

# Patriotic War, 1941 to 1945\*

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# Patriotic War, 1941 to 1945

Standing squarely in the middle of the Soviet Union's timeline is the Great Patriotic War, the Russian name for the eastern front of World War II.<sup>1</sup> In recent years historians have tended to give this war less importance than it deserves. One reason may be that we are particularly interested in Stalin and Stalinism. This has led us to pay more attention to the changes following the death of one man, Stalin in March 1953, than to those that flowed from an event involving the deaths of 25 million. The war was more than just an interlude between the 'prewar' and 'postwar' periods.<sup>2</sup> It changed the lives of hundreds of millions of individuals. For the survivors, it also changed the world in which they lived.

This chapter asks: Why did the Soviet Union find itself at war with Germany in 1941? What, briefly, happened in the war? Why did the Soviet war effort not collapse within a few weeks as many observers reasonably expected, most importantly those in Berlin? How was the Red Army rebuilt out of the ashes of early defeats? What were the consequences of defeat and victory for the Soviet state, society and economy? All this does not convey much of the personal experience of war, for which the reader must turn to narrative history and memoir.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. The Road to War

Why, on Sunday, 22 June 1941, did the Soviet Union find itself suddenly at war? The reasons are to be found in gambles and miscalculations by all the great powers over the preceding forty years. During the nineteenth century international trade, lending and migration developed without much restriction. Great empires arose but did not much impede the movement of goods or people. By the twentieth century, however, several newly industrialising countries were turning to economic stabilisation by controlling and diverting trade to secure economic self-sufficiency within colonial boundaries. German leaders wanted to insulate Germany from the world by creating a closed trading bloc based on a new empire. To get an empire they launched a naval arms race that ended in Germany's military and diplomatic encirclement by Britain, France and Russia. To break out of containment they attacked France and Russia and this led to World War I; the war brought

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<sup>1</sup> The authors thank R.W. Davies, Simon Ertz, and Jon Petrie for valuable comments and advice.

<sup>2</sup> Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Forty years on there is still no more evocative work in the English language than Alexander Werth's *Russia at War, 1941-1945* (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1964).

deaths and destruction on a previously unimagined scale and defeat and revolution for Russia, their allies and themselves.

World War I undermined the international economic order. World markets were weakened by Britain's postwar economic difficulties and by Allied policies that isolated and punished Germany for the aggression of 1914 and Russia for treachery in 1917. France and America competed with Britain for gold. The slump of 1929 sent deflationary shock waves rippling around the world. In the 1930s the great powers struggled for national shares in a shrunken world market. The international economy disintegrated into a few relatively closed trading blocs.

The British, French and Dutch reorganised their trade on protected colonial lines, but Germany and Italy did not have colonies to exploit. Hitler led Germany back to the dream of an empire in central and eastern Europe; this threatened war with other interested regional powers. Germany's attacks on Czecho-Slovakia, Poland (which drew in France and Britain) and the Soviet Union aimed to create 'living space' for ethnic Germans through genocide and resettlement. Italy and the states of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire formed more exclusive trading links. Mussolini wanted the Mediterranean and a share of Africa for Italy, and eventually joined the war on France and Britain to get them. The Americans and Japanese competed in East Asia and the Pacific. The Japanese campaign in the Far East was both a grab at the British, French and Dutch colonies and a counter-measure against American commercial warfare. All these actions were gambles and most turned out disastrously for everyone including the gamblers themselves.

In the interwar years the Soviet Union, largely shut out of western markets, but blessed by a large population and an immense territory, developed within closed frontiers. The Soviet strategy of building 'socialism in a single country' showed both similarities and differences in comparison with national economic developments in Germany, Italy and Japan. Among the differences were its inclusive if paternalistic multinational ethic of the Soviet family of nations with the Russians as 'elder brother', and the modernising goals that Stalin imposed by decree upon the Soviet economic space. Unlike the Nazis the communists did not preach racial hatred and extermination, although they did preach class hatred.

There were also some similarities. One was the control of foreign trade; the Bolsheviks were happy to trade with western Europe and the United States, but only if the trade was under their direct control and did not pose a competitive threat to Soviet industry. After 1931, conditions at home and abroad became so unfavourable that controlled trade gave way to almost no trade at all; apart from a handful of 'strategic' commodities the Soviet economy became virtually closed. Another parallel lay in the fact that during the 1930s the Soviet Union pursued economic security within the closed space of a 'single country' that was actually organised on colonial lines inherited from the old Russian Empire; this is something that Germany, Italy and Japan still had to achieve through empire-building and war.

The Soviet Union was an active partner in the process that led to the opening of the 'eastern front' on 22 June 1941. Soviet war preparations began in the 1920s, long before Hitler's accession to power, at a time when France and Poland were seen as more likely antagonists.

The decisions to rearm the country and to industrialise it went hand in hand.<sup>4</sup> The context for these decisions was the Soviet leadership's perception of internal and external threats and their knowledge of history. They feared internal threats because they saw the economy and their own regime as fragile: implementing the early plans for ambitious public-sector investment led to growing consumer shortages and urban discontent. As a result they feared each minor disturbance of the international order all the more. The 'war scare' of 1927 reminded them that the government of an economically and militarily backward country could be undermined by events abroad at any moment: external difficulties would immediately accentuate internal tensions with the peasantry who supplied food and military recruits and with the urban workers who would have to tighten their belts. They could not forget the Russian experience of World War I when the industrial mobilisation of a poorly integrated agrarian economy for modern warfare had ended in economic collapse and the overthrow of the government. The possibility of a repetition could only be eliminated by countering internal and external threats simultaneously, in other words by executing forced industrialisation for sustained rearmament while bringing society, and especially the peasantry, under greater control. Thus, although the 1927 war scare was just a scare, with no real threat of immediate war, it served to trigger change. The results included Stalin's dictatorship, collective farming and a centralised command economy.

In the mid-1930s the abstract threat of war gave way to real threats from Germany and Japan. Soviet war preparations took the form of accelerated war production and ambitious mobilisation planning. The true extent of militarisation is still debated, and some historians have raised the question of whether Soviet war plans were ultimately designed to counter aggression or to wage aggressive war against the enemy.<sup>5</sup> It is now clear from the archives that

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<sup>4</sup> N.S. Simonov, "Strengthen the defence of the land of the Soviets": the 1927 "war alarm" and its consequences', *Europe-Asia studies*, 48(8), 1996; R.W. Davies and Mark Harrison, 'The Soviet military-economic effort under the second five-year plan (1933-1937)', *Europe-Asia studies*, 49(3), 1997; Lennart Samuelson, *Plans for Stalin's War Machine: Tukhachevskii and Military-Economic Planning, 1925-41* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); Andrei K. Sokolov, 'Before Stalinism: the defense industry of Soviet Russia in the 1920s', forthcoming in *Comparative economic studies*, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> The Russian protagonist of the latter view was Viktor Suvorov (Rezun), *Ice-Breaker: Who Started the Second World War?* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1990). On similar lines see also Richard C. Raack, *Stalin's Drive to the West, 1938-1941: the Origins of the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995); Albert L. Weeks, *Stalin's Other War: Soviet Grand Strategy, 1939-1941* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002). The ample grounds for scepticism have been ably mapped by Teddy J. Ulricks, 'The Icebreaker controversy: did Stalin plan to attack Hitler?' *Slavic review*, 58(3), 1999, and, at greater length, by Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999); Evan Mawdsley, 'Crossing the Rubicon: Soviet plans for offensive war

Stalin's generals sometimes entertained the idea of a pre-emptive strike, and attack as the best means of defence was the official military doctrine of the time; Stalin himself, however, was trying to head off Hitler's colonial ambitions and had no plans to conquer Europe.

