

Candlemas

Jamaica Plain, January 30, 2005, Rev. Terry Burke

Wednesday, February 2nd is Candlemas, when the church remembers the story in Luke of the aged and pious Simeon, waiting in the temple for the Messiah, who takes the new born child Jesus in his arms and calls him the "light of revelation." Candlemas has traditionally been a time to light and bless candles; it's also St. Brigit's Day in Ireland, and Ground Hog Day in our country. However, February 2nd, 1943 was also the end of the fighting in the great World War II battle of Stalingrad, although the German Field Marshall Paulus had already surrendered on January 30th, 62 years ago today.

When I was in grade school, I read a Scholastic Books' edition of Winston Churchill's history of WWII. I remember that it seemed like the Germans kept on winning, then the Allies invaded North Africa, and the Germans were suddenly losing. The 5 month siege of Stalingrad, told masterfully by British historian Antony Beevor, was the difference. It was a battle where 485,000 Soviet soldiers died, and 850,000 Axis troops were killed, missing, wounded, or captured. In contrast, U.S. military deaths for ALL of WWII were about 400,000.

When the German armies invaded Russia in June of 1941, Hitler had fooled Stalin into thinking that an attack wasn't coming. Both the German foreign minister and ambassador to Russia told their Soviet counterparts that they thought the invasion was a mistake. In the "small world" category, the First Secretary of the Russian Embassy in Berlin was Valentin Berezhkov, whose widow Lera I stayed with in Moscow during my sabbatical in 2001.

Many in the German upper military command saw the war as an anti-communist crusade. However, for the Nazi true believers, it was a "rassenkampf," a "race war" against "untermenschen," subhuman Jews and Slavs. Hitler had recently decided that he needed to be the head German military leader; after all, he was "Grosetf," the "Greatest Military

Commander of All Time." The German military made a rapid advance against the unprepared Russians. Hitler believed that Stalin's thorough purges of the Russian officer corps in the late 1930's left the country as vulnerable as a house of cards. Hitler not only underestimated the deep nationalist feelings of the Russians, he wasted a key opportunity to capture Moscow, leaving German troops, without winter uniforms, in the Russian snows.

Both sides treated civilians with barbarity. The Germans turned families out of their homes into the snow so that their troops could have shelter; the Russians burned these dwellings to the ground whenever possible to deny housing for the Germans. In both instances, the civilians were homeless in the Russian winter. The German generals were also told by Hitler to disregard international law: German soldiers would not be held accountable for any crime against a civilian. Also, military orders blurred partisans and Jews, so that almost anyone could be simply shot, even if wearing a Soviet uniform.

The German 6th army now came under the command of General Paulus, a staff officer who had never held a command and who was obedient to Hitler's wishes. In contrast, one of Paulus' subordinates, General Strecker, was an old war horse who hated the Nazis, and informed all of his commanders to disobey the illegal rules about civilians. His staff officer, Lt. Col. Groscurth went high up the chain of command trying to save 90 young Jewish orphans. They were shot anyway, and Groscurth went to Paris on his next leave to join the anti-Nazi resistance. Later, when the Germans captured Kiev, they rounded up and killed over 30,000 Russian Jews at Babi Yar. Russian POWs were also treated with great cruelty; Beevor points out that the first gas executions at Auschwitz were carried out on 600 Russian POWs.

After the winter of 1941-42, the Germans continued their advance. By the time the 6th Army reached the Volga, they were over 2,500 miles from home and experiencing difficulty receiving supplies. That distance would be about the same as from Boston to Salt Lake City. Stalin put General Zhukov in charge of the Red Army and the political commissar for Stalingrad, Nikita Khrushchev, chose General Chuikov to defend the city.

Seasoned professionals, they had previously been in political disgrace, but the desperate situation allowed them to return to command.

By reaching the Volga, the Germans were practically able to cut Russia in two. However, more importantly, Hitler had realized that his parallel drive for the Caucasus's oil fields would fail. The German leader had said before that such a loss would mean the end of the war, but now he refused to acknowledge it. Instead, he turned to the symbolic value of winning the city on the east bank of the Volga named after his nemesis, Stalingrad, bragging about the upcoming victory in an important speech. Previously, Hitler had avoided street fighting, in which German advantages of aircraft and tanks would mean little.

In August of '43, the German air force destroyed most of the Stalingrad, killing 40,000 civilians. Soon the 6th Army broke through Soviet lines to surround the city. The 6th Army was largely Germans, but included units that were Rumanian, Italian, Hungarian, and over 50,000 Russians (identified as Cossacks to fit German racial purity codes) who chose to fight against Stalin's regime. Surprised by the German advance, teenage Russian girls turned anti-aircraft guns down to fire on the tanks. After clearing out their opposition, the Germans were horrified to discover that they had been fighting women. As Beevor points out, they didn't seem to have been concerned about the women civilians killed in the bombing of the city.

About 50,000 civilians were unable to flee besieged Stalingrad. The destroyed buildings made a great defensive position for the beleaguered Russian forces. German troops called this street combat "rattenkrieg" "rat warfare;" tanks and aircraft were little help. Russian troops would fight at night with knives, calling themselves members of the "Stalingrad Street Academy." Killing soldiers by sniping became an art form, with a soldier named Zaitsev killing 149 of the Germans. One was designated a "noble sniper after 40 kills. Sergeant Jakob Pavlov and a few Russian defenders held "Pavlov's house" against the Germans' advance for 48 days. When tanks arrived, they'd flee to the third floor or the basement, out of the elevation of the main tank guns. When I visited the Sergeev

Monastery in Zagorsk in 2001, Sargeant Pavlov, now Archimandrite Kyrill, was the much loved head of the monastery.

