

Contested Memory:
Writing the Great Patriotic War's Official History During Khrushchev's Thaw

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ABSTRACT

The first official history of the Great Patriotic War appeared in the Soviet Union in 1960-1965. It evolved into a six-volume set that elicited both praise and criticism from the reading public. This dissertation examines the creation of the historiographical narrative of the Great Patriotic War in the decade following de-Stalinization in 1956. The debates historians, Party and state representatives engaged in, including the responses they received from reviewers and readers, shed new light on the relationship between the government, those who wrote state-sponsored narratives, and the reading public.

The narrative examined here shows the importance and value placed on the war effort, and explores how aspects of the Stalinist period were retained during the Thaw. By focusing on previously unexplored archival material, which documents debates and editorial decisions, an examination of how officials sought to control the state's explanation of events, motivations and consequences of the war can be examined in-depth. To date, the periodization, terminology and areas of concentration that define the course of the Great Patriotic War are fixated on topics that Stalin's war narrative favored, assigning significance to events according to Stalinist preferences rather than objective analysis. My study of the war's historiography shows how contentious its memory became at every level, making it difficult to clearly discern who represented and opposed the party line throughout Soviet society.

The author argues that the collective memory of the war, as propagated by the state, became so all-encompassing that it was often the preferred version, infiltrating individual memories and displacing or blending with personal recollections and factual documentation. Because the war touched the entire population of the Soviet Union, its

story became the foundational myth of the USSR, replacing the October Revolution, and was used as a legitimizing tool by Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev. Most recently, it has experienced a revival in the post-Soviet period by Vladimir Putin as a way to unify Russia and build popular support for his administration. Viewing how the public interacted with representatives of the state over the creation of the official history of the war suggests that like no other event, war compels any state, even a totalitarian state, to reexamine its foundations, historical memory, foreign and domestic policies and views on censorship.

For my parents, Boris and Lyudmila Mann, for their unwavering support and ability to take risks – your sacrifices will not be forgotten. For my grandparents, David and Anna Rozhener and David and Hannah Mann. They selflessly helped raise, nurture, and educate me to always strive to be better.

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INTRODUCTION

The history of the Great Patriotic War is absolutely implausible...It is not a history that existed but a history that was written. It was written in the spirit of the time. Who to praise, [and] whom to be silent about.

- Marshal of the Soviet Union Georgii Konstantinovich Zhukov¹

The first official history of the “Great Patriotic War” – designating the Soviet war effort against Germany during the Second World War – appeared in the Soviet Union in 1960-1965. It evolved into a six-volume set that elicited both praise and criticism from commission members themselves and the reading public. One veteran writing to the Minister of Defense in the early 1960s claimed that “there is a feeling of resentment arising against the authors” for what he believed was undeserved praise for the Germans and an inability to highlight Soviet accomplishments, while a letter written by three members of the communist party in 1962, to the head of the Army and Navy’s Political Department, commented how the war’s official history contained “a lot of useful and enlightening material.”² Letters from readers were received by various media outlets and the Institute of Marxism-Leninism itself, the creator and publisher of the official history, and the admiration and condemnation they offered attest to the contested nature of the war’s history and history within the Soviet state in general.

This dissertation examines how the first official history of the Soviet Union’s World War Two experience was crafted in the decade following de-Stalinization in 1956.

¹ Undated interview with *Literaturnaia gazeta*, cited in Vladimir Melnikov, *Ikh poslal na smert Zhukov? Gibel’ armii generala Efremova* (Iauza, Eksmo: Moscow, 2011), 5.

² The letter to the Minister of Defense was undated and signed “veteran-frontovik” but included in a folder with letters from the early 1960s. The letter written to Aleksei Epishev was by P. A. Aleskandrov, I. G. Starinov (a famous partisan and former member of the commission), and N. F. Avramenko, dated 22 September 1962. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 309, l. 39, 104.

The debates the editorial team engaged in when they produced this multi-volume history, as well as the responses they received from reviewers and readers, shed new light on the relationship between Nikita Khrushchev's administration, those who wrote state sponsored narratives, and the reading public. Because the war and its victory affected the entire population of the Soviet Union, its story became a myth of triumph and unification for the postwar USSR and post-Soviet Russia.