Stalinist dictatorship and terror left bloody fingerprints on war preparations, most notably in the devastating purge of the Red Army command staff in 1937/38. They also undermined Soviet efforts to build collective security against Hitler with Poland, France and Britain, since few foreign leaders wished to ally themselves with a regime that seemed to be either rotten with traitors or intent on devouring itself. As a result, following desultory negotiations with Britain and France in the summer of 1939 Stalin accepted an offer of friendship from Hitler; in August their foreign ministers Molotov and Ribbentrop signed a treaty of trade and non-aggression that secretly divided Poland between them and plunged France and Britain into war with Germany.<sup>6</sup> In this way Stalin bought two more years of peace, although this was peace only in a relative sense and was mainly used for further war preparations. While selling war materials to Germany Stalin assimilated eastern Poland, annexed the Baltic states and the northern part of Romania, attacked Finland and continued to expand war production and military enrolment.

In the summer of 1940 Hitler decided to end the 'peace'. Having conquered France he found that Britain would not come to terms; the reason, he thought, was that the British were counting on an undefeated Soviet Union in Germany's rear. He decided to remove the Soviet Union from the equation as quickly as possible; he could then conclude the war in the west and win a German empire in the east at a single stroke. A year later he launched the greatest land invasion force in history against the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union remained at peace with Japan until August 1945, a result of the Red Army's success in resisting a probing Japanese border incursion in the Far East in the spring and summer of 1939. As war elsewhere became more likely each side became more anxious to avoid renewed conflict, and the result was the Soviet-Japanese non-aggression pact of April 1941. Both sides honoured this treaty until the last weeks of the Pacific war when the Soviet Union declared war on Japan and routed the Japanese army in north China.

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in 1940-1941', *International history review*, 25(4), 2003, adduces further evidence and interpretation.

<sup>6</sup> On Soviet foreign policy in the 1930s see Jonathan Haslam's two volumes *The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe, 1933-39* (London: Macmillan, 1984), and *The Soviet Union and the Threat from the East, 1933-41: Moscow, Tokyo and the Prelude to the Pacific War* (London: Macmillan, 1992); Geoffrey Roberts, *The Soviet Union and the Origins of the Second World War: Russo-German Relations and the Road to War, 1933-1941* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995); and Derek Watson, 'Molotov, the making of the Grand Alliance and the Second Front, 1939-1942', *Europe-Asia studies*, 54(1), 2002, 51-85.

## 2. The Eastern Front

In June 1941 Hitler ordered his generals to destroy the Red Army and secure most of the Soviet territory in Europe. German forces swept into the Baltic region, Belorussia, the Ukraine, which now incorporated eastern Poland, and Russia itself. Stalin and his armies were taken by surprise. Hundreds of thousands of Soviet troops fell into encirclement. By the end of September, having advanced more than a thousand kilometres on a front more than a thousand kilometres wide, the Germans had captured Kiev, put a stranglehold on Leningrad and were approaching Moscow.<sup>7</sup>

The German advance was rapid and the resistance was chaotic and disorganised at first. But the invaders suffered unexpectedly heavy losses. Moreover, they were met by scorched earth: the retreating defenders removed or wrecked the industries and essential services of the abandoned territories before the occupiers arrived. German supply lines were stretched to the limit and beyond.

In the autumn of 1941 Stalin rallied his people using nationalist appeals and harsh discipline. Desperate resistance denied Hitler his quick victory. Leningrad starved but did not surrender and Moscow was saved. This was Hitler's first setback in continental Europe. In the next year there were inconclusive moves and counter-moves on each side, but the German successes were more striking. During 1942 German forces advanced hundreds of kilometres in the south towards Stalingrad and the Caucasian oilfields.

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<sup>7</sup> Among many excellent works that describe the Soviet side of the eastern front see Werth, *Russia at War*; Seweryn Bialer, *Stalin and His Generals: Soviet Military Memoirs of World War II* (New York: Pegasus, 1969); Harrison Salisbury, *The 900 Days: the Siege of Leningrad* (London: Pan, 1969); books and articles by John Erickson including *The Soviet High Command: A Military-Political History, 1918-1941* (London: Macmillan, 1962), followed by *Stalin's War with Germany*, volume 1, *The Road to Stalingrad*, and volume 2, *The Road to Berlin* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975 and 1983); his 'Red Army battlefield performance, 1941-1945: the system and the soldier', in Paul Addison and Angus Calder (eds), *Time to Kill: The Soldier's Experience of War in the West, 1939-1945* (London: Pimlico 1997); John Erickson and David Dilks (eds), *Barbarossa: the Axis and the Allies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994); three volumes by David M. Glantz, *From the Don to the Dnepr: Soviet Offensive Operations, December 1942-August 1943* (London: Cass, 1991), *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* with Jonathan House (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 1995), and *Stumbling Colossus: The Red Army on the Eve of World War* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 1998); Richard Overy, *Russia's War* (London: Allen Lane, 1997); Bernd Wegner (ed.), *From Peace to War: Germany, Soviet Russia, and the World, 1939-1941* (Providence, RI: Berghahn, 1997); Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad* (London: Viking, 1998), and *Berlin: the Downfall, 1945* (London: Viking 2002); Geoffrey Roberts, *Victory at Stalingrad: the Battle That Changed History* (London: Longman, 2000). For a wider perspective see Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: a Global History of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

These forces were then destroyed by the Red Army's defence of Stalingrad and its winter counter-offensive.

Their position now untenable, the German forces in the south began a long retreat. In the summer of 1943 Hitler staged his last eastern offensive near Kursk; the German offensive failed and was answered by a more devastating Soviet counter-offensive. The German Army could no longer hope for a stalemate and its eventual expulsion from Russia became inevitable. Even so, the German army did not collapse in defeat. The Red Army's journey from Kursk to Berlin took nearly two years of bloody fighting.

The eastern front was one aspect of a global process. In the month after the invasion the British and Soviet governments signed a mutual assistance pact, and in August the Americans extended Lend-Lease to the Soviet Union. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, followed by a German declaration of war, brought America into the conflict and the wartime alliance of the United Nations was born. After this there were two theatres of operations, in Europe and the Pacific, and in Europe there were two fronts, in the west and the east. Everywhere the war followed a common pattern: until the end of 1942 the Allies faced unremitting defeat; the turning points came simultaneously at Alamein in the west, Stalingrad in the east and Guadalcanal in the Pacific; after that the Allies were winning more or less continuously until the end in 1945.

