-in-chief of all Soviet ground forces. However, within three months Zhukov had been sacked by Stalin and banished to the command of the Odessa Military District.

The ostensible reason for Zhukov's dismissal was that he had been disloyal and disrespectful toward Stalin and claimed too much personal credit for victory in the Great Patriotic War, as the Soviets called it. In truth, Zhukov's loyalty to Stalin was beyond question. If anyone deserved the appellation "Stalin's General," he did. Zhukov was not slow to blow his own trumpet, at least in private, but that was characteristic of top generals the world over, including many of his colleagues

in the Soviet High Command—who all voted for Stalin’s resolution removing him as commander-in-chief. What Stalin really objected to was Zhukov’s independent streak and his tendency to tell the truth as he saw it, a quality that had served the dictator well during the war but was less commendable in peacetime when Stalin felt he needed no advice except his own. Like Zhukov, Stalin could be vain, and he was jealous of the attention lavished on his deputy during and immediately after the war, even though he had been instrumental in the creation of Zhukov’s reputation as a great general. Stalin’s treatment of Zhukov also sent a message to his other generals: if Zhukov, the most famous among them and the closest to Stalin, could suffer such a fate, so could any one of them if they did not behave themselves.

According to his daughter Era, Zhukov was not a man given to overt displays of emotion, even in the privacy of his family, but his demotion and exile to Odessa caused him great distress.² Later, he told the Soviet writer Konstantin Simonov: “I was firmly resolved to remain myself. I understood that they were waiting for me to give up and expecting that I would not last a day as a district commander. I could not permit this to happen. Of course, fame is fame. At the same time it is a double-edged sword and sometimes cuts against you. After this blow I did everything to remain as I had been. In this I saw my inner salvation.”³

Zhukov’s troubles were only just beginning, however. In February 1947 he was expelled from the Communist Party Central Committee on grounds that he had an “antiparty attitude.” Zhukov was horrified and he pleaded with Stalin for a private meeting with the dictator to clear his name. Stalin ignored him and the anti-Zhukov campaign continued. In June 1947 Zhukov was censured for giving the singer Lidiya Ruslanova a military medal when she had visited Berlin in August 1945. Shortly after, Ruslanova and her husband, General V. V. Krukov, were arrested and imprisoned. “In 1947 I feared arrest every day,” recalled Zhukov later, “and I had a bag ready with my underwear in it.”⁴

The next development was even more ominous: an investigation began into the war booty Zhukov had extracted while serving in Germany. According to the report of a party commission Zhukov amassed a personal hoard of trophies, including 70 pieces of gold jewelry, 740

items of silverware, 50 rugs, 60 pictures, 3,700 meters of silk, and—presumably after casting a professional eye over them—320 furs (he had been a furrier in his youth). Zhukov pleaded that these were gifts or paid from his own pocket but the commission found his explanations insincere and evasive and concluded that while he did not deserve to be expelled from the party he should hand over his ill-gotten loot to the state. In January 1948 Zhukov was demoted to the command of the Urals Military District based in Sverdlovsk.⁵

Further punishment came in the form of treating Zhukov as an “unperson.” He was written out of the history of the Great Patriotic War. Paintings of the 1945 Victory Parade omitted him. A 1948 documentary film about the battle of Moscow barely featured Zhukov. In a 1949 poster tableau depicting Stalin and his top generals plotting and planning the great counteroffensive at Stalingrad Zhukov was nowhere to be seen.

But as early as October 1949 there were signs of Zhukov’s rehabilitation. That month *Pravda* carried a funeral notice of the death of Marshal F. I. Tolbukhin and Zhukov was listed among the signatories.⁶ In 1950 Zhukov, along with a number of other senior officers, was reelected to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. In 1952 the second edition of the official *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* carried a short but favorable entry on Zhukov, stressing his important role in the realization of Stalin’s military plans during the war.⁷ In October 1952 Zhukov was a delegate to the 19th Party Congress and he was restored to candidate (i.e., probationary) membership of the Central Committee. Incredibly, Zhukov believed that Stalin was preparing to appoint him minister of defense.⁸