Viewing how the public interacted with representatives of the state adds a new dimension to our understanding of the ways the war and its history altered life in the Soviet Union. Studying how the first official history was crafted and contested before, during and after its publication illustrates how contentious the memory of the war was at every level. Whereas the Soviet Union has traditionally been viewed as characterized by a state juxtaposed to the society it ruthlessly ruled, this dissertation unveils just how difficult it is to discern who represented and who opposed the party line; in the case of what became the most important event in Soviet history, there was a fluidity visible at all levels of society.

In exploring this dynamic, this dissertation also provides a prism through which to view the transition of the Stalin Cult to the Cult of the Great Patriotic War. Although not without opposition, the war was portrayed as the culmination and justification of Stalin's industrialization, collectivization and purges. Victory in the war, which the public could not question but only celebrate, was the one event the Soviet Union could take pride in, but that Stalin could not be fully divorced from.

While aspects of the Second World War continue to be debated to this day, from the United States and France to China and Japan, for the Soviet Union, the Second World

War was a defining event. The “Great Patriotic War” offered a profound memory for the entire country to unite around. Every family participated in the war experience, whether on the frontlines, in the rear, or under occupation. Tens of millions were left dead, tens of thousands of villages were obliterated and tremors from the war years continued to impact Soviet society in the postwar period with famines, homelessness, labor shortages and countless orphans.

The war’s history attracted immense attention but researchers were met with restrictions and obstacles. Documenting the war in the immediate postwar period, while Stalin was alive, was practically impossible. Under Stalin the war’s narrative was tightly controlled and disseminated by a limited number of publications that reproduced a discourse the reading public was already familiar with. Military archives remained off-limits while censorship was often all-encompassing with bans on publishing even well-known and publicized orders from the war period. State sponsored narratives – collections of Stalin’s speeches on the war, pamphlets, articles and laudatory texts – monopolized the collective memory of the war until the Thaw under Khrushchev.

The decision to create an official history of the war created conditions for a narrative, dominated by Khrushchev and his close associates, of the war experience to take center stage and clash with the individual and collective memories of the reading public, including members of the commission organized to craft the war’s official history. This dissertation will explore how authors and editors openly debated sensitive issues while reviewers and readers attempted to voice concerns in meetings and through letters about inaccuracies, weaknesses, omissions, and the continued concentration on Stalin’s role in the war. Yet despite the tremendous amount of time, emotions, and energy

lavished on this project, the end result was deeply flawed, and the nature of its flaws provide further insight into why and how the Soviet Union was unable to truly escape the inherent framework of the Stalinist system.

In looking at the state-endorsed narrative of the war under Khrushchev and the public's criticism – that the history produced was tainted by Stalin's cult – the traditional concept of the binary between Soviet state and society does not help to explain the politics of the historical discussions; however, this did not mean that state and society were synonymous. Agreement and disagreement over all issues were evident at all levels. The war temporarily rearranged the boundaries between elites, state institutions, and society, hence its history became the one history to which all Soviet citizens felt they could lay claim.

Debates over the war years showcase the interplay of both individual and collective memory, and of memory and history. While history relies on evidence based evaluation and analysis, dominated by trained historians, memory allows for a broader interpretation in order to equally serve the needs of artists, historians, literary writers and politicians, whose interpretations help define culture and society for the public. I found in keeping with Pierre Nora's work, that memory, serving as a connection to the past, yet a phenomenon of the present, is comparable to but different from history, a representation of the past that is written, discussed, and experienced in the present.³ History and memory are intertwined, but they are also distinct, unstable and in constant flux. Hence the contested nature of the war experience was a consistent phenomenon during the

³ Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 2-3.

writing of the official history, and certainly not limited to the Soviet Union. In analyzing the state-sponsored narrative of the Great Patriotic War, I was able to find that “unstable” and “partial” memory, partly a remnant from the war and immediate postwar period, which became contested territory not only for the editors and authors of the war’s history but also for veterans and civilians who wanted to add their voice to the collective.

Discussing “memory” means inevitably dealing with the concept of “collective memory.” For this study, “memory” or “individual memory” will refer to events that individuals can recall having lived through, while “collective memory” will reference the creation of a framework based on social interactions that individuals within a state can utilize to organize the history of their country.⁴ The contested nature of “collective memory” can become deceptive as it leaves the impression that a collective can “remember” in the same way an individual can. As memory and history are in a constant struggle, so is collective memory and history. Where history is complex, inclusive of multiple viewpoints and detached from obvious biases, collective memory relies on oversimplifications and familiar stereotypes. Although aspects of “collective memory” are regularly challenged, there is some agreement among historians with respect to who creates memories and how they impact everyday life or governmental policies and politics. Collective memory is a reflection of numerous variables and conditions that through a selective process become defining moments of significant historical events within a collective body.⁵

⁴ Jan-Wener Muller, “Introduction: the Power of Memory, the Memory of Power and the Power over Memory,” in *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*, ed. Jan-Wener Muller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3.