The Soviet experience of warfare was very different from that of its British and American allies. The Soviet Union was the poorest and most populous of the three; its share in their prewar population was one half but its share in their prewar output was only one quarter.<sup>8</sup> Moreover it was on Soviet territory that Hitler had marked out his empire, and the Soviet Union suffered deep territorial losses in the first 18 months of the war. Because of this and the great wartime expansion in the US economy, the Soviet share in total Allied output in the decisive years 1942 to 1944 fell to only 15 per cent. Despite this, the Soviet Union contributed half of total Allied military manpower in the same period. More surprisingly Soviet industry also contributed one in four Allied combat aircraft, one in three artillery pieces and machine guns, two fifths of armoured vehicles and infantry rifles, half the machine pistols and two thirds of the mortars in the Allied armies. On the other hand the Soviet contribution to Allied naval power was negligible; without navies Britain and America could not have invaded Europe or attacked Japan, and America could not have aided Britain or the Soviet Union.

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<sup>8</sup> On the Soviet economy in wartime see Susan J. Linz (ed.), *The Impact of World War II on the Soviet Union* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1985); Mark Harrison, *Soviet Planning in Peace and War, 1938-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Mark Harrison, *Accounting for War: Soviet Production, Employment, and the Defence Burden, 1940-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Jacques Sapir, 'The economics of war in the Soviet Union during World War II', in Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin (eds), *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and for a comparative view Mark Harrison (ed.), *The Economics of World War II: Six Great Powers in International Comparison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998).

The particular Soviet contribution to the Allied war effort was to engage the enemy on land from the first to the last day of the war. In Churchill's words the Red Army 'tore the guts' out of the German military machine. For three years it faced approximately 90 per cent of the German army's fighting strength. After the Allied D-Day landings in Normandy in June 1944 two thirds of the Wehrmacht remained on the eastern front. The scale of fighting on the eastern front exceeded that in the west by an order of magnitude. At Alamein in Egypt in the winter of 1942 the Germans lost 50,000 men, 1,700 guns and 500 tanks; at Stalingrad they lost 800,000 men, 10,000 guns and 2,000 tanks.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike its campaign in the west, Germany's war in the east was one of annexation and extermination. Hitler planned to depopulate the Ukraine and European Russia to make room for German settlement and a food surplus for the German army. The urban population would have to migrate or starve. Soviet prisoners of war would be allowed to die; former communist officials would be killed. Mass shootings behind the front line would clear the territory of Jews; this policy was eventually replaced by systematic deportations to mechanised death camps.

Our picture of Soviet war losses remains incomplete. We know that the Soviet Union suffered the vast majority of Allied war deaths, roughly 25 million. This figure could be too high or too low by one million; most Soviet war fatalities went unreported so the total must be estimated statistically from the number of deaths that exceeded normal peacetime mortality.<sup>10</sup> In comparison the United States suffered 400,000 war deaths and Britain 350,000.

Causes of death were many. A first distinction is between war deaths among soldiers and civilians.<sup>11</sup> Red Army records indicate 8.7 million known military deaths. Roughly 6.9 million died on the battlefield or behind the front line; this figure, spread over four years, suggests that Red Army losses on an *average* day ran at about twice the Allied losses on D-Day. In addition 4.6 million soldiers were reported captured or missing, or killed and missing in units that were cut off and failed to report losses. Of these 2.8 million were later repatriated or reenlisted, suggesting a net total of 1.8 million deaths in captivity and 8.7 million Red Army deaths in all.

The figure of 8.7 million is actually a lower limit. The official figures leave out at least half a million deaths of men who went missing during mobilisation

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<sup>9</sup> I.C.B. Dear, ed., *The Oxford Companion to the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 326.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Ellman and Sergei Maksudov, 'Soviet deaths in the Great Patriotic War', *Europe-Asia studies*, 46(4), 1994; Mark Harrison, 'Counting Soviet deaths in the Great Patriotic War: comment', *Europe-Asia studies*, 55(6), 2003, provides the basis for our figure of 25 ± 1 million.

<sup>11</sup> The detailed breakdown in this and the following paragraph is from G.F. Krivosheev, V.M. Andronikov, P.D. Burikov, V.V. Gurkin, A.I. Kruglov, E.I. Rodionov, and M.V. Filimoshin, *Rossia i SSSR v voynakh XX veka. Statisticheskoe issledovanie* (Moscow: OLMA-PRESS, 2003), especially pp. 229, 233, 237, and 457.

because they were caught up in the invasion before being registered in their units. But the true number may be higher. German records show a total of 5.8 million Soviet prisoners, of whom not 1.8 but 3.3 million had died by May 1944. If Germans were counting more thoroughly than Russians, as seems likely up to this point in the war, then a large gap remains in the Soviet records. Finally, the Red Army figures omit deaths among armed partisans, included in civilian deaths under German occupation.

Soviet civilian war deaths fall into two groups: some died under German occupation and the rest in the Soviet-controlled interior. Premature deaths under occupation have been estimated at 13.7 million, including 7.4 million killed in hot or cold blood, another 2.2 million taken to Germany and worked to death, and the remaining 4.1 million died of overwork, hunger, or disease. Among the 7.4 million killed were more than two million Jews who vanished into the Holocaust; the rest died in partisan fighting, reprisals and so forth.<sup>12</sup>

How many were the war deaths in the Soviet interior? If we combine 8.7 million, the lower limit on military deaths, with 13.7 premature civilian deaths under German occupation, and subtract both from 25 million war deaths in the population as a whole, we find a 2.6 million residual. The scope for error in this number is very wide. It could be too high by a million or more extra prisoner-of-war deaths in the German records. It could be too high or too low by another million, being the margin of error around overall war deaths. But in fact war deaths in the Soviet interior cannot have been less than 2 millions. Heightened mortality in Soviet labour camps killed three quarters of a million inmates. Another quarter of a million died during the deportation of entire ethnic groups such as the Volga Germans and later the Chechens who, Stalin believed, had harboured collaborators with the German occupiers. The Leningrad district saw 800 thousand hunger deaths during the terrible siege of 1941 to 1944. These three categories alone make 1.8 million deaths. In addition there were air raids and mass evacuations, the conditions of work, nutrition and public health declined, and recorded death rates rose.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Jewish deaths were up to one million from the Soviet Union within its 1939 frontiers, one million from eastern Poland, and two to three hundred thousand from the Baltic and other territories annexed in 1940. Israel Gutman and Robert Rozett, 'Estimated Jewish losses in the Holocaust', in Israel Gutman (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, Vol. 4 (New York: Macmillan, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> Peacetime deaths in the camps and colonies of the Gulag were 2.6 per cent per year from figures for 1936 to 1940 and 1946 to 1950 given by A.I. Kokurin and N.V. Petrov (eds), *GULAG (Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei). 1918-1960* (Moscow: Materik, 2002), 441-442. Applied to the Gulag population between 1941 and 1945, this figure yields a wartime excess of about 750,000 deaths. On deaths arising from deportations see Overy, *Russia's War*, 233. On deaths in Leningrad, John Barber (ed.), *Zhizn' i smert' v blokadnom Leningrade. Istoriko-meditsinskii aspekt* (St Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 2001). On death rates across the country and in Siberia, John Barber and Mark Harrison, *The Soviet Home Front: a Social and Economic History of the USSR in World War II* (London: Longman, 1994), 88.

