

WHO DROPPED THE SWORD OF STALINGRAD?

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Abstract



On November 29, 1943, at a ceremony at the Soviet Embassy in Tehran in the presence of President Roosevelt, Prime Minister Churchill presented Marshal Stalin with a Sword of Honour as a gift from King George VI to the 'steel-hearted citizens of Stalingrad'. According to an 'enduring legend' (Higgins, 1993), Stalin was surprised by the sword's weight and dropped it on the floor after he took it from Churchill. This article investigates this 'legend' to see whether the sword was dropped and, if yes, who dropped it. In doing so, available memoirs, visuals, and newspaper sources are used. Autobiographical subjectivity is discussed in view of the conflicting accounts from the people who were at the center of the ceremony and close to it, i.e. Winston Churchill, the British diplomat Gladwyn Jebb, Field-Marshal Lord Alanbrooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, and the interpreters Arthur Birse (UK), Hugh Lunghi (UK), Charles Bohlen (USA), and Valentin Berezhevskiy (USSR). An unambiguous answer to the research question is given by two items of video footage taken during the ceremony, despite the obvious efforts to edit out the embarrassing moment.

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In November 1993, Andrew Higgins, the then Moscow bureau chief for *The Independent*, visited Volgograd, Russia, the site of the Battle of Stalingrad (August 23, 1942– February 2, 1943). In the Battle of Stalingrad Museum, he saw the Sword of Honor on display, King George VI's gift to the 'steel-hearted citizens of Stalingrad' (Higgins, 1993). The sword was presented to Marshal Stalin by Prime Minister Churchill and in the presence of President Roosevelt, at a ceremony at the Soviet Embassy in Tehran on November 29, 1943.

Deploing the sorry state of the Battle of Stalingrad Museum, where the 'blunted-by-time' Stalingrad sword was 'gathering museum dust', Higgins remarked that the sword had inspired a series of tales in Russia. According to him, one enduring legend was that Stalin, surprised by its weight, had dropped it on the floor after he took it from Churchill. The second version of the legend insists that the sword was dropped by Marshal Voroshilov, who received the sword from Stalin's hands. This second version is supported by Michael Zimecki in *The History of My Final Illness*, a novella about the last five days in the life of Stalin told from his point of view:

I suspect the people who are filing into my room are members of the Central Committee of the Party and the Council of Ministers. Some of them – Beria, Bulganin, Malenkov and Khrushchev in particular—are my avowed enemies. Others, like **Vorishilov, who dropped the Sword of Stalingrad on my toes in front of Churchill and Roosevelt**, are completely useless. But a few of them—such as Brezhnev and Suslov—are my protégés, and perhaps may be counted upon to help (Zimecki, 2011; *bolded by me*).

This article investigates this 'legend' to see whether the sword was dropped and, if yes, by whom. In doing so, available memoirs, visuals, and newspaper sources will be used.

'Surprised by the weight of the sword'

The starting point of our investigation is **Figure 1**. In the photo, taken in 1951, a boy of around 8 to 10 years of age inspects the Sword of Stalingrad in the Battle of Stalingrad Museum, obviously not surprised by its weight.

Figure 1

A boy inspects the Sword of Stalingrad in the Battle of Stalingrad Museum, 1951.



Note: Lyudnikov, Yu. (1951). Mech Stalingrada v muzee oborony Tsaritsyna-Stalingrada [Photograph]. By Mchpv - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=35022556>

The total length of the Stalingrad sword in the scabbard, which is a Crusader sword, is reported to be 48in (122cm), with a double-edged blade of 36in (91cm). No information about the weight of the Stalingrad sword has been found on the Internet. However, the weight of Crusader swords of similar size usually does not exceed 2 kgs. Scotland's Sword of State, which Penny Mordaunt carried for the formal coronation of King Charles III and Queen Camilla in Westminster Abbey in May 2023, weighed 3.6 kg (Duncan, 2023).

Figure 2 shows Marshal Stalin kissing the scabbard of the Sword of Stalingrad unsurprised by its weight. In other words, the part of the 'legend' concerning the weight of the sword as the reason for it to be dropped by Stalin does not seem to have any ground to stand on.

Figure 2

Stalin kisses the scabbard of the Sword on Stalingrad. First from right is Stalin's interpreter Valentin Berezhkov.