⁵ Other terms used to describe “collective memory” are “national memory,” “collective remembrance,” “public recollection,” “public memory,” “political memory,” “collective conceptions,” “mass memory,”

Looking at “collective” or “historical” memory allows for historians to gain a better understanding of where current popular concepts, ideas, and policies come from. In studying the influence of collective memory and who the intended audience is, as well as how those on the receiving end interpret, utilize or simply ignore the end result, we can view the transformation of individual and collective memories into national “memories” or “myths.” When these “myths” enter the public sphere they become both contested territory for all levels of society and a means to unite society around a greater idea or ideal. It is a broader goal of this dissertation to provide a case study for such a process.

An essential question that arises in the midst of these ideas and attitudes toward “memory” is whether individual memory and “collective” or “national” memory can be kept separate. As soon as individual memory joins the greater collective it no longer solely belongs to the individual but assumes a place in something that is not constructed based on distinctly personal past experiences and traumas but by present day needs – in many ways it retains a type of truth but also mixes in aspects of “myth,” which in this case need not mean something fictitious. On the contrary, the “myth” that is created around a collective war experience offers order and significance to the inherent chaos of war, a consumable narrative in its simplicity and relies on previously examined and

“social memory,” “popular history making” and “historical memory.” All are quite distinct from “individual memory” – an entire other topic is the fleeting nature of individual memory that has often proved malleable when being recalled. For discussions about memory and collective memory, see Jan-Werner Müller, ed., *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, *The Legacy of the Siege of Leningrad, 1941-1995: Myth, Memories, and Monuments* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Richard Ned Lebow, ed., *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Maria Ferretti, “Memory Disorder: Russia and Stalinism,” *Russian Politics and Law* 41, no. 6 (2003): 38-82; Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, eds., *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Aleksandr S. Seniaevskii and Elena S. Seniaevskaia, “The Historical Memory of Twentieth-Century Wars as an Arena of Ideological, Political, and Psychological Confrontation,” *Russian Studies in History* 49, no. 1 (2010): 53-91.

resolved historical issues.⁶ It could be argued that “collective memory” provides the framework onto which details from individual memories are inserted, establishing a simplistic narrative that conveys the “myth,” which constitutes a learned truth an authority aims to entrench within the public sphere. The political scientist Thomas D. Sherlock views the final product as “political myth” which creates “a narrative of past events that gives them special significance for the present and the future.”⁷ Similar to other states, the Soviet government remained continually dependent on maintaining a number of myths in order to legitimize its existence and actions. Thus collective memory, and the myths it supports, are provided to a ready population of readers and listeners.

Memories associated with the Second World War in the USSR had no parallel with the First World War, which was a fragmented rather than collective memory.⁸ There was some public commemoration of the latter among émigré circles – who were able to develop an alternative narrative due to their experiences outside the Soviet state – and within Soviet newspapers, which marked the first of August, when Germany declared

⁶ This type of constructed myth was what Maurice Halbwachs had in mind when he commented how “Society from time to time obligates people not just to reproduce in thought previous events of their lives, but also to touch them up, to shorten them, or to complete them so that, however convinced we are that our memories are exact, we give them a prestige that reality did not possess.” Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 51. For another way to look at “myth” in the context of memory and war, see Samuel Hynes, “Personal Narratives and Commemoration,” in Winter and Sivan, 207; Thomas D. Sherlock, *Historical Narratives in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia Destroying the Settled Past, Creating an Uncertain Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 5.

⁷ Sherlock, 3.

⁸ Karen Petrone, *The Great War in Russian Memory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 7.

war on Russia in 1914.⁹ But the Bolsheviks had no need to commemorate a war they consistently denounced as imperialist, rather it was the revolution that followed and disrupted the war that was celebrated.

However, the October Revolution and Civil War that followed were disjointed and disproportionately affected parts of the Russian Empire, lacking the collective war experience that the Second World War would offer. The October Revolution was concentrated in the cities, leaving much of the countryside without a unifying memory of the events that brought the Soviets to power. The Civil War that followed divided Russia and Russian families, whereas the Second World War united them on an unprecedented level. A unified collective memory of events, therefore, needed support from all levels of society to become an enduring legacy and rallying point for a nation and the Second World War provided that needed collective experience for the entire state, which has translated into an enduring legacy.

