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The sniper Vasily Zaitsev (Zaytsev)—seen at right—and his student-snipers move into an ambush position in Stalingrad, during December of 1942. Image online via a Russian-language website.

Most scholars recognize Antony Beevor's 1998 book, *Stalingrad: The Fateful Siege*, as the best account of the Stalingrad battle. Beevor interviewed survivors and uncovered extraordinary documents in both German and Russian archives.

His monumental work discusses Vasily Zaitsev and his talents as a sniper. But of the *duel* story, Beevor reports, at page 204:

Some Soviet sources claim that the Germans brought in the chief of their sniper school to hunt down Zaitsev, but that Zaitsev outwitted him. Zaitsev, after a hunt of several days, apparently spotted his hide under a sheet of corrugated iron, and shot him dead. The telescopic sight off his prey's rifle, allegedly Zaitsev's most treasured trophy, is still exhibited in the Moscow armed forces museum, but this dramatic story remains essentially unconvincing.

If the telescopic sight is still on display, and the story made all the papers, why does Beevor think it is not convincing?

It is worth noting that there is absolutely no mention of it [the duel] in any of the reports to Shcherbakov [chief of the Red Army political department], even though almost every aspect of "sniperism" was reported with relish.

What did Vasily Zaitsev have to say about the duel? Living to old age in the Ukraine, where he was the director of an engineering school in Kiev, this Hero of the Soviet Union was apparently quoted by Alan Clark in *Barbarossa*:

The sun rose. Kulikov took a blind shot; we had to rouse the sniper's curiosity. We had decided to spend the morning waiting, as we might have been given away by the sun on our telescopic sights. After lunch our rifles were in the shade and the sun was shining directly on to the German's position. At the edge of the sheet of metal something was glittering: an odd bit of glass or telescopic sights?

Kulikov carefully, as only the most experienced can do, began to raise his helmet. The German fired. For a fraction of a second Kulikov rose and screamed. The German believed that he had finally got the Soviet sniper he had been hunting for four days, and half raised his head from beneath the sheet of metal. That was what I had been banking on. I took careful aim. The German's head fell back, and the telescopic sights of his rifle lay motionless, glistening in the sun, until night fell... (Barbarossa, page 245.)

The sniper's story, as quoted by Clark, never names "the German." And Clark does not name Zaitsev. He refers to him as "one of the crack Soviet snipers." Clark says the German was "Standartenfuhrer SS Heinz Thorwald," not Major Koenig. And, according to Clark, it was the Soviet sniper who was assigned to track down Thorwald, not the other way around.

Individual marksmen of particular skill soon became known, not only to their own side but also to the enemy, and the Russian ascendancy became so marked that the head of the snipers' school at Zossen, Standartenfuhrer SS Heinz Thorwald, was sent to Stalingrad in an attempt to restore the balance. One of the crack Soviet snipers was set the task of catching him. (*Barbarossa*, page 243.)

We may never know if the duel story is true. Given all the inconsistencies, it's no wonder Beevor reached his doubting conclusion.

But what we DO know is Zaitsev and his fellow snipers forced the Germans to fight a battle they could not easily win. Used to blitzkrieg tactics, not street fighting, Hitler's troops would soon be in the worst-possible position.

In early November, 1942, more than 300 million people lived under Hitler's rule. The Fuhrer controlled more Russian territory than any other foreigner ever had. But brilliant strategy by Soviet commanders would soon shock the Germans.

What followed set in motion Hitler's ultimate demise.

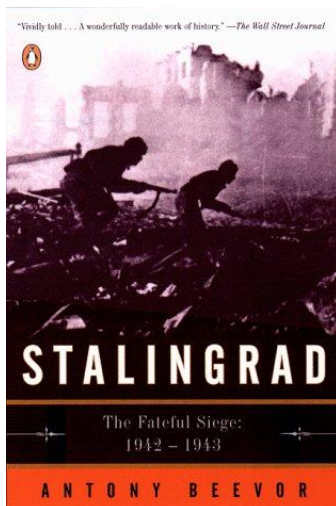
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[Stalingrad: The Fateful Siege - by Anthony Beevor](#)

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Crack Soviet Snipers in Stalingrad

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German Controlled Area - Map

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Vasily Zaitsev Talks about the Stalingrad Duel

Vasily Zaitsev, explaining what happened during the Stalingrad duel, online courtesy Comrade Vedernikov via YouTube.

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