

PAUL  
WINTERTON



EYE-WITNESS  
ON THE SOVIET  
WAR-FRONT



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PUBLICATION

The illustrations on the front cover show (top): R.A.F. Fighter pilots, with Hurricanes in the background, chat with a Soviet sentry. (bottom): A Nazi transport of fodder in retreat struggling through the snow.

## **EYE-WITNESS ON THE SOVIET WAR-FRONT**

is a report of Mr. Paul Winterton's speech, and includes questions and answers, made at the Russia Today Society Meeting, at the Kingsway Hall, London, on May 19th, 1943.

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**PAUL WINTERTON**

*(With acknowledgements to the "News Chronicle")*



# Eye-Witness on Soviet War Front

*The following is the text of a speech made by Mr. Paul Winterton, on leave from the U.S.S.R., where he had been the Special Correspondent of the "News Chronicle" for over a year, at the Kingsway Hall, London, on May 19, 1943. The meeting was presided over by Mr. A. J. Cummings, the well-known political writer on the same newspaper. At the end of the speech will be found a selection of the questions put to Mr. Winterton from the audience, and his replies.*

**I**T seems to me a matter of vital world importance that when this war is over we should develop the sort of friendship with the Soviet Union which is not just a matter of treaties or formal agreements, but which is really sincere, which is based on something deep in the hearts of the peoples of both countries and which will last because it is built on sound foundations. I am absolutely certain that if we fail to establish such a basis of friendship, we are fighting this war in vain.

Of course, both in Russia and in Great Britain there is already a tremendous potential reservoir of good feeling and never were there better prospects for the development of friendship. The great majority of the people in Russia are very interested in this country. They are very friendly, as individuals, to the British people, and they are very anxious to know what we are doing, and what we are going to do. I would say that, on the whole, the Russian people are in the mood when they are ready to be sincerely and honestly friendly and to co-operate with the British people in the post-war period.

What about our feelings over here? Well, of course, the Russians themselves have done so much since they began to defend their country against Germany that naturally and obviously we here are only too ready to be friends with Russia. The Russians themselves have laid the foundations of the admiration, respect and enthusiasm to be found everywhere in this country.

I suppose it would be true to say that admiration for the Red Army's tremendous fight is the key-note of British feeling. I got repercussions of that, even in Moscow. The British people were tremendously enthusiastic about what the Russians were doing and had done. I am sure you will all agree that that is the feeling of almost every man and woman in this country. Well, that is very right and proper. The only thing is that admiration is such a weak word with which to describe such a tremendous thing.

### COURAGE AT STALINGRAD

When I hear the word "courage" or the word "endurance" used about the Red Army I always think of one thing in Russia. There have been many occasions when the Russians have shown amazing courage, but there is one place, one battle which in my view sums up the attitude of the Red Army towards the struggle in which they are engaged. When anybody talks of Russian courage, I always think of Stalingrad. I want to tell you why, because I think I see Stalingrad in quite a different way from the way in which you see it.

I saw Stalingrad a few hours after the German Sixth Army had been destroyed. I saw it one very cold dawn. I had spent the night in a dug-out near the great tractor factory which so often appeared in the news. In the early morning I walked over the Russian defence positions which the Red Army had used during the last few heroic days. I must tell you that I was absolutely amazed by what I saw. The really interesting thing about Stalingrad was that the Germans had in fact almost taken the city. The Russians had been left with just a very narrow strip of broken yellow devastated ground along the top of the cliff above the river Volga. It was just the fringe of the city, and they had in some places only a few square yards of cliff-top. On that they had their dug-outs and trenches and machine-guns and their men.

And having seen this position I walked out to the top of a famous hill that you will remember—the Mamaev Kurgan. It is a sort of hog's back, running parallel with the river. For the greater part of the time, and during the latter days, powerful German forces had held this hill. From the top of the hill you could see the whole of the Russian positions. They were under fire day and night from German guns. The Russian

river crossings upon which the Red Army depended for every cartridge, every bit of food, all its supplies, were under continuous fire. The Germans had almost complete mastery of the air, and were able to do as they liked. They bombed continuously, and with terrific effect.