The Soviet Union's remembrance of the Second World War went through varied phases which will be outlined in detail later. Its contentious nature was hardly visible under Stalin and only entered the public sphere under Khrushchev. There was no denying that the Soviet Union achieved an unprecedented victory but the cost of its realization left deep scars on the state and its people. Acknowledging anything that could point to a weakness in the Soviet system was impossible for Stalin, thus the memory of the war could not be utilized as a "usable past" until Khrushchev's tenure.

⁹ Aaron J. Cohen, "Oh, That! Myth, Memory, and World War I in the Russian Emigration and the Soviet Union," *Slavic Review* 62, no. 1 (Spring, 2003): 71, 72-73.

George L. Mosse, in his study on the memory of the two world wars, comments how in the Soviet Union “war memorials honoring the fallen after the Second World War duplicated those built in the rest of Europe after the First World War. These were often mammoth memorials topped by heroic figures, guarded day and night by an honor guard of regular soldiers or youth.” But these memorial complexes were only built under Khrushchev. After Khrushchev began a de-Stalinization campaign, the accomplishments of the 1930s were no longer tenable for appropriation, only the war was left for the leadership to grasp onto. In both cases, the memorialization of war allowed for the ability to not only remember the past but also create conditions by which to understand the present and help legitimize leaders. What Mosse has highlighted as the “Myth of the War Experience,” initially cemented in the wake of the First World War, was not revived in Western Europe after the Second World War and only endured in the Soviet Union.¹⁰

As this dissertation will argue, for many Soviet citizens, the myth of the war experience became so all-encompassing that in some instances it was the *preferred version*, displacing or blending with personal recollections and factual documentation. The collective memory of the war was propagated by multiple outlets within the Soviet Union and, due to the shortage of war histories, the dominance of literary publications centered on the war, themselves often quasi-documentary productions that explored the allowed limits between fact and fiction, resulted in individual reminiscences becoming at times intertwined with literature, which began to infiltrate memories. In some ways the collective memory of the war in the Soviet Union became not so much reflective of a war

¹⁰ George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 213.

experience but rather a superimposed “universality of experience” where not only were significant events similarly recalled but their interpretations were practically pre-packaged and standardized for easier consumption.¹¹

The “Great Patriotic War,” including its historiography, has been a sorely neglected topic in Western scholarship due to restricted archival access; because the war became central to the Soviet Union’s identity, the state never relinquished full control over what could be written or even researched about it. Historians covering the war have benefited from the opening of former Soviet archives but their work continues to have a limited presence in academic studies.¹² Military historians and hobbyists dominate the genre, while social, cultural, and political studies dealing with the war remain in their infancy.¹³

¹¹ Olga Kucherenko, *Little Soldiers: How Soviet Children Went to War, 1941-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 16.

¹² For some recent publications, see Reina Pennington, *Wings, Women, & War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001); Kenneth Slepyan, *Stalin’s Guerrillas: Soviet Partisans in World War II* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006); Alexander Hill, *The War Behind the Eastern Front: The Soviet Partisan Movement in North-West Russia 1941-1944* (London: Frank Cass, 2005); Evan Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War 1941-1945* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); Roger Reese, *Why Stalin’s Soldiers Fought: The Red Army’s Military Effectiveness in World War II* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011); Jochen Hellbeck, *Stalingrad: The City that Defeated the Third Reich* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015).

¹³ Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Kirschenbaum, *The Legacy of the Siege of Leningrad, 1941-1995: Myth, Memories, and Monuments*; Catherine Merridale, *Ivan’s War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006); Rebecca Manley, *To the Tashkent Station: Evacuation and Survival in the Soviet Union at War* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2009); Kucherenko, *Little Soldiers: How Soviet Children Went to War, 1941-1945*; Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Karel C. Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger: Soviet Propaganda during World War II* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012); Julie K. deGraffenried, *Sacrificing Childhood: Children and the Soviet State in the Great Patriotic War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014); Frank Ellis, *The Damned and the Dead: The Eastern Front Through the Eyes of Soviet and Russian Novelists* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011).