Note: PublicResourceOrg. (2010, September 1). *Global Conference – Tehran*. Stalin kisses the scabbard of the Sword on Stalingrad [Screenshot].

https://youtu.be/iH00_1S_6Q4?si=z7XhGVxKE1_zUT6z

The English-language page of the 'Sword of Stalingrad' entry in Wikipedia, rephrasing Mayle (1987, p. 90), supports the second version:

At the end of the ceremony, Stalin unexpectedly handed it off to one of his oldest and most loyal comrades, Marshal Kliment Voroshilov. He seemed to have been taken by surprise and took it the wrong way up so that the sword slipped out and fell. Observers differ on whether it struck his foot, clattered onto the floor, or was caught in time to be returned to its scabbard with a deft move. (Sword of Stalingrad, 2023)

Did you know... that after Winston Churchill handed Joseph Stalin the Sword of Stalingrad (pictured) at the Tehran Conference, a clumsy Soviet general let it slip out of its scabbard? (Talk: Sword of Stalingrad, 2024)

However, when the reader switches to the Russian-language page of the same entry, the first version is presented (Mech Stalingrada, 2024). Since the Russian text obviously is a translation of the text in WW2 History (2021), the original text is quoted below:

Stalin kissed the scabbard and thanked the British Prime Minister in an undertone. Churchill gave a friendly wave of his hand, possibly saying "Please!". At this time, Stalin, turning to Voroshilov, who was standing to his right, and wanting either to show the sword, or to hand it over, awkwardly tilted the gift with the handle down, and the heavy sword, slipping out of the scabbard, hit the head of the handle on the carpet. Voroshilov tried to grab the falling sword, but did not manage to do so. (WW2 History, 2021)

Quite understandably, official accounts of the ceremony in *Pravda* (1943, 3 December, p. 2), *Time* magazine (1943, 20 December), or the *Daily Mirror* (1943, 7 December) do not mention the incident. On the other hand, conflicting accounts of the incident can be found in the memoirs of eyewitnesses who were at the center of the ceremony or close to it. These include Winston Churchill, the British diplomat Gladwyn Jebb, Field-Marshal Lord Alanbrooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, and the interpreters Arthur Birse (UK), Hugh Lunghi (UK), Charles Bohlen (USA), and Valentin Berezhkov (USSR). These accounts are cited in secondary sources such as Beevor (1999), Mayle (1987), etc.

Arthur Birse was Churchill's Russian interpreter at Tehran, Yalta, and Potsdam. Churchill describes Birse as "my trusted interpreter" (Churchill, 1951, p. 376). He also mentions Charles Bohlen and Vladimir Pavlov (Churchill, 1951):

I had my admirable interpreter of the previous year, Major Birse. Pavlov again performed this service for the Soviets, and Mr. Bohlen, a new figure, for the United States. (p. 347)

The Earl of Avon, in the Foreword to Birse's memoir, points out (Birse, 1967):

Birse pays a generous tribute to Mr. Pavlov, his Soviet opposite number and that, too, has been well-earned. They were a remarkable pair and carried between them the responsibility of interpreting almost all the more important Anglo-Soviet conversations of the war years. (p.7)

Charles Bohlen was third secretary of the United States embassy in Moscow and Roosevelt's Russian language interpreter at Tehran and Yalta. Hugh Lunghi, a Captain in the Royal Artillery, was the second Russian language interpreter in the British delegation

at Tehran. In June 1943, at the age of 23, he was appointed aide-de-camp and Russian language interpreter to Lt. Gen. Sir Gifford Le Q. Martel, Head of the British Military Mission in Moscow. He also attended the conferences in Yalta and Potsdam. After the war, he served as a diplomat and interpreter. In his remarks at the Annual General Meeting of the International Churchill Society (UK) on 29 April 2006, Lunghi speaks with great respect about Birse:

Here I should explain that Churchill's principal interpreter was Major Arthur Birse, a peacetime banker, also from our Moscow Military Mission, born and educated in 19th century St. Petersburg, more than twice my age, a good friend and mentor, by far the most outstanding, the most brilliant of all the Allied interpreters. (Lunghi, 2013)

Hugh Lunghi is not mentioned in the memoirs of Churchill, Birse, Bohlen, and Berezhkov. There is no mention of Berezhkov in Churchill's and Birse's memoirs. Bohlen mentions Berezhkov on two occasions. First, to say that the principal interpreter at Tehran was Pavlov and that Berezhkov took his place occasionally (Bohlen, 1973, p. 137). Lunghi (2013) also confirms that Pavlov was "virtually always Stalin's interpreter—in English and German". Second, to refute Berezhkov's claim that he was the only interpreter at the first meeting between Stalin and Roosevelt at Tehran and to ascertain that there were two interpreters at that meeting, i.e. Pavlov and himself (Bohlen, 1973, p. 141).

The first meeting between Roosevelt and Stalin at the Soviet Embassy in Tehran on November 28, 1943 sparked controversy among the three interpreters. The official record of conversation was prepared by Bohlen. Berezhkov had his own version. The third interpreter, who claimed that it was he who introduced Roosevelt to Stalin and interpreted during the first minutes of their meeting, is Russian-born Oleg Pantuhoff (Colonel John Bates as of 1953), who was attached as interpreter to W. Averell Harriman, the U.S. Ambassador to Moscow, at Tehran (Pantuhoff, 1985, Chapter 13). There are no photos or videos of the meeting, so we can only rely on the word of each interpreter. However, in the case of the sword-dropping incident, we have unbiased video footage. So, before discussing the eyewitness accounts, let us look at the available documentary footage of the ceremony that gives an objective answer to our query. It will be much more interesting to read these conflicting eyewitness accounts when we know the right answer.