Though the Germans lost many soldiers and much equipment, they relentlessly pushed Chuikov's troops back to a few hundred yards along the bank of the Volga in huge ruined truck factories. The only source of men and supplies for the Russians was by boat across the Volga. Needless to say, the boats were bombed, strafed and machine gunned by the Germans. Hitler assumed that the Russians were nearly out of reserves. However, Russian war production was enormously higher than Germany's because Russian women all worked in the factories; Hitler didn't think women should do such labor, so the Germans used slave laborers from captured countries instead.

The Russians had not only produced huge quantities of tanks and aircraft, they had acquired large amounts of American aid in the form of trucks, jeeps, tanks, flour and Spam. Hitler had foolishly declared war on the U.S. after Japan had attacked Pearl Harbor. With these war supplies and Russian troops brought from the Far East, General Zhukov engineered an enormous trap for the 6th Army, with Stalingrad as the bait. As in the old video game Pacman, the defender suddenly turned and become the attacker. In November of '42, hitting especially the badly supplied Rumanian units, the Russians trapped the unsuspecting Germans (about 350,000 troops) in a sixty mile pocket, a "Kessel" or cauldron.

Hitler refused to let General Paulus break out of the encirclement and retreat. Goering, the Nazi air chief, insisted he could supply the army by air drops, though his experts told him that air ships could only provide half the supplies needed, and that amount only in good weather. And the Russian winter was coming on. In their "fortress without a roof," the 6th Army waited for the rescue that Hitler promised. A German army that tried to break through to the "Kessel" was drive back, and the vigorous Russian counterattack pushed the attacking Germans back over 150 miles in great disorder. Now Hitler needed Paulus to hold on in order to tie down the Russian armies surrounding the 6th Army, so that the German line not completely collapse.

Cold, stress, exhaustion and lack of food started to kill the Germans. The food ration at the end was 75 grams of bread a day in severe cold. A sympathetic German general in Berlin who tried to live on the Stalingrad ration lost 26 pounds in two weeks, then was ordered by Hitler to stop. The soldiers hoped for a miracle at Christmas that never came. Then lice infested troops started dying of typhus. The final Russian attack in January found exhausted troops, lacking anti-tank ammunition. In the extreme cold, Russian mortar shells bounced off the frozen ground and exploded in the air. When the Russians reached the 3,500 Russian POWs held by the Germans, only 20 were left alive.

Hitler promoted Paulus to Field Marshall, hoping he would commit suicide rather than surrender. The severely depressed Paulus surrendered anyway on January 30th. The fiercely anti-Nazi General Strecker held out until February 2nd, then send a final radio message that pointedly ended, "Long live Germany," and not "Long live the Fuehrer." Of the 91,000 Axis troops captured, only 5,000 lived to return to Germany, some only in 1955, ten years after the end of the war.

In Germany, scapegoats were needed for Hitler's disaster. First, the aristocratic officer corps was blamed. Then, on February 16th, academic Arvid Harnack and his American wife Mildred Fish Harnack were executed as part of the brave but ineffective "Red Orchestra" spy ring. On February 22nd, Hans and Sophie Scholl of the White Rose student group were beheaded for passing out anti-Nazi leaflets. When the Nazi judge asked 21-year-old Sophie Scholl "How could you distribute leaflets calling for the military defeat of the Fatherland?" Sophie replied, "Somebody had to do it."

With the lessening of the military threat, Stalin began to tighten repressive controls that had loosened somewhat with the war. He designed even more punitive slave labor camps, the so-called "katorga" or "hard labor" camps. The first structure rebuilt in Stalingrad was the NKVD secret police headquarters. In the late 1940's the popular General Zhukov was degraded and placed under house arrest. Perhaps because of his direct experience of war at Stalingrad, as Premier of the Soviet Union, Khrushchev sought peaceful co-existence

with the West. Historians argue whether Hitler lost the war at Stalingrad, or whether after the battle he could no longer win the war. Some historians argue that Paulus' holding out for six weeks in the "Kessel" prevented the collapse of the German line, and kept millions of people from falling behind what was to become the "Iron Curtain."

I imagine some people in the congregation today are thinking, "So what." What meaning does this terrible story of the clash of ideologies, the clash of fascists and communists in the last century, mean for us? A church member told me a joke recently: A man goes into a bar and sees President Bush and Vice President Cheney. "What are you doing here?" he asks. Cheney replies, "We're plotting a war against Iran and we're going to kill 140 million Muslims and one beautiful blond." "Why are you killing the blond?" Cheney turns to Bush and says, "I told you nobody would care about the Muslims."

Many of our leaders feel we are involved in a clash of civilizations. In an article in the current New Yorker, Seymour Hirsch writes how American covert actions now take place without congressional oversight, and that during the next four years the administration plans to deal with a nuclear threat from Iran with clandestine activities, air strikes on nuclear facilities (which, the thinking goes, will trigger a popular uprising), and if necessary an invasion. As the father of an almost 17-year-old son, I find this terrifying. Some of the lessons we learn from the story of Stalingrad are the deadliness of urban street fighting, the great unknowns of war, where attacker can rapidly become the encircled, and the certainty that many civilians and children will die.

In the Candlemas story, the ancient Simeon holds the baby in his arms and sees a savior, the "light of revelation." Who hasn't held a new-born baby and seen in that child the light of the world? We light our candles today for all children and for all people, in the hope and prayer that we can live together in the light of God's peace.

Benediction: May we walk in the light of God's peace...and may we remember the words of Sophie Scholl. "Somebody had to do it."