One of the first publications on the historiography of the war was a 1968 article in *Voенно-istoricheskii zhurnal*, by A. Grylev.¹⁴ Two collections of articles followed in 1976 and 1980.¹⁵ Historians in the post-Soviet period have produced few publications on the war's historiography.¹⁶ More recently, Valentin Pron'ko, a retired colonel and candidate of historical studies, head editor of the ten volume *Velikaia Otechestvennaia voina sovetskogo naroda 1941-1945*, published a text that is almost wholly based on secondary source material looking at foreign and domestic concepts and ideas about the war's historiography.¹⁷ However, none of these studies utilized the rich archival collection associated with the publication of the first official history of the Great Patriotic War. Similarly, Russian studies on the memory of the war are also limited.¹⁸

¹⁴ A. Grylev, "Sovetskaia voennaia istoriografiia v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny I poslevoennyi period," *Voенно-istoricheskii zhurnal* No. 1 (1968): 90-100.

¹⁵ *Istoriografiia sovetskogo tyla perioda Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny: Sbornik statei* (Moscow: Institute of History SSSR, 1976); *Istoriografiia Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny. Sbornik statei* (Moscow: Nauka 1980).

¹⁶ This includes two chapters in an edited volume, on History and Stalinism, published in 1991. The editor, Andrei Mertsalov, a veteran of the Second World War and doctor of historical studies, previously wrote two volumes on the western historiography of the Second World War. Vasilii Kulish, who previously authored a book on the history of the Second Front, and Nikolai Pavlenko, a military historian and head editor of *Voенно-istoricheskii zhurnal*, wrote the two chapters within Mertsalov's volume. Vasilii Mikhailovich Kulish, "O nekotorykh, aktual'nykh problemakh istoriografii Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny," in *Istoriia i Stalinism*, ed. A. N. Mertsalov (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Politicheskoi Literatury, 1991); Nikolai Grigorevich Pavlenko, "Staliniskie Kontseptsii Voенnoi Istorii," in *Istoriia i Stalinism*, ed. A. N. Mertsalov (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Politicheskoi Literatury, 1991).

¹⁷ V. A. Pron'ko, *Srazheniia istorikov na frontakh Vtoroi Mirovoi i Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voin (1939-1945)* (Moscow: ITK 'Dashkov i K', 2016).

¹⁸ Mikhail Gabovich, ed., *Pamiat' o Voine 60 Let Spustia: Rossiia, Germaniia, Evropa* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2005); Iu. A. Petrov, *Velikaia Otechestvennaia – izvestnaia i neizvestnaia: istoricheskaia pamiat' i sovremennost'* (Moscow: Institut Rossiiskoi istorii RAN, 2015). The latter is based on a 2015 conference.

Existing western studies of the historiography of the war and the cult created around it limit their discussions to then available newspapers, journals and interviews.¹⁹ A few historians have explored the Thaw by analyzing responses, addressed to authors and publishers, from readers of literary works about the war but have not looked at the Thaw's impact on official publications.²⁰ Jochen Hellbeck recently analyzed the commission created to document the history of the "Great Patriotic War" during the war, and although some of its members then participated in crafting the war's official history under Khrushchev, the documentation and interviews he examined were never published but relegated to the archives and were not commented on by the public. Hellbeck's work utilized the commission's interviews with Stalingrad veterans to weave a mosaic of the Soviet war effort through the recollections of soldiers and officers, while my work looks at the inner dialog of the commission members themselves.²¹ Conversely, whereas Amir Weiner looked at how Soviet citizens attempted to make sense of the war and occupation and how veterans tried to find their place in Soviet society in the western borderlands, he did not discuss the creation of an official history of the war or their reactions to it.²² To date, I am the first scholar who has examined the voluminous records of the commission housed in the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI).

¹⁹ Matthew P. Gallagher, *The Soviet History of World War II: Myths, Memories, and Realities* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1976); Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and The Dead: The Rise and Fall of the cult of World War II in Russia* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

²⁰ Denis Kozlov, *The Readers of Novyi Mir: Coming to Terms with the Stalinist Past* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Polly Jones, "Between Post-Stalinist Legitimacy and Stalin's Authority: Memories of 1941 from Late Socialism to the Post-Soviet Era," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 54:3/4 (Sep-Dec 2012): 357-376; Polly Jones, *Myth, Memory, Trauma: Rethinking the Stalinist Past in the Soviet Union, 1953-70* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

²¹ Hellbeck, *Stalingrad: The City that Defeated the Third Reich*.

²² Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution*.