Documentary footage

There are two archive videos showing the Stalingrad Sword presentation ceremony and the sword-dropping incident from two different angles. The first is a 9-minute public domain video 'Global Conference – Teheran. Stalingrad Sword Presentation' (PublicResourceOrg, 2010) housed within the Audio/Visual collections at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library (FDR3105-112-3). The second is a 5.04-minute video, *The Big Three in Teheran* (1943) housed at the British Pathé (1943a), film ID 1099.05. There is a different 6.23-minute video *The Big Three in Teheran* (1943) at the British Pathé (1943b), film ID 1919.09, where the awkward incident has been completely cut out.

Figure 3

The Sword of Stalingrad presentation ceremony. Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden (stands second from left, to the left of Churchill), and Arthur Birse (stands first from right in the first row) look on as the sword drops out of the scabbard in Stalin's hands. Voroshilov's hand can be seen to the left of the hilt.



Note: PublicResourceOrg. (2010). *Stalin dropping the Sword of Stalingrad* [Screenshot]. https://youtu.be/iH00_1S_6Q4?si=z7XhGVxKE1_zUT6z

Figure 4.

Stalin tilts the Sword of Stalingrad with its hilt downwards and the sword slips out of its scabbard.



Note: British Pathé (1943a). *The Big Three in Teheran (1943)*. Stalin tilts the scabbard downwards [Screenshot]. <https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/65797/>.

Figure 5.

Churchill and Eden look at the fallen sword.



Note: British Pathé (1943a). *The Big Three in Teheran (1943)*. Churchill and Eden look at the floor [Screenshot]. <https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/65797/>.

To summarize, the two archive videos unambiguously testify that the Sword of Stalingrad was dropped and that it was Marshal Stalin who dropped it. Having established this fact, let us now look at the conflicting eyewitness accounts and try to understand the underlying reasons for these conflicts.

Conflicting eyewitness accounts of the sword-dropping incident

Some of the participants in the ceremony either did not write memoirs or do not mention the incident in their published memoirs. The first volume of Marshal Voroshilov's memoir was published in 1968 with a promise of a second volume, which never came out, and events beyond the year 1907 remained untold. Anthony Eden, Britain's Foreign Secretary in 1940–45, wrote several books of memoirs, including *'The reckoning: the memoirs of Anthony Eden, Earl of Avon'* (1965), in which he only briefly talks about the Tehran Conference and makes no mention of the sword presentation ceremony. Stalin's interpreter Valentin Berezhkov, who was present at the ceremony (standing first from right in Figure 2, behind the Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov), does

not mention the incident in his memoir. He also claims that Stalin pulled the sword out of the scabbard and kissed the blade:

Stalin took the sword and pulled it out of its sheath. The blade glinted coldly. Stalin raised it to his lips and kissed it. (Berezhkov, 1983, p. 276)

In *Closing the Ring*, the fifth volume of his war memoirs, Churchill, who was right in front of Stalin accompanied by Anthony Eden and Arthur Birse and watched the sword fall from Stalin's hands, described the sword-dropping incident in the following terms (Churchill, 1951):

When, after a few sentences of explanation, I handed the splendid weapon to Marshal Stalin, he raised it in a most impressive gesture to his lips and kissed the blade. He then handed it to [Marshal Kliment] Voroshilov, who dropped it. (p. 364)

Arthur Birse authored a book of memoir. In it, he supports Churchill's account: Churchill then handed over the Sword to Stalin, who kissed the hilt and handed it to Voroshilov. At this point the ceremony almost fell into anticlimax, for Voroshilov, surprised by the weight thrust upon him, nearly dropped his burden—my heart missed one or two beats!—but by what looked like a clever conjuring trick he retrieved it in time and clasped it to his breast. (Birse, 1967, p. 158)

Again, Churchill and Birse were right in front of Marshal Stalin and must have seen who dropped the sword. However, they preferred to put the blame on Voroshilov, most probably for political reasons.