The Germans also had a considerable superiority in manpower and in fire-power on the ground. In short, they really had everything except just that last ounce of stubborn determination which was the thing which really turned the scales. I am sure that when the German generals stood on the hill and surveyed the scene they were perfectly certain that just one more attack would see the completion of the job they had been told to do, and when Hitler said: "Stalingrad will be taken; you may be sure of that," he had been informed by the people on the spot who were convinced that nothing could prevent the city from falling into German hands. But, of course, it did not. In some amazing, miraculous way these men of the Red Army, who were bombed and shelled and under constant fire in an almost unparalleled position, clung on to this narrow strip of cliff with teeth and finger-nails and just stuck it out until the moment when the counter offensive came, unexpectedly for the Germans, and changed the situation. So when I hear the word "courage" I think of that dogged obstinacy of the Red soldiers in conditions which seemed so hopeless.

So much for admiration. One could talk for ever about the feats of the Red Army, of their courage in desperate situations. The worse the situation got, the more stubborn were they in their resistance. What I think we do forget is that these achievements of the Red Army, which, without the shadow of a doubt, have changed the history of the world, were not brought about without enormous sacrifice. It is all very well to applaud the wonderful results, but it is also desirable to remember something of the price which the men of the Red Army paid when they crossed the river Volga to take up their positions on the other side. Everyone there, each soldier knew very well that thousands and thousands of those who went over to that cliff-side were going to die on the Stalingrad side of the river.

### HUGE CASUALTIES

As we all know, and as we should remember, Russian casualties have been huge. I suppose that in the whole of the



Soviet Union there is no home which has not lost a man at the front or felt the results of some casualties in a very intimate way. Russia is a country which is in mourning as is no other country in the world, except perhaps Germany itself.

It is not only the Red Army which has suffered these great casualties. In this long drawn-out war, some of the worst casualties and sufferings have been experienced by civilians who have been taken to Germany or put to work in the occupied areas when the Germans entered the country, and who have been living under German rule since.

It is really rather difficult to give you the slightest idea of the extent and nature of the ordeal to which civilian Russia has been subjected in the last couple of years. The Germans in Russia have had a deliberate policy of extermination. As far as they can, they have set out to destroy, by any and every means in their power. They appear to be utterly ruthless, and devoid of the slightest trace of human feeling.

### HORROR IN RZHEV

In the district of Rzhev, where I spent quite a long time wandering around among the villagers and talking to the people who had lived under German occupation, I got my first taste and evidence of what the Russians had suffered during that time. It was a very mild sort of story compared with what I was going to hear later on, but it was bad enough.

A large number of women told me that they had been flogged by German officers for quite minor breaches of the regulations. I saw myself how people had been turned out of their homes by the Nazis and left to starve, how whole families had been driven to live in holes in the ground like animals and to feed on roots, grass and the bark of trees and on bits of long-dead horse-meat. This was a general thing over a vast area. Hundreds of thousands, even millions of Russian civilians were inadequately fed and were just gathering their means of subsistence as best they could for themselves and their children. Of course, an enormous number died, simply because you cannot live on grass and the bark of trees for long.

In Rzhev, and the district round it, the Germans did a certain amount of hanging, and shot many people. There were some bad atrocities like setting alight to a house full of women and children. I checked up on this and found it to be true.

It was only later that I began to realise how organised and how terrible was this Nazi campaign of terrorism. In Kharkov the people described to me how the Germans had deliberately hanged from balconies along the streets dozens and dozens of innocent, law-abiding, peaceful residents, almost for the fun of the thing. One woman caught my arm and said: "I was walking down here one day and a German officer took hold of me and said: 'We are just going to hang a man and you have got to watch.' He held me and made me look while the Russian was hanged over the balcony."

### KHARKOV MASSACRE

There is one awful story about the Jews of Kharkov. One day they were all collected together and told that they had got to walk out of the town into the Nazi-appointed ghetto. A long trail of men, women and children set off to the factory quarter where they had been told they were to stop. For several days they were starved of all the necessities of life, and then at the end of that time they were taken out and Nazi machine-guns were turned on them. The whole lot were massacred. That story too, I was able to check up from conversations I had with people who had seen it happen.