The majority of the original archival research for this dissertation is based on the archival collection of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism (1931-1991) at RGASPI. Four repositories contain materials dealing with the History of the Great Patriotic War, dating from 1941. They include stenographic records of commission meetings, reviews and commentary on submitted manuscripts, as well as letters received from the public responding to the eventual publication of the multi-volume history.²³ In researching this topic, I looked through dozens of folders, including records of meetings and hundreds of letters from readers and solicited reviewers, dating mainly from 1957-1966, a periodization that sheds light on the changeover from the Khrushchev administration into Leonid Brezhnev's early time in power. There was one visible gap in the records in that every volume published had a specific folder dedicated to reader letters that were received except the second volume, which dealt with the German invasion of the Soviet Union through the Soviet counteroffensive outside Stalingrad in November 1942.²⁴

The production of an official history under Khrushchev was influenced by professional historians, who themselves have had a turbulent history with the Soviet state. Historians in the Soviet Union have always had to walk a thin line between history and myth/patriotic propaganda. Control over Soviet historians by the government can be traced to Vladimir Lenin. Aleksandr Nekrich, a historian and Soviet dissident, commented in his 1991 memoirs that "History, like all other fields of study in the USSR,

²³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22-25, 28. This is the Fond of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism associated with the Central Commission of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The repositories themselves (22-25, 28) were under the heading of "Section [on the] History of the Great Patriotic War." Letters from readers are found in opis 22, mainly in folders 309, 585, 586, 587, 796, and 916, totaling over fifteen hundred pages.

²⁴ The archivist could not tell me why this gap existed, but responses to the second volume proved so all-encompassing that they were evident throughout numerous other folders and help to show the continued interest of the war's initial period for both commission members and readers.

is the preserve of the Communist party and the state. The state, virtually the only employer in the country, subsidizes such study. Therefore, every scholar is, at the same time, a state official: he must constantly keep this in mind and construct his work in such a way as to render useful service to the state.”²⁵ Under Stalin, historians flattered and prostrated themselves before the state. Scholarship for historians was determined by the party line, which they needed to elaborate and reinforce, rather than create, let alone challenge.

A characteristic dilemma that soon appeared was that when previously tightened controls over historical publications were loosened, studies that did not adhere to the status quo were automatically labelled as “revisionist” and “unorthodox” due to a previous lack of alternative discussions among sensitive topics. This affected party history as much as it did other aspects of Soviet historical scholarship.²⁶ In looking at the transition of the war’s narrative from Stalin to Khrushchev, this dissertation employs Alexei Yurchak’s premise that literature after Stalin’s death was only allowed to be interpreted either as true or false with no middle ground for an original debate that would dare to move beyond the confines of previous discussions. Yurchak argues that Stalin existed outside his own “ideological rule” while acting as a “master” manipulator of “ideological discourse[s]” the origins of which could never be questioned. From his external position Stalin controlled the production of a “widely circulating metadiscourse” where “linguistic formulations” and texts, among other productions, were evaluated throughout the public sphere based on Marxist-Leninist ideals and suggestions could be

²⁵ Aleksandr M. Nekrich, *Forsake Fear: Memoirs of an Historian* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1991), 263.

²⁶ Nancy Whittier Heer, *Politics and History in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), vii.

made for their improvement. After Stalin's death the position of outside "master," who could evaluate or interpret knowledge, was left vacant and the country was left in a cycle of repetition of previous ideas made by Stalin or Lenin to support positions and decisions undertaken by the new leadership.²⁷ Examining the arguments among commission members shows that there were no real debates when it came to fundamental ideas about the war or the foundations of the Soviet system. When it came to the war's history, inadequacies were mentioned repeatedly but no decisions were undertaken that deviated from previously acknowledged resolutions. Contested ideas were addressed by leaning on previous statements made by Stalin and, in some instances, Lenin.

Yurchak relies on John Austin's analysis of "performatives" to distinguish Soviet society of the Stalin period from the "late socialism" that came after. While Stalin lived, aside from holding the "master" position, he utilized "performative utterances" or "performatives," which were allowed to alter "social reality" instead of simply describing it. His speeches *did something*, dictating order into Soviet society, no matter its contradictory nature. After his death performative speech was replaced by "constative," which simply stated things. Instead of altering "social reality" constative speech described it. Thus, without Stalin the best the Party and Komsomol could do was participate in "ritualized acts and texts" whereby they reproduced "social norms, positions, relations and institutions." As Yurchak explains, "It became increasingly more important to participate in the reproduction of the *form* of these ritualized acts [meetings, parades, elections, etc.] of authoritative discourse than to engage with their constative