In March 1953 Stalin died and Zhukov was a prominent member of the military guard of honor at the dictator’s state funeral.⁹ Zhukov’s appointment as deputy minister of defense was among the first announcements made by the new, post-Stalin Soviet government. Zhukov’s rehabilitation continued apace with his appointment in February 1955 as minister of defense by Khrushchev, Stalin’s successor as party leader. In July 1955 Zhukov attended the great power summit in Geneva of Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and United States—the first such gathering since the end of the war. There he met and conversed with President Dwight Eisenhower, with whom he had served

in Berlin just after the war. “Could the friendship of two old soldiers,” wondered *Time* magazine, “provide the basis for a genuine easing of tensions between the U.S. and Russia?”¹⁰

As minister of defense, Zhukov emerged as a prominent public figure in the Soviet Union, second only in importance to Khrushchev. In June 1957 Zhukov played a pivotal role in resisting an attempt to oust Khrushchev from the leadership by a hard-line faction led by Vyacheslav Molotov, the former foreign minister. Unfortunately for Zhukov his bravura performance in the struggle against Molotov turned him into a political threat in Khrushchev’s eyes. In October 1957 Zhukov was accused of plotting to undermine the role of the Communist Party in the armed forces. Among Zhukov’s most active accusers were many of the same generals and marshals he had served with during the war. Khrushchev sacked Zhukov as minister of defense and in March 1958 he was retired from the armed forces at the relatively young age of sixty-one.

During the remainder of the Khrushchev era Zhukov suffered the same fate of excision from the history books he had experienced during his years of exile under Stalin. In 1960, for example, the party began to publish a massive multivolume history of the Great Patriotic War that barely mentioned Zhukov while greatly exaggerating Khrushchev’s role.¹¹ Another expression of Zhukov’s disgrace was his isolation from the outside world. When American author Cornelius Ryan visited the USSR in 1963 to research his book on the battle of Berlin, Zhukov was the only Soviet marshal he was prohibited from seeing.¹²

Zhukov took solace in writing his memoirs. His authorial role model was Winston Churchill, whose memoir-history of the Second World War he had read when a restricted circulation Russian translation was published in the USSR in the 1950s. Churchill’s motto in composing that work was that history would bear him out—because he was going to write the history! Zhukov seems to have harbored similar sentiments and his memoirs were designed not only to present his own point of view but to answer and refute his Khrushchevite critics, even if that meant skewing the historical record in his own favor.

While Khrushchev continued to rule the Soviet Union there was no chance Zhukov’s memoirs would be published. When his daughter

Ella asked him why he bothered he said he was writing for the desk drawer. In October 1964, however, Khrushchev was ousted from power and there began a process of rehabilitating Zhukov as a significant military figure. Most notably, the Soviet press began to publish Zhukov's articles again, including his accounts of the battles of Moscow, Stalingrad, Kursk, and Berlin.

Zhukov's second rehabilitation rekindled interest in the West, which had faded somewhat after he was ousted as defense minister. In 1969 the American journalist and historian Harrison E. Salisbury published an unauthorized translation of Zhukov's articles in a book called *Marshal Zhukov's Greatest Battles*. In his introduction to the volume Salisbury famously described Zhukov as "the master of the art of mass warfare in the 20th century."¹³ Most reviewers agreed. John Erickson, the foremost British authority on the Red Army, writing in *The Sunday Times*, said "the greatest soldier so far produced by the 20th century is Marshal Georgi Zhukov of the Soviet Union. On the very simplest reckoning he is the general who never lost a battle. . . . For long enough the German generals have had their say, extolling their own skills. . . now it is the turn of Marshal Zhukov, a belated appearance to be sure but the final word may be his."¹⁴

When Zhukov's memoirs were published in April 1969 it was in a handsome edition with colored maps and hundreds of photographs, including some from Zhukov's personal archive.¹⁵ The Soviet public was wildly enthusiastic about the memoirs. The initial print run of 300,000 soon sold out and millions more sales followed, including hundreds of thousands in numerous translations. The memoirs quickly became—and remain—the single most influential personal account of the Great Patriotic War.