Then there was the story which I have already told in the *News Chronicle*—the story of the cottage in Rzhev. Rzhev had had a population of some sixty-five thousand people, but when we got there there were only two hundred that could be accounted for. The rest had just disappeared. That is just a measure of the sort of de-population which is going on. In Rzhev we came in the course of our wanderings upon a cottage. One of the correspondents said: "Look, there's a dead body in here." We all looked through the window, and on a bed there was the dead body of a boy. We went into this awful place and had a look round. We found that this boy had seven bullet wounds from the Nazis. In another room there was the mother, who had been shot in the back while protecting a small child who was shot through the head. On the stove was a boy who had also been shot, and on the floor between the rooms was an old woman whose head had been bashed in by a powerful blow from a heavy weapon.

Well, it was a pretty grim scene, and it brought home to me very strongly just what atrocities really mean. One so often hears about them and one thinks, "Well, it may be just a



story." These things are often exaggerated, but this is no exaggeration. These things have happened in Russia and there is nothing one could say which would present an exaggerated picture of things which the Germans have done in a calculated way. I think we all know the Nazis by now, but I do want to make it perfectly clear to you that the Russian people have gone through something hideous, and something which we, in the comparative quiet and comfort of our homes here, can hardly realise.

### VILLAGE DESTROYED

Apart from the actual personal cruelty of the Nazis there has been tremendous organised devastation, which I think is not sufficiently realised. There was one village I wanted to see near Rzhev. I wanted to talk with some of the people who had been through the German occupation. I went looking for this village with a Russian, and we walked for a couple of miles along a hard mud road and climbed a slight rise. Then my friend suddenly stopped and said: "Well, here we are." There was absolutely nothing to be seen. He said for the second time: "Here we are, this is the village."

There had been one hundred peasant cottages in this place, and when I looked again I saw that every few yards along the side of the track there was a black patch on the ground, and beside the black patch a red patch. The black patches were all that was left of the ashes of the houses, and the red patches all that was left of the red brick chimneys, which are the only non-inflammable parts of these wooden buildings. The chimneys had been knocked down after the houses had been burnt, and ground into the soil until the whole place was level. This village had been literally razed to the ground. I saw quite a number which had had this done to them.

The Germans in Western Russia have not been able to destroy every place, but they have been able to destroy most of the towns. Rzhev, Vyasma and Gzhatsk—places on the central front where there was fighting and withdrawals—have been destroyed. There has been devastation on an unprecedented scale.

Well, you see now how the picture is built up, a picture of terror, death, torture, starvation and devastation.

Now we come to the people, behind the Russian lines, who

are working in factories making Red Army supplies. How are they living? It is spring now, and spring means that very soon there will be vegetables, and a new harvest. It means sunshine and warmth. People are feeling considerably better than they were; but in winter, as I think you know, the Russians in Moscow and in other towns have had a very thin time indeed. Their food was just enough to keep working efficiency at a reasonable level. They had bread, but very little else. Fuel in Moscow is very short, and after a hard day's work the people would go back home to a room which perhaps was just a few degrees below freezing point or a few degrees above. They sat in their rooms for hours in the dark because of the necessity of economising electricity for the factories. After such a day of work, of cold, darkness and hunger, or inadequate food, they went to bed with nothing to look forward to except another similar day.

That is the picture. I have not painted it in colours grimmer than they really are.

I said earlier that it is not enough merely to admire. Sympathy is not enough either. I have to tell you quite frankly something which you may have suspected, and that is that Russia has been very dissatisfied with the help she has got, and from time to time the Russians have gone about in a very depressed way at the apparent inertia of their Western Allies.

### BULK OF SACRIFICE

I think that it would have a very bad effect indeed on the prospects of our future relations after the war if the Russians were to end this fight with the feeling that they had made the bulk of the sacrifice, and that we had come in towards the end just to clean things up. Many of them do have that view at the moment, and it would be foolish to hide it. They do feel that they have made most of the sacrifices, and, of course, they have.

It is a difficult time just now to talk about what is going to happen. I do think that when the second and third and fourth fronts open, as I believe they will, the attitude of the Russians is going to change very rapidly, and they are going to be a good deal more friendly than they are now. But even so, they are going to measure this business in the end in a very realistic way. They are going to measure it primarily in terms of blood



and in terms of suffering, and, as I say, if they think that the bulk of sacrifice is disproportionate, then that is not a hopeful basis upon which to build our post-war friendship. This is a sticky subject, and I am not going to say any more about it.