Were these all truly 'war' deaths? Was Hitler to blame, or Stalin? It is true that forced labour and deportations were part of the normal apparatus of Stalinist repression. For example, Stalin sent millions of people to labour camps where overwork and poor conditions raised mortality in peacetime well above the norm in the rest of society. Because of the war, however, food availability fell to a point where more people were sure to die. Hitler caused this situation, and in this sense he chose *how many died*. Stalin chose *who died*; he sent some of them to the Gulag and allowed the conditions there to worsen further. If Hitler had not decided on war, Stalin would not have had to select the victims. Thus, they were both responsible but in different ways.

In short, the general picture of Soviet war losses suggests a jigsaw puzzle. The general outline is clear: people died in colossal numbers in many different miserable or terrible circumstances. But the individual pieces of the puzzle still do not fit well; some overlap and others are yet to be found.

In 1945 Stalin declared that the country had passed the 'test' of war. If the war was a test, however, few citizens had passed unscathed. Of those alive when war broke out, almost one in five were dead. Of those still living, millions were scarred by physical and emotional trauma, by lost families and treasured possessions, and by the horrors they had been caught up in. Moreover the everyday life of most people remained grindingly hard as they laboured in the following years to cover the costs of demobilising the army and industry and rebuilding shattered communities and workplaces.<sup>14</sup>

The Soviet economy had lost a fifth of its human assets and a quarter to a third of its physical wealth.<sup>15</sup> The simultaneous destruction of physical and human assets normally brings transient losses but not lasting impoverishment. The transient losses arise because the people and assets that remain must be adapted to each other before being recombined and this takes time. Losses of productivity and incomes only persist when the allocation system cannot cope or suffers lasting damage. In the Soviet case the allocation system was undamaged. Economic demobilisation and the reconversion of industry to peacetime production, although unexpectedly difficult, restored civilian output to prewar levels within a single five-year plan. A more demanding yardstick for recovery would be the return of output to its extrapolated prewar trend. In this sense recovery was more prolonged; during each postwar decade only half the remaining gap was closed so that productivity and living standards were still somewhat depressed by the war in the 1970s.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Don Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism: Labour and the Restoration of the Stalinist System after World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> Harrison, *Accounting for War*, 162.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Harrison, 'Trends in Soviet labour productivity, 1928-1985: war, postwar recovery, and slowdown', *European review of economic history*, 2(2), 1998.

### 3. On the Edge of Collapse

John Keegan has pointed out that most battles are won not when the enemy is destroyed physically, but when her will to resist is destroyed.<sup>17</sup> For Germany, the problem was that the Soviet will to resist did not collapse. Instead, Soviet resistance proved unexpectedly resilient. At the same time, from the summer of 1941 to the victory at Stalingrad in the winter of 1942 a Soviet collapse was not far off for much of the time.

Even before June 1941 the Wehrmacht had won an aura of invincibility. It had conquered Czecho-Slovakia, Poland, Netherlands, Belgium, Luxemburg, France, Norway, Denmark, Greece and Yugoslavia. Its reputation was enhanced by the ease with which it occupied the Baltic region and the western Ukraine and the warmth of its initial reception.

In contrast Red Army morale was low. The rank and file, mostly of peasant origin, had harsh memories of the forced collectivisation of agriculture and the famine of 1932/33. The officer corps was inexperienced and traumatised by the purges of 1937/38.<sup>18</sup> In the campaigns of 1939 and 1940 and particularly the 'winter war' against Finland successes were mixed and casualties were heavy. Rather than fight, many deserted or assaulted their commanders. In the first months of the war with Germany millions of Red Army soldiers rejected orders that prohibited retreat or surrender. In captivity, with starvation the alternative, thousands chose to put on a German uniform; as a result, while civilians collaborated with the occupiers in all theatres, the Red Army was the only combat organisation in this war to find its own men fighting on the other side under the captured Red Army general Vlasov.<sup>19</sup> The Germans also succeeded in recruiting national 'legions' from ethnic groups in the occupied areas.

As the Germans advanced, the cities of western and central Russia became choked with refugees bearing news of catastrophic setbacks and armies falling back along a thousand-kilometre front.<sup>20</sup> Some Soviet citizens planned for defeat: in the countryside, anticipating the arrival of German troops, peasants secretly planned to share out state grain stocks and collective livestock and fields. Some trains evacuating the Soviet defence factories of the war zones to the safety of the interior were plundered as they moved eastward in late 1941. In the Moscow 'panic' of October 1941, with the enemy close to the city, crowds rioted and looted public property.

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<sup>17</sup> John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978).

<sup>18</sup> On the Red Army before and during the war see, in addition to the military histories already cited, Roger R. Reese, *The Soviet Military Experience* (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> Catherine Andreyev, *Vlasov and the Russian Liberation Movement: Soviet Reality and Émigré Theories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>20</sup> On wartime conditions see Barber and Harrison, *Soviet Home Front*.

In the urban economy widespread labour indiscipline was reflected in persistent lateness, absenteeism and illegal quitting.<sup>21</sup> Food crimes became endemic: people stole food from the state and from each other. Military and civilian food administrators stole rations for their own consumption and for sideline trade. Civilians forged and traded ration cards.<sup>22</sup> Red Army units helped themselves to civilian stocks. In besieged Leningrad's terrible winter of 1941 food crimes reached the extreme of cannibalism.<sup>23</sup>

In the white heat of the German advance the core of the dictatorship threatened to melt down. Stalin experienced the outbreak of war as a severe psychological blow and momentarily left the bridge; because they could not replace him, or were not brave enough to do so, or believed that he was secretly testing their loyalty, his subordinates helped him to regain control by forming a war cabinet, the State Defence Committee or GOKO, around him as leader.<sup>24</sup> At many lower levels the normal processes of the Soviet state stopped or, if they tried to carry on business as usual, became irrelevant. Economic planners, for example, went on setting quotas and allocating supplies although the supplies had been captured by the enemy while the quotas were too modest to replace the losses, let alone accumulate the means to fight back.

## 4. Unexpected Resilience

The Soviet collapse that German plans relied on never came. Instead, Stalin declared a 'great patriotic war' against the invader, deliberately echoing Russia's previous 'patriotic war' against Napoleon in 1812.

How was Soviet resistance maintained? The main features of the Soviet system of government on the outbreak of war were Stalin's personal dictatorship, a centralised bureaucracy with overlapping party and state apparatuses, and a secret police with extensive powers to intervene in

<sup>21</sup> Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism*.

<sup>22</sup> William Moskoff, *The Bread of Affliction: the Food Supply in the USSR During World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>23</sup> Barber (ed.), *Zhizn' i smert'*.