Zhukov's triumph in the battle for the historical memory of the Great Patriotic War was not one that he lived to savor. By the time a revised edition of his memoirs was issued in 1974 he was dead.¹⁶ In 1968 Zhukov had suffered a severe stroke from which he never really recovered. His health problems were exacerbated by the stress of his second wife, Galina, suffering from cancer. When she died in November 1973 at the age of forty-seven, Zhukov's own health deteriorated rapidly and he passed away aged seventy-seven in the Kremlin hospital in June 1974.

Zhukov's funeral was the biggest such occasion in the Soviet Union since the death of Stalin. As Zhukov lay in state in the Central House of the Soviet army in Moscow thousands came to pay their respects. When his ashes were interred in Kremlin wall on June 21 the chief pallbearer was party general secretary Leonid Brezhnev and at the memorial service that followed the main speaker was Minister of Defense Marshal A. A. Grechko.¹⁷

In Russia Zhukov was—and still is—considered not only the greatest general of the Second World War but the most talented *polkovodets* (military leader) in Russian history. In the West Zhukov's reputation is only slightly less exalted. Of course, Zhukov is not everyone's hero. Even in Russia he has his critics. There are those who consider him an egotistical brute with an inflated military reputation. According to Viktor Suvorov, a former Soviet intelligence officer, whose history books are huge bestsellers in Russia, "all the top military leaders of the country were against Zhukov. The Generals knew, the Marshals knew, that Zhukov was vainglorious. They knew he was both a dreadful and a dull person. They knew he was rude and a usurper. They knew he was in a class of his own as a careerist. They knew he trampled over everyone in his path. They knew of his lust for power and the belief in his own infallibility."¹⁸

As we shall see, Zhukov certainly was a flawed character and his fellow generals did have many negative things to say about him during the course of his career but Suvorov accentuated only the negatives. Suvorov's critical onslaught had little impact on Zhukov's popularity in Russia. If anything, the continuing controversy only added to Zhukov's allure as a deeply flawed character of epic achievements.

When Zhukov published his memoirs the Russian archives were closed and little or no independent documentary evidence was available. To write his biography was perforce to gloss his officially sanctioned memoirs, and the result was a lopsided story of his life. The situation began to improve with the publication in the early 1990s of new editions of Zhukov's memoirs incorporating a large amount of material excluded by the Soviet censors in the 1960s.¹⁹ After the end of the Soviet regime in 1991 many thousands of documents concerning Zhukov's career were published from Russian military and political archives. More recently these materials have been supplemented by

direct archival access to some of Zhukov's private papers.²⁰ Now it is possible to render an account of his life that is grounded in the documentary evidence.

Zhukov's life consists of far more than a chronology of the battles he fought. His story reflects both the triumphs and the tragedies of the Soviet regime he served. Above all, Zhukov was a dedicated communist and a loyal servant of Stalin and the Soviet regime. While his victories over the Nazis served humanity well, they also helped to buttress and legitimate a system that was itself highly authoritarian and harshly repressive. As an ideologue as well as a soldier Zhukov accepted Soviet repression as necessary to progress the communist cause in which he believed. Had he lived to see the end of the Soviet Union it is doubtful that Zhukov would have felt the need to repudiate his beliefs or apologize for his role in saving Stalin's regime. Rather, like many of his generation, he would have argued that he was a patriot as well as a communist and that the Soviet regime—for all its faults—was the only one he could serve on behalf of his country.

Zhukov was neither the unblemished hero of legend nor the unmitigated villain depicted by his detractors. Undoubtedly, he was a great general, a man of immense military talent, and someone blessed with the strength of character necessary to fight and win savage wars. But he also made many mistakes, errors paid for with the blood of millions of people. Because he was a flawed and contradictory character it will not be possible to render a simple verdict on Zhukov's life and career. But it is those flaws and contradictions, as well as his great victories and defeats, that make Zhukov such a fascinating subject.

Joseph Stalin was the General Secretary of the Communist Party and the Soviet Union's sole leader from 1924 until his death in 1953. One of the most controversial and enigmatic figures in Russian history, he is still the subject of fierce discussions and assessments. His introduction of the command principle and five-year plans aimed at boosting the country's economy condemned the country to human losses of immense proportions.