I want to say just one more thing about post-war relations. Suppose we give Russia admiration and sympathy and, when the war is over, give her every help in our power in the work of reconstructing her battered areas and trying to re-build her country. Suppose we start a second and a third and a fourth front, as I hope we shall, and the Russians and ourselves finish this business fighting together side by side, taking fair and equal shares in the struggle. If all that happens, can we then rely on friendship between our two countries growing automatically?

I think that something more is necessary. The greatest hope I have is that Russia and Britain will find a basis of understanding. But you know that I am very conscious that our two countries do not know each other at all. We have not even begun to scratch the surface of knowledge about each other. The Russians know even less about us than we know about them, and their knowledge of us is even more inaccurate—and that is saying a good deal. In order to be friends with a country you have got to do a lot of hard work. You have got to find out how it lives and why it lives in that way, to know its customs and its political and economic institutions. You have got to be prepared for a few shocks when you come to investigate other countries. It is no good expecting everything to be lovely. When a country is as vast and complicated and new as Russia, you can't expect to find everything near to your heart's desire. Before we can establish the permanent friendship we all want to see the facts must be faced by each country about the other. We have got to be prepared for surprises. But if we can get to know each other on the basis of the facts, with our eyes wide open, then I believe that in the years to come we shall enjoy friendship with the Russians, and I believe that, if so, the peace of Europe will be assured.

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### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

*What do the Russian people say about the recent Polish dispute?*

It has been made perfectly clear and it is understood generally in Russia that the eastern portion of the former Poland will

remain in the Soviet Union. The frontier is not defined, but the general principle is understood. Any Polish government after this war, any government of a free and independent Poland, must be honestly and sincerely willing to work in a friendly way with the Soviet Union. It would be quite impossible to have a Polish government which was aggressively nationalistic or which intrigued against the Soviet Union. Those are two points, and I think that on any realistic basis we should be well advised to agree to both of them as being both desirable and right.

*Was there any truth in the assertions of Admiral Standley with regard to the American Lease-Lend Aid to Russia? What happened about American supplies?*

The Russian people knew hardly anything about them and I think I know why not. The Russians felt that we and the Americans were not pulling our weight in the war and that we were sending them supplies in lieu of assistance on land. Of course, they needed the supplies and they are using them, but they did feel that we were keeping the war going with Russian soldiers, and in a way they would rather we had used the supplies ourselves.

But there was something in what Admiral Standley said, because the Russians did not know anything about the supplies they were getting.

### RUSSIANS ARE REALISTIC

*Do you think that some of the British realise the effect in Russia of all that happens wherever the Union Jack flies, for instance, in India?*

The Russians are realistic, and some of them are much more tolerant than some of you are about India. When Mr. Gandhi was hunger-striking, rather a poor view was taken of this in Moscow, and the general opinion was that we were handling the situation very well.

*With reference to Russian resentment of so-called British "inertia," how do they rationalise the Russian position during the Battle of Britain?*

They do not have any difficulty in explaining why they were standing aside when we were fighting alone. They say that we had a chance earlier to co-operate with them and we failed.

*To what extent are schoolchildren drawn into the war? I*



*recently heard that children of 10 were working in factories, but I should say this is sheer nonsense.*

Children are playing a big part. The Russians have to face a very difficult man-power situation. They have a tremendous number of men's places to fill. Their man-power is fully mobilised for victory at the front, and women are drawn in to replace the men, but there are still more jobs, and children are being used as well. On the collective farms particularly, school-children give great help. In factories also you do see quite young children helping, but I have never seen a child of 10 at work.

*What sort of inaccuracies do the Russians think of in relation to us?*

The sort of thing I have in mind is what they think about how we live. I know that when young people in Russia talk to me about the conditions they think are prevalent here, they imagine we are very much worse off than we really are materially. Many of them are quite surprised to hear that a working man and his family often inhabit a whole house, because they have not been told the facts.