<sup>24</sup> Dmitrii Volkogonov, *Triumf i tragediia: politicheskii portret I. V. Stalina*, volume 2(1) (Moscow: Novosti, 1989). Other views of Stalin and Soviet wartime politics are provided by G.A. Kumanev, *Riadam so Stalinym. Otkrovennye svidetel'stva. Vstrechi, besedy, interv'iu, dokumenty* (Moscow: Bylina, 1999); A.N. Mertsalov and L.A. Mertsalov, *Stalinizm i voina* (Moscow: Terra-Knizhnyi klub, 1998); A.I. Mikoian, *Tak bylo. Razmyshleniia o minuvshem* (Moscow: Vagrius, 1999); Konstantin Simonov, *Glazami cheloveka moego pokoleniia. Razmyshleniia o I. V. Staline* (Moscow: Novosti, 1989); and V.A. Torchinov and A.M. Leontiuk, *Vokrug Stalina. Istoriko-biograficheskii spravochnik* (St Petersburg: Filologicheskii fakul'tet Sankt-Peterburgskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 2000). Many such recent and intimate revelations are compiled and summarised in English by Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003). For traditional views of Stalin in wartime see also Bialer, *Stalin and His Generals*.

political, economic and military affairs. This regime organised the Soviet war effort and mobilised its human and material resources. There were some adjustments to the system but continuity was more evident than change.

In the short term, however, this regimented society and its planned economy were mobilised not on lines laid down in carefully coordinated plans and approved procedures but by improvised emergency measures. From the Kremlin to the front line and the remote interior, individual political and military leaders on the spot took the initiatives that enabled survival and resistance.

The resilience was not just military; the war efforts on the home front and the fighting front are a single story. Patriotic feeling is part of this story, but Soviet resistance cannot be explained by patriotic feeling alone, no matter how widespread. This is because war requires collective action, but nations and armies consist of individuals. War presents each person with a choice: on the battlefield each must choose to fight or flee and, on the home front, to work or shirk. If others do their duty then each individual's small contribution can make little difference; if others abandon their posts, one person's resistance is futile. Regardless of personal interest in the common struggle, each must be tempted to flee or shirk. The moment that this logic takes hold on one side is the turning point.

The main task of each side on the eastern front was not to kill and be killed. Rather, it was to organise their own forces of the front and rear in such a way that each person could feel the value of their own contribution, and feel confident in the collective efforts of their comrades, while closing off the opportunities for each to desert the struggle; and at the same time to disorganise the enemy by persuading its forces individually to abandon resistance and to defect.

A feature of the eastern front, which contributed to the astonishingly high levels of killing on both sides, was that both the Soviet Union and Germany proved adept at solving their own problems of organisation and morale as they arose; but each was unable to disrupt the other's efforts, for example by making surrender attractive to enemy soldiers. One factor was the German forces' dreadful treatment of Soviet civilians and prisoners of war: this soon made clear that no one on the Soviet side could expect to gain from surrender. Less obviously, it also ensured that no German soldier could expect much better if Germany lost. Thus it committed both sides to war to the death.

In short, three factors held the Soviet war effort together and sustained resistance. First, for each citizen who expected or hoped for German victory there were several others who wanted patriotic resistance to succeed. These were the ones who tightened their belts and shouldered new burdens without complaint. In farms, factories and offices they worked overtime, ploughed and harvested by hand, rationalised production, saved metal and power, and boosted output. At the front they dug in and fought although injured, leaderless and cut off. To the Nazi ideologues they were ignorant Slavs who carried on killing pointlessly because they were too stupid to know when they were beaten. To their own people they were heroes.

Second, the authorities supported this patriotic feeling by promoting resistance and punishing defeatism. They suppressed information about Red Army setbacks and casualties. They executed many for spreading 'defeatism' by telling the truth about events on the front line. In the autumn of 1941 Moscow and Leningrad were closed to refugees from the occupied areas to

prevent the spread of information about Soviet defeats. The evacuation of civilians from both Leningrad and Stalingrad was delayed to hide the real military situation.

Stalin imposed severe penalties on defeatism in the army. His Order no. 270 of 16 August 1941 stigmatised the behaviour of Soviet soldiers who allowed themselves to be taken prisoner as 'betrayal of the Motherland' and imposed social and financial penalties on prisoners' families. Following a military panic at Rostov-on-Don, his Order no. 227 of 28 July 1942 ('Not a Step Back') ordered the deployment of 'blocking detachments' behind the lines to shoot men retreating without orders and officers who allowed their units to disintegrate; the order was rescinded, however, four months later. The barbarity of these measures should be measured against the desperation of the situation. Although their burden was severe and unjust, it was still in the interest of each individual soldier to maintain the discipline of all.

The authorities doggedly pursued 'deserters' from war work on the industrial front and sentenced hundreds of thousands to terms in prisons and labour camps while the war continued. They punished food crimes harshly, not infrequently by shooting. The secret police remained a powerful and ubiquitous instrument for repressing discontent. This role was heightened by the severe hardships and military setbacks and the questioning of authority that resulted. Civilians and soldiers suspected of disloyalty risked summary arrest and punishment.

Third, although German intentions were not advertised, the realities of German occupation and captivity soon destroyed the illusion of an alternative to resistance.<sup>25</sup> For civilians under occupation the gains from collaboration were pitiful; Hitler did not offer the one thing that many Russian and Ukrainian peasants hoped for, the dissolution of the collective farms. This was because he wanted to use the collective farms to get more grain for Germany and eventually to pass them on to German settlers, not back to indigenous peasants. On the other hand the occupation authorities did permit some decollectivisation in the north Caucasus and this was effective in stimulating local collaboration.

People living in the Russian and Ukrainian zones of German conquest were treated brutally with results that we have already mentioned. Systematic brutality resulted from German war aims, one of which was to loot food and materials so that famine spread through the zone of occupation. Another aim was to exterminate the Jews, so that the German advance was followed immediately by mass killings. The occupation authorities answered resistance with hostage-taking and merciless reprisals. Later in the war the growing pressure led to a labour shortage in Germany, and many Soviet civilians were deported to Germany as slave labourers. In this setting random brutality towards civilians was also commonplace: German policy permitted soldiers and officials to kill, rape, burn and loot for private ends. Finally, Soviet soldiers taken prisoner fared no better; many were starved or worked to death. Of the survivors, many were shipped to Germany as slave labourers. Red Army political officers faced summary execution at the front.

It may be asked why Hitler did not try to win over the Russians and Ukrainians and to make surrender more inviting for Soviet soldiers. He

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<sup>25</sup> Dallin's *German Rule in Russia* remains the classic account.

wanted to uphold racial distinctions and expected to win the war quickly without having to induce a Soviet surrender. While this was not the case, his policy delivered one unexpected benefit. When Germany began to lose the war, it stiffened military morale that German troops understood they could expect no better treatment from the other side. Thus Hitler's policy was counterproductive while the German army was on the offensive, but it paid off in retreat by diminishing the value to German soldiers of the option to surrender.