²⁷ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 10, 13-14, 41, 43.

meanings.” In the case of historians and literary personalities, a possible outlier were those who refused to participate in the reproduction of these rituals and “wrote for the drawer,” awaiting a time when ideas that went against the status quo would be welcomed. Others participated in a discourse that “experienced progressive normalization” as texts went through constant edits that whittled away any type of identity and became practically inseparable from previous writings.²⁸

An additional difficulty for historians was the constantly changing political environment that surrounded them. It was not out of the ordinary for a publication to be issued, recalled, amended, and reissued with a revised list of authors or editors, reflecting how the “historical identity” of enemies of the people were excised from historical memory.²⁹ Since a regular feature of the Stalinist period was the continuous rewriting of history to suit immediate political needs, the population’s exposure to this process meant, in part, that no figure, no matter their previously perceived importance, was safe from the cutting board of Soviet history. This process continued in the post-Stalin period as the former Soviet leader himself became a contested territory and, after his removal from office, Khrushchev also began to disappear from the pages of previous histories.

The rewriting of history to suit immediate political and Party needs was not the only holdover from the Stalinist system under Khrushchev. Letter writing continued to be viewed as an important tool in the hands of the population. Consequently, this dissertation’s reliance and emphasis on letters received from the public reflects the

²⁸ Ibid., 19, 25, 26, 47.

²⁹ Elaine McClarnand MacKinnon, “Writing History for Stalin: Isaak Izrailevich Mints and the Istoriiia grazhdanskoi voiny,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6, no. 1 (2005): 21.

seriousness with which state representatives took letter writing. Historians, as representatives of the state, participated in the letter writing process that was a regular feature of life in the Soviet Union. Sheila Fitzpatrick analyzed letter writing in the Soviet Union during the 1930s and commented that the “two-way communication” that was expected by authors of letters meant their complaints, praise, and denunciations needed to be addressed and were treated seriously by the recipient, whether individual or organization.³⁰ It was an official and unofficial way to communicate discontent or preference by circumventing well-established bureaucratic channels. Writing letters was encouraged by the system, which considered them a reinforcement of the link between the Party and population and viewed the letters as “input from below” and representative of the democratic process at work in the Soviet state with direct participation of the people. Those who submitted their thoughts to publications were “usually applauded.”³¹

Letter writers became adept at what Stephen Kotkin labeled “speaking Bolshevik,” which identified the “writer as an active participant of the system.” Soviet citizens were able to absorb state propaganda and utilized “Soviet idols, icons and legends” when addressing state representatives or revealing weaknesses and failures of official policies. They utilized the tools the government had created for and given to them in order to criticize.³² While most letters were signed some were left anonymous,

³⁰ Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Suplicants and Citizens: Public Letter-Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s,” *Slavic Review* 55, no. 1 (Spring, 1996): 102.

³¹ Juliane Fürst, “In Search of Soviet Salvation: Young People Write to the Stalinist Authorities,” *Contemporary European History* 15, no. 3 (2006): 327–328; Kozlov, 17; Stephen White, “Political Communications in the USSR: Letters to Party, State and Press,” *Political Studies* XXXI (1983): 45.

³² Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 198-238. Fürst contends that “Communist Party leadership considered the letters of Soviet people to be of such explosive significance that they had them filed in the secret part of their archives,

with the latter usually containing accusations that portrayed the regime or authorities in a poor light. According to Fitzpatrick, citizens who wrote letters to officials offered their opinions and criticisms along with suggestions that they claimed represented the public's interest; their right to be heard was acknowledged by state representatives.³³

In systematically going through the letters included in the archival collection I utilized, I concentrated on those that dealt with issues that were consistently debated, forming a contested territory, for authors, editors, and readers.³⁴ The most significant, as will become apparent, dealt with feedback on the second volume, which dealt with the invasion of the Soviet Union and Germany's advance on Stalingrad in 1942, and the interpretations and attacks against the presence of Stalin's Cult of Personality. Many of those who wrote to the editors and various media outlets about the war's official history mentioned their wartime experiences and service. While often offering their gratitude for the work put into the official history of the war, they simultaneously pointed out numerous deficiencies and weaknesses, including examples from their own time at the front, hoping that their individual memories of the wartime experience could alter the collective memory of the war and official history making it that much more

restricting access to the tightest of circles. Here they were preserved side by side with all the other embarrassing moments of Soviet life – oppositional activity, suicides, terrible accidents, mass poisonings and major fraud.” Fürst, 327–328.