Hugh Lunghi also puts the blame for dropping the sword on Voroshilov:

When Churchill presented the Stalingrad Sword to Stalin, I was standing just behind him, just behind Churchill, and that was a magnificent occasion. They played the Internationale first, and then our national anthem, and Churchill was given the sword, which was on a cushion, and he handed it over to Stalin, who kissed the hilt, and then Stalin handed it over to Voroshilov, Marshal Voroshilov, who promptly dropped it, or he let it slide out of the scabbard, held it to his chest; it fell down on to his toes, fortunately not right out of the scabbard, and he had to pull it out. (Lunghi, 1996)

The Prime Minister proudly presented the sword. Stalin was visibly moved. After quietly uttering a few words Stalin passed the sword to Voroshilov, who promptly let it slip from the scabbard onto his toes. Stalin's face darkened, his fists clenched. (Lunghi, 2013)

Reading Lunghi's description of the incident, it is hard to believe that he really saw the scene: "promptly dropped it, or he let it slide out of the scabbard, held it to his chest; it fell down on to his toes, fortunately not right out of the scabbard, and he had to pull it out". Did Voroshilov drop the sword, or did he let it slide out of the scabbard? How can the sword slide out of the scabbard and hit Voroshilov's toe, but fortunately not right out of the scabbard?

It is also not clear what Lunghi means when he says that his own test as interpreter came before the second plenary session on November 29, at the presentation of the Sword of Honor, and that he was standing just behind Churchill (Lunghi, 2013). It was Birse who interpreted for Churchill and Stalin during the ceremony, with Berezhkov standing behind Molotov, who stood behind Stalin. Lunghi cannot be seen in the first row of people behind the Prime Minister in the two documentary videos and the available photos of the ceremony.

Field-Marshal Lord Alanbrooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, who can be seen in the first row of people behind Churchill, gives the following account of the incident in his war diaries: "Stalin kissed the sword and handed it over to Voroshilov, who promptly dropped the sword out of the scabbard" (Bryant & Alanbrooke, 1959, p. 64). The same story is repeated in the eyewitness account of Gladwyn Jebb, a British civil servant, diplomat, and politician who was the acting secretary-general of the United Nations between 1945 and 1946 (cited in Nicolson, 1967, p. 334.). The official British version of the incident blaming it on Voroshilov is quoted in later research. Thus, according to the British military historian Antony James Beevor (1999):

Churchill made the ceremony memorable by his oratory. Stalin, who accepted the sword with both hands, lifted it to his lips to kiss the scabbard. He then passed it to Marshal Voroshilov, who clumsily let the sword slide out of the scabbard. It clattered loudly on the floor.

The video footage of the ceremony clearly shows that the floor of the hall was covered by a thick Persian rug, so the “loud clatter” on the floor of the sword’s crystal rock pommel falling from a height of about 1 meter (Stalin’s height is reported to be 165 cm) seems to be an exaggeration. The diplomatic historian of American Foreign Policy and International Relations Paul D. Mayle (1987) cites the available eyewitness accounts but never refers to the available video footage of the ceremony.

Charles Bohlen (1973), Roosevelt’s Russian language interpreter at Tehran and Yalta, gives the following account of the incident:

The only time I saw Stalin show anything other than a surface emotion was at a ceremony at Teheran when Churchill presented him a sword made specially for the city of Stalingrad, in commemoration of the Nazi defeat there... Stalin’s hands shook so hard that he dropped the sword. (p. 340)

The most objective account of the incident, cited in the Russian-language “Sword of Stalingrad” entry in Wikipedia, is given in WW2 History (2021):

Stalin, turning to Voroshilov, who was standing to his right, and wanting either to show the sword, or to hand it over, awkwardly tilted the gift with the handle down, and the heavy sword, slipping out of the scabbard, hit the head of the handle on the carpet. Voroshilov tried to grab the falling sword, but did not manage to do so.

That is exactly what we see in the two videos (PublicResourceOrg, 2010 and British Pathé, 1943a). Stalin, “unpractised in swordsmanship, held it hilt downwards, so the sword slipped out of its scabbard” (MacCarthy, 2005). What we do not see is that “The day was saved by Marshal Voroshilov, who caught it just before the rock crystal pommel hit the floor” (MacCarthy, 2005). The sword slipped off the scabbard so fast that Voroshilov’s hand reached the sword after it had already hit the carpeted floor.

Conclusion

On November 29, 1943, at a ceremony at the Soviet Embassy in Tehran in the presence of President Roosevelt, Prime Minister Churchill presented Marshal Stalin with a Sword of Honor as a gift from King George VI to the ‘steel-hearted citizens of Stalingrad’. This article investigated the ‘legend’ according to which (1) Stalin dropped the sword after he took it from Churchill because he was surprised by the sword’s weight and his hands were trembling, or (2) Stalin gave the sword to Marshal Voroshilov, who dropped it.

An unambiguous answer to the research question was given by two items of video footage taken during the ceremony, despite the obvious efforts to edit out the embarrassing moment. Churchill and Birse were right in front of Marshal Stalin and must have seen who dropped the sword. However, for political reasons they preferred to put the blame on Voroshilov. The main conclusion is that when there are conflicting eyewitness accounts of the event under investigation and available video footage of the event, priority should be given to the video footage and not to the eyewitness accounts.

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