*Are you suggesting that in order to secure a firm foundation for friendship we must lose a number of men comparable to the number lost by the Russians?*

No, of course I do not mean that. What I mean is that the Russians do want to feel that we are putting our backs into this business, as they are. They know that although many of our people are putting their backs into it in a remarkable way, on the whole we are not fighting yet the same sort of total war that the Russians are. You have only got to compare the food of the average person here and in Russia to know that. Our rations would seem like a positive banquet to them.

### STRICT DISCIPLINE

*Could you tell us something of the discipline of the Red Army?*

There is just one thing I would like to say about discipline. Although it is very strict, and, in some respects, a good deal more strict than ours, the Russians have managed to preserve a very friendly and comradely attitude between officers and men.

*Would the Russians regard the invasion of Italy as meeting their needs, having regard to a possible rising in Europe?*

What they want us to do is to engage a substantial part of the German armies. I do not think they mind where.

*Can you confirm that Soviet citizens are being deported as slaves to Germany?*

Yes, hundreds of thousands have been taken to Germany.

*Why could not a "Britain Today Society" be established in Russia?*

I think it might be a very good idea. There is quite a lot already being done in Russia to tell the people what we are like and what we are doing. There is a newspaper called *The British Ally*, which is doing very good work indeed. I did have occasion to criticise it, but I may say that it has improved a good deal, and is doing excellent work, and will do more. There are a lot of contacts between Russia and Britain. They are showing films there, for example, "Desert Victory," and feature films; and there is a general increase of interest in what we are doing. A "Britain Today Society" might help this work.

*What, in your opinion, is the feeling of Russians about our effort in Tunisia?*

Before I left there was some mellowing of feeling, and I understand from colleagues who remained behind that the position has improved since our victory in Tunisia was announced.

*Is there much sabotage in Russia today?*

I have not heard of any.

### GERMANS OR NAZIS?

*Do the Russian people feel that they are fighting Germany or the Fascists? Do not the atrocities inspire a hatred against the German people?*

Feeling is very mixed. It is impossible to say to what extent discrimination between the Germans and Fascists is made. I do not think that you would find any great affection for any Germans in Russia. On the whole Russians feel that they are fighting invaders of their country, and these are Germans. I think the simpler Russian people think of them as Germans and they hate them as Germans.

*Has your first-hand acquaintance with the U.S.S.R. brought you nearer to a belief in the philosophy of Communism?*



*Are atrocities committed by all ranks of Germans or only by the Gestapo? If by all ranks, then are they acting under orders?*

My impression was that the atrocities were disciplined and authorised. Certainly orders were given, and on many occasions carried out. I think terrorism is a deliberate policy.

*Have the Russian newspapers any independent point of view?*

I am not quite sure what an independent point of view is! Independent of what? Every paper is dependent on somebody or something.

### GOOD MEDICAL SERVICE

*What are the Soviet medical services like in the army?*

In the army they are pretty good. They have got the best of the doctors and nurses and supplies. Sometimes they are very short of supplies of certain drugs, but on the whole they are efficient, very conscientious, and they are doing a good job.

*After the last war many war prisoners from Germany, Austria and Hungary joined the Red Army. Can we hope that the same thing will happen again?*

The feeling about Germany is so strong that I cannot really see that happening. In years to come the feeling may change.

*What impression did you get of the German prisoners and their philosophy?*

I saw prisoners on several occasions, but it is impossible to generalise. Like any other body of people they vary, but those I saw were, in the main, very tough. They had not ceased to be loyal to Hitler, and they did not seem to be conscious of taking part in any crime. Indeed they did not seem to understand what was going on. They were disciplined. However, some of them were more politically-minded than others. Some said they had belonged to the Communist Party.

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# PAUL WINTERTON



Paul Winterton recently returned to England after fourteen months in Moscow, and on the Russian front, as correspondent of the "News Chronicle." He was in Stalingrad just after the destruction of the German Sixth Army, saw Paulus, the commander of that Army, and his twenty-four generals. Was in Kharkov during that short period in the spring when the Russians held it again, and in Rzhev a few hours after the Nazis had left it. Now he is returning to Russia and his exclusive cables to the "News Chronicle" will be appearing again shortly.

*Copies of Paul Winterton's postscript to 9 o'clock news (Sunday, June 3, 1943) can be obtained from "News Chronicle," E.C.A. Send 2½d. stamp.*

## NEWS CHRONICLE