As a result the outcome of the war was decided not by morale but by military mass. Since both sides proved equally determined to make a fight of it, and neither could be persuaded to surrender, it became a matter of kill-and-be-killed after all, so victory went to the army that was bigger, better equipped and more able to kill and stand being killed. Although the Red Army suffered much higher casualties than the Wehrmacht, it proved able to return from such losses, regain the initiative and eventually acquire a decisive quantitative superiority.

Underlying military mass was the economy. In wartime the Soviet Union was more thoroughly mobilised economically than Germany and supplied the front with a greater volume of resources. This is something that could hardly have been predicted. Anyone reviewing the experience of the poorer countries in World War I, including Russia, would have forecast a speedy Soviet economic collapse hastened by the attempt to mobilise resources from a shrinking territory.

On the eve of war the Soviet and German economies were of roughly equal size; taking into account the territorial gains of 1939/40, the real national product of the Soviet economy in 1940 may have exceeded Germany's by a small margin. Between 1940 and 1942 the German economy expanded somewhat, while the level of Soviet output was slashed by invasion; as a result, in 1942 Soviet output was only two thirds the German level. Despite this, in 1942 the Soviet Union not only fielded armed forces more numerous than Germany's, which is not surprising given the Soviet demographic advantage, but also armed and equipped it at substantially higher levels. The railway evacuation of factories and equipment from the war zones shifted the geographical centre of the war economy hundreds of kilometres to the east. By 1943 three-fifths of Soviet output was devoted to the war effort, the highest proportion observed at the time in any economy that did not subsequently collapse under the strain.<sup>26</sup>

There was little detailed planning behind this; the important decisions were made in a chaotic, uncoordinated sequence. The civilian economy was neglected and declined rapidly; by 1942 food, fuels and metals produced had fallen by half or more. Living standards fell on average by two-fifths while millions were severely overworked and undernourished; however, the state procurement of food from collective farms ensured that industrial workers and soldiers were less likely to starve than peasants. Despite this the economy might have collapsed without victory at Stalingrad at the end of 1942. Foreign aid, mostly American, also relieved the pressure; it added about 5 per cent to Soviet resources available in 1942 and 10 per cent in each of 1943 and 1944. In

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<sup>26</sup> Mark Harrison, 'The economics of World War II: an overview', in Harrison, ed., *Economics of World War II*, 21.

1943 economic controls became more centralised and some resources were restored to civilian uses.<sup>27</sup>

How did an economy made smaller than Germany's by invasion still out-produce Germany in weapons and equipment? Surprising though this may seem, the Soviet economy did not have a superior ability to repress consumption. By 1942 both countries were supplying more than three fifths of their national output to the war effort, so this was not the source of Soviet advantage. Stalin's command system may have had an advantage in repressing consumption more rapidly; the Soviet economy approached this level of mobilisation in a far shorter period of time.

The main advantage on the Soviet side was that the resources available for mobilisation were used with far greater efficiency.<sup>28</sup> This resulted from mass production. In the interwar period artisan methods still dominated the production of most weapons in most countries other than small arms and ammunition. In wartime craft technologies still offered advantages of quality and ease of adaptation, but these were overwhelmed by the gains of volume and unit cost that mass production offered. The German, Japanese and Italian war industries were unable to realise these gains, or realised them too late, because of corporate structures based on the craft system, political commitments to the social status of the artisan, and strategic preferences for quality over quantity of weaponry. In the American market economy these had never counted for much, and in the Soviet command system they had already been substantially overcome before the war.

The quantitative superiority in weaponry of the Allies generally, and specifically of the Soviet Union over Germany, came from supplying standardised products in a limited assortment, interchangeable parts, specialised factories and industrial equipment, an inexorable conveyor belt system of serial manufacture, and deskilled workers who lacked the qualifications and discretion to play at design or modify specifications. Huge factories turned out proven designs in long production runs that poured rising quantities of destructive power onto the battlefield.

## 5. The Red Army in Defeat and Victory

A contest over the nature of revolutionary military organisation began in March 1917, when the Petrograd soviet decreed that soldiers could challenge their officers' commands. While the army of Imperial Russia disintegrated, the Red Guard emerged as a voluntary organisation of revolutionaries chosen for working class origin and political consciousness. But when revolution turned into civil war these founding principles had to face the realities of modern military combat. Trotskii, then commissar for war, responded by instituting conscription from the peasantry and the restoration of an officer corps recruited from Imperial army commanders willing to serve the new regime.

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<sup>27</sup> Harrison, *Soviet Planning in Peace and War*, chapters 2 and 4, and *Accounting for War*, chapters 6 and 7.

<sup>28</sup> Mark Harrison, 'Wartime mobilisation: a German comparison', in John Barber and Mark Harrison (eds), *The Soviet Defence-Industry Complex from Stalin to Khrushchev* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

The Workers' and Peasants' Red Army that Trotskii created reflected a sweeping compromise of political principles with military imperatives: professional elements combined with a territorial militia, military training of the rank and file side by side with political education and party guidance, and dual command with military officers' orders subject to verification by political 'commissars'; the latter term, used widely in English and German, approximates only loosely to the Russian *politruk* (short for *politicheskii rukovoditel'*: political guide or leader). After the civil war Trotskii's successor, Frunze, introduced military reforms that created a general staff and unified military discipline. Over the next quarter century the Red Army evolved from its radical origins to a modern military organisation.

A feature of the revolutionary tradition in the Red Army was its emphasis on offensive operations, and specifically in the counter-offensive as the best means of defence. Underlying this was the belief that, in a world polarised between capitalism and communism, no country could attack the Soviet Union without risking mutiny at the front and revolution in its rear. Therefore, the moment when it was attacked was the best moment for the Red Army to launch a counter-attack. When this proved to be an illusion, Red Army doctrines shifted to a more defensive stance based on a war of attrition and falling back on reserves. Then, when forced industrialisation created the prospect of a motorised mass army with armoured and air forces capable of striking deeply into the enemy's flanks and rear, Tukhachevskii's concept of 'deep battle' again radicalised Red Army thinking.<sup>29</sup>

The size of the armed forces followed a U-shaped curve in the interwar years. It stood at five million at the end of the civil war in 1921 and five million again at the German invasion of 1941. In the 1920s wholesale demobilisation and cost cutting took the Red Army and Navy down to little more than half a million. In the 1930s modernisation and recruitment reversed the decline. The Red Army of 1941 with its thousands of tanks and aircraft bore little visible comparison with the ragged-trousered regiments who had won the civil war.

Beneath the surface, the new army was nearer in spirit to the old one than might appear. It was difficult to break the mould of the civil war. One problem was that, as numbers expanded, the quality of personnel deteriorated amongst both rank and file and officers. It was impossible to recruit officers in sufficient numbers, give them a professional training and pay them enough to command with integrity and competence. Another was the cost of reequipping the rapidly growing numbers with motorised armour and aviation at a time of exceptional change in tank and aircraft technologies. The industry of a low-income, capital-scarce country could not produce new weapons in sufficient numbers to equip the army uniformly in the current state of the arts; instead, the army had to deploy new and obsolete weapons side by side.

