

OLLSCOIL NA hÉIREANN, GAILLIMH
DÁMHA NA NDÁN AGUS AN LÉINN CHEILTIGH
SCRÚDUITHE AN TSAMHRAIDH 2000-2001
AN TARD-DIOPLÓMA I GCUMARSÁID FHEIDHMEACH

GAEILGE SCRÍOFA

Pádraig Ó Héalaí
Máirtín Ó Briain

Dhá uair an chloig a cheadaítear.
Scríobh leagan Gaeilge, c. 400 focal, den sliocht seo thíos:

Stalingrad is the greatest epic of the modern age of nationalism, mass armies and large-scale war. The course of the battle is by now well known and has recently been retold in a couple of very fine, best-selling books: Anthony Beevor's *Stalingrad* and Richard Overy's *Russia's War*.

Hitler wanted oil; he wanted to cut off river traffic on the Volga, constricting the arteries of Russian resistance to the north. These were his rational reasons. But there was also the massively charged symbolism of the city's name. Hitler went so far as to deny stridently and publicly this had any significance for him, and he protested too much. The collapse of the Soviet dictator's namesake city would have had a crushing effect on his regime's ability to mobilise resistance. Historian John Erickson thinks it drew Hitler like a magnet. And for Stalin, there was also an irrational, surplus pride in his refusal to consider a step back from the doomed city. For 20 years before the Nazi invasion, his closest military collaborators, notably Kliment Voroshilov and the cavalry commander, Semon Budenny, had defeated the White armies on the steppes around the Volga port of Tsaritsyn. After his rise to power, the city was named after Stalin, and the myth created that he had saved the Revolution there. So he would not give an inch, and issued his notorious Order No. 227 that punished retreat or hesitancy with death. He proved willing to sacrifice nearly half a million men and women to save "his" city.

.../

In April, 1942, Adolf Hitler, against the advice of his senior generals, determined on a push to the far south of Russia. He took forces that could otherwise have strengthened his attack on Moscow and sent them on a long slashing race to take the city of Stalingrad, situated on the Volga about 60 miles from the bend of the other central Russian river, the Don. Beyond lay the oilfields on which the Russian army depended and which Hitler sorely needed. The Sixth Army, led by Friedrich von Paulus, an upper middle class general with a taste for classical music, struck hard across the steppe from the Don and by late August had reached the outskirts of Stalingrad.

In late November, the besiegers became the besieged, in a huge secretive operation that sent hundreds of tanks and half a million men round the back and flanks of the Nazi army, pressing it into a gigantic trap, cutting it off from reinforcements and fuel supplies, and depriving it of all air support. Inexorably, the ring of Soviet fire grew tighter, the starving Germans more hopeless. Von Paulus surrendered on January 31st, 1943, delivering a quarter of a million men into captivity. Very few survived the Soviet prison and labour camps. It was the first serious defeat of Nazism, a terrible demonstration that the Wehrmacht was vulnerable.

The new film, *Enemy at the Gates*, reduces this epic to a personal conflict, to a duel of warriors — in this case of two snipers, one a young Russian shepherd and the other an amoral German officer. We might be back in Troy: but this is a kind of mock-Homeric reduction of the vast impersonal slaughter of modern combat. A medium more capable than any yet invented of capturing the enormous scale and destructiveness of the worst war in history seems afraid of its own power, shrinking back to ancient dramatic conventions.

Enemy at the Gates does have some extraordinary panoramic scenes that convey, more vividly than anything I have seen, the enormity of the destruction and the grinding down of life in the Stalingrad cauldron. And it reminds the cinema-going public that the war was not won by Americans and Englishmen. Unfortunately, it still owes too much to the conventions of the Western and the romance to be taken seriously. See the movie, by all means, but read the books. [Slíocht leasaithe as alt léirmheasa le Neil Belton, *The Irish Times*, 17.3.00]