Then in 1937/38, in the middle of rapid expansion, Stalin forced the Red Army through a major backward step in the bloody purge that he inflicted on its leadership. Most commanding officers down to the level of corps commanders were executed; altogether, more than twenty thousand officers were discharged after arrest or expulsion from the party. Stalin carried out the purge because he feared the potential for a fifth column to develop in the armed forces, as in other structures of Soviet society, that would emerge in

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<sup>29</sup> Samuelson, *Plans for Stalin's War Machine*.

wartime to collaborate with an adversary and hand over the key to the gates.<sup>30</sup> He determined to destroy this possibility in advance by savage repression. He believed that this would leave the army and society better prepared for war.

Stalin succeeded in that the purge turned the army's command staff, terrorised and morally broken, into his absolutely obedient instrument. At the same time, while continuing to grow rapidly in numbers, it declined further in quality. Officer recruitment and training had to fill thousands of new posts and at the same time replace thousands of empty ones. The mass promotions that resulted had a strongly accidental character; they placed many competent but poorly qualified soldiers in commanding positions and many incompetent ones beside them. Bad leadership brought falling morale amongst the rank and file. The army paid heavily for incompetent military leadership at war with Finland in 1939/40, and more heavily still in the June 1941 invasion.

The backward step that the Red Army took in 1937 was expressed in its organisation and thinking. Organisationally Stalin sought to compensate for officers' collapsing prestige and competence by returning to the model of dual command: in 1937 military commanders again lost their undivided authority to issue orders, which had to be countersigned by the corresponding *politruk* (political commissar). Unified command was restored in 1940; then, in the military chaos of 1941 following the German invasion Stalin once more returned to the *politruk* system, finally restoring unified command in the military reforms of 1942.

In military thinking the Red Army also took a step back, marked by a return to the cult of the offensive. The main reason was Stalin's fear of defeatist tendencies in the armed forces; since retreat was the first stage of defeat, his logic ran, the easiest way to identify defeatism was to connect it with plans for Tukhachevskii's 'deep battle' which envisaged meeting the enemy's invasion by stepping back and regrouping before launching a counter-offensive. Thus, the advocates of operations in depth were accused of conspiring with Nazi leaders to hand over territory. As a result, when war broke out many officers found it easier to surrender to the Wehrmacht than to retreat against Stalin's orders.

Soviet military plans for an enemy attack became dominated by crude notions of frontier defence involving an immediate counter-offensive that would take the battle to the enemy's territory. Stalin now hoped to deter German aggression by massing Soviet forces on the frontier apparently ready to attack. This was a dangerous bluff; it calmed fears and stimulated complacency in Moscow, while observers in Berlin were not taken in. The revived cult of the offensive also had consequences for the economy. The planned war mobilisation of industry was based on a short offensive campaign and a quick victory. Threats of air attack and territorial loss could not be discussed while such fears were equated with treason. As a result, air defence and the dispersal of industry from vulnerable frontier regions were neglected.

Stalin was surprised and shocked when Hitler launched his invasion. Having convinced himself that Hitler would not invade, he had rejected

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<sup>30</sup> Oleg Khlevnyuk, 'The objectives of the Great Terror, 1937-1938', in Julian Cooper, Maureen Perrie, and E.A. Rees, eds, *Soviet History, 1917-53: Essays in Honour of R.W. Davies* (London and Basingstoke: St Martin's Press, 1995).

several warnings received through diplomatic and intelligence channels, believing them to be disinformation. When the invasion came, he was slow to react and slow to adapt. Better anticipation might not have prevented considerable territorial losses but could have saved millions of soldiers from the encirclements that left them to captivity and death. After the war there was tension between Stalin and his generals over how they should share the credit for final victory and blame for early defeats. In 1941 Stalin covered his own responsibility for misjudging Hitler's plans by shooting several generals. The army had its revenge in 1956 when Khrushchev caricatured Stalin planning wartime military operations on a globe.

The war completed the Red Army's transition to a modern fighting force, but the process was complicated and there were more backward steps before progress was resumed. As commander-in-chief Stalin improvised a high command, the *Stavka*, and took detailed control of military operations. He demanded ceaseless counter-attacks regardless of circumstances and indeed in the circumstances of the time, when field communications were inoperative and strategic coordination did not exist, there was often no alternative to unthinking resistance on the lines of 'death before surrender'. This gave rise to episodes of both legendary heroism and despicable brutality. Over time Stalin ceded more and more operational command to his generals while keeping control of grand strategy,.

For a time the army threatened to become de-professionalised again. Reservists were called up *en masse* and sent to the front with minimal training. More than 30 million men and women were mobilised in total. The concepts of a territorial militia and voluntary motivation were promoted by recruiting 'home guard' detachments in the towns threatened by enemy occupation. These were pitched into defensive battle, lightly armed and with a few hours training, and most were killed. The few survivors were eventually integrated into the Red Army. At the same time partisan armies grew on the occupied territories behind German lines, sometimes based on the remnants of Red Army units cut off in the retreat; these too were gradually brought under the control of the general staff. Once the tide had turned and the Red Army began to recover occupied territory, it refilled its ranks by scooping up able-bodied men remaining in the towns and villages on the way. Offsetting these were high levels of desertion that persisted in 1943 and 1944, even after the war's outcome was certain.

The annihilating losses of 1941 and 1942 instituted a vicious cycle of rapid replacement with ever younger and less experienced personnel who suffered casualties and lose equipment at dreadful rates. This affected the whole army, including the officer corps. At the end of the war most commanding officers still lacked a proper military education, and most units were still commanded by officers whose level of responsibility exceeded their substantive rank.

In the end, three things saved the Red Army. First, at each level enough of its units included a core of survivors who, after the baptism of fire, had acquired enough battlefield experience to hold the unit together and teach new recruits to live longer. Second, in 1941 and the summer of 1942 when the army's morale was cracking Stalin shored it up with merciless discipline. In October 1942 he followed this with reforms that finally abolished dual command by the political commissars and restored a number of traditional gradations of rank and merit. Third, the economy did not collapse; Soviet industry was mobilised and poured out weapons at a higher rate than

Germany. As a result, despite atrocious losses and wastage of equipment, the Soviet soldier of 1942 was already better equipped than the soldier he faced in armament, though not yet in rations, kit, or transport. In 1943 and 1944 this advantage rose steadily.

By the end of the war the Red Army was no longer an army of riflemen supported by a few tanks and aircraft but a modern combined arms force. But successful modernisation did not bar soldiers from traditional pursuits such as looting and sexual violence, respectively encouraged and permitted by the Red Army on a wide scale in occupied Germany in the spring of 1945.

## 6. Government and Politics

The war ended in triumph for Soviet power. Whether or not the Soviet Union has left anything else of lasting value, it did at least put a stop to Hitler's imperial dreams and murderous designs. This may have been the Soviet Union's most positive contribution to the balance sheet of the twentieth century.

Millions of ordinary people were intoxicated with joy at the announcement of the victory and celebrated it wildly in city squares and village streets. But some of the aspirations with which they greeted the postwar period were not met. Many hoped that the enemy's defeat could be followed by political relaxation and greater cultural openness. They felt the war had shown the people deserved to be trusted more by its leaders. But this was not a lesson that the leaders drew. The Soviet state became more secretive, Soviet society became more cut off and Stalin prepared new purges.<sup>31</sup> Ten years would pass before Khrushchev opened up social and historical discourse in a way that that was radical and shocking compared with the stuffy conformity of Stalinism, but pathetically limited by the standards of the wider world.

As for the social divisions that the war had opened up, Stalin preferred vengeance to reconciliation. While the Germans retreated he selected entire national minorities suspected of collaboration for mass deportation to Siberia. The Vlasov officers were executed and the men imprisoned without forgiveness. No one returned from forced labour in Germany or from prisoner-of-war camp without being 'filtered' by the NKVD. Party members who had survived German occupation had to account for their wartime conduct and show that they had resisted actively.<sup>32</sup>

There were other consequences. The Soviet victory projected the Red Army into the heart of Europe. It transformed the Soviet Union from a regional power to a global superpower; Stalin became a world leader. It strengthened his dictatorship and the role of the secret police.

. Nothing illustrates Stalin's personal predominance better than the lack of challenge to his leadership at the most critical moments of the war. As head of GOKO and Sovnarkom, defence commissar, supreme commander-in-chief and general secretary of the Communist Party, Stalin's authority over Soviet political, economic and military affairs was absolute. From the moment when

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<sup>31</sup> Yoram Gorlizki, 'Ordinary Stalinism: the Council of Ministers and the Soviet neo-patrimonial state, 1946-1953', *Journal of modern history*, 74(4).

<sup>32</sup> Weiner, *Making Sense of War*.

his colleagues asked him to lead the war cabinet Stalin exercised greater influence over his country's war effort than any other national leader in World War II. Washing away his mistakes and miscalculations in 1941 and 1942, the victory of 1945 further strengthened his already unassailable position.

The establishment of the five-man GOKO was a first step to a comprehensive system of wartime administration that institutionalised prewar trends. GOKO functioned with marked informality. Meetings were convened at short notice, without written agendas or minutes, with a wide and varying cast of supernumeraries. It had only a small staff; responsibility for executing decisions was delegated to plenipotentiaries and to local defence committees with sweeping powers. But it was vested, in Stalin's words, with 'all the power and authority of the State'. Its decisions bound every Soviet organisation and citizen. No Soviet political institution before or after possessed such powers. Another prewar trend that continued in wartime was the growth in influence of the government apparatus through which most GOKO decisions were implemented. Its heightened importance was reflected in Stalin's becoming chairman of Sovnarkom on the eve of war and thus head of government.

The role of central party bodies declined correspondingly. The purges of 1937/38 had already diminished the role of the Politburo. Before the war it met with declining frequency; all important decisions were taken by Stalin with a few of its members, and issued in its name. During the war the Politburo met infrequently and the central committee only once; there were no party congresses or conferences. It was at the local level that the Party played an important role in mobilising the population and organising propaganda. It did this despite the departure of many members for the front; in many areas Party cells ceased to exist.

The NKVD played several key roles. While repressing discontent and defeatism it reported on mass opinion to Stalin. In military affairs it organised partisans and the 'penal battalions' recruited from labour camps. In the economy it supplied forced labour to logging, mining and construction, and to high-security branches of industry. These roles gave it a central place in wartime government. Beria, its head, was a member of GOKO throughout the war and deputy chairman from 1944, as well as deputy chairman of Sovnarkom. Not accidentally, reports from him and other security chiefs constituted the largest part of Stalin's wartime correspondence.

In economic life the overall results of the war were conservative and further entrenched the command system. The war gave a halo of legitimacy to centralised planning, mass production and standardisation. It showed that the Soviet economy's mobilisation capacities, tried out before the war in the campaigns to 'build socialism' by collectivising peasant farming and industrialising the country, could be used just as effectively for military purposes: the Soviet economy had devoted the same high proportion of national resources to the war as much wealthier market economies without collapsing.<sup>33</sup>

Had the war changed anything? At one level Hitler had made his point. Germany had fought two world wars to divert Europe from the class struggle and polarise it on national lines. World War II largely put an end to class

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<sup>33</sup> Harrison, *Accounting for War*.

warfare in the Soviet Union. By the end of the war nationality and ethnicity had replaced class origin in Soviet society as a basis of selection for promotion and repression.<sup>34</sup>

Other influences made the postwar economy and society more militarised than before. The country had paid a heavy price in 1941 for lack of preparedness. In the postwar years a higher level of economic preparedness was sustained so as to avoid a lengthy conversion period in the opening phase of the next war. This implied larger peacetime allocations to maintain combat-ready stocks of weapons and reserve production facilities to be mobilised quickly at need.

After an initial postwar demobilisation, the Soviet defence industry began to grow again in the context of the US nuclear threat and the Korean War. Before World War II, defence plants were heavily concentrated in the western and southern regions of the European USSR, often relying on far-flung suppliers. World War II shifted the centre of gravity of the Soviet defence industry hundreds of kilometres eastward to the Urals and western Siberia. There, huge evacuated factories were grafted onto remote rural localities. A by-product was that the defence industry was increasingly concentrated on Russian Federation territory.

After the war, despite some westward reverse evacuation, the new war economy of the Urals and Siberia was kept in existence. The weapon factories of the remote interior were developed into giant, vertically integrated production complexes based on closed, self-sufficient 'company towns'. Their existence was a closely guarded secret: they were literally taken off the map.

The postwar Soviet economy carried a defence burden that was heavier in proportion to GNP than the burdens carried by the main NATO powers. Whether or how this contributed to slow Soviet postwar economic growth or the eventual breakdown of the economy are questions on which economists find it hard to agree; there was certainly a substantial loss to Soviet consumers that accumulated over many years.

Finally, the war established a new generation that would succeed Stalin. At the close of the war in Europe GOKO members comprised Stalin (65), Molotov (55), Kaganovich (51) Bulganin (50), Mikoyan (49) Beria (46), Malenkov (43) and Voznesenskii (41); Voroshilov (64) had been made to resign in November 1944. Members of the Politburo included Khrushchev (51) and Zhdanov (49). Stalin's successors would be drawn from among those in their forties and early fifties.<sup>35</sup> These were selected in several stages. First, the purges of 1937/38 cleared their way for recruitment into the political elite. Then they were tested by the war and by Stalin's last years. Those who outlived Stalin became the great survivors of the postwar Soviet political system. Once they were young and innovative. Having fought their way to the top in their youth they became unwilling to contemplate new upheavals in old age. The war had taught them the wrong lessons. Unable to adapt to new times, they made an important contribution to the Soviet Union's long-term decay.

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<sup>34</sup> Weiner, *Making Sense of War*.

<sup>35</sup> John Crowfoot and Mark Harrison, 'The USSR Council of Ministers under late Stalinism, 1945-54: its production branch composition and the requirements of national economy and policy', *Soviet studies*, 42(1), 1990.