³³ Fitzpatrick, 104-105.

³⁴ An aspect of the war that was readily accepted and featured no debate, as one example, was that Germany controlled all of Europe and her industries, which it utilized to wage war on the Soviet Union. As will become evident, this holdover of the Stalinist period added to the exceptional nature of the Soviet war effort and omitted the drain on German resources and manpower that the occupation of so many territories had on the Third Reich. Additionally, there were no discussions about the validity of the Soviet invasion and occupation of Eastern Poland or the incorporation of the Baltics into the Soviet Union.

representative of the war's "true" nature. In other words, they were trying to portray themselves as reasonable, sympathetic, and helpful critics.

This dissertation follows a chronological order starting with the beginning of the war through Khrushchev's time in power. The first chapter discusses the documentation of the war's narrative in the wake of the German invasion through the immediate postwar period until Stalin's death. The second chapter analyzes how the post-Stalin period, including Khrushchev's speech at the 20th Party Congress, allowed for the creation of an official multi-volume history of the war. The next four chapters discuss the initial stages of the official history's creation and document the reviews, feedback and letters received that showcase the war's importance and its contested nature throughout all levels of society.

Concentrating on newspaper coverage, letters from readers, and supported by a foundation of previous studies on wartime reporting and propaganda, the first chapter traces major changes that the narrative of the Great Patriotic War underwent during the war and in the immediate postwar period. Modern war narratives in general are regularly altered as journalists and editors adhere to the rules of wartime military censorship. The chapter explores how the system that created that narrative operated and discusses some of the myths that were developed to explain defeats suffered and eventual victories achieved by the Red Army, many of which are still prominent today. Additionally, mention is made of how wartime heroism among the rank-and-file in the Red Army was defined by the state and propagated by the press. While Stalin and various Soviet organizations attempted to control what was said about the war, the raw, emotionally laden prose offered by writers resonated with much of the population even if they often

offered cliché, exaggerated reports of selfless courage from the frontlines. These reports were a mixture of art and reality and have continued to influence the war's history, as the wall separating fact from fiction was often broken down. The narrative produced by the end of the war – before Stalin's cult of personality could fully dominate its history and historiography – was formed from a combination of efforts on the part of Stalin and his censors, the editors and correspondents of leading newspapers, and the reading public itself. All three “authors” continually influenced each other while developing a narrative of the war's progress which became heavily entrenched in the public's memory – both those who went through the war and those who were born after. The ability to influence the war's narrative by information producers, censors and consumers means a flexibility was evident even under Stalin that once more challenges the familiar simplistic binary associated with the Soviet system – the production and propagation of information was not a solely top-down affair.

The atmosphere surrounding the war's history in the postwar period until Stalin's death demonstrates what limits were placed on Soviet historians and participants of the Second World War in regards to what could be said about the war. By 1947 Stalin dominated the war's narrative, historical and literary publications that did not follow the party line – created and enforced by a few select texts – were heavily criticized in the public sphere. This resulted in a weakening of any possibility for the Soviet armed forces to learn from their mistakes and prepare for future conflicts. Meanwhile, Stalin was able to enrich his cult of personality with all the credit for the victories achieved by the Red Army during the war. Many of these ideas meshed with those propagated during the war, both internally and via the mass media, and only minor instances of disagreement could

be found among the public. Although the Stalinist version of the war was denounced by Khrushchev in 1956, aspects the Stalinist postwar narrative, intertwined with the history of the war crafted during the war itself, continued to impact the country's understanding of the war's course.

The second chapter looks at Khrushchev's succession struggle and documents the initial changes that began to take place after Stalin's death through Khrushchev's secret speech and the decision of the Central Committee to publish a multi-volume history of the Great Patriotic War. Chapters three through six encompass the majority of the original archival research that was done for this dissertation. The third chapter examines the decision to publish an up-to-date history of the war and examines the creation of the commission put in charge of the publication, including the background of some of its more vocal members. Analyzing the numerous meetings of the editorial staff, historians, and various experts and party representatives, who debated numerous issues when it came to the history of the war, the chapter offers a rare glimpse into the contested memory of the war and how in the post-Stalin period commission members attempted to appease the population while simultaneously being the mouthpiece of the party.

The fourth and fifth chapters discuss the reactions to the publication of the six-volume history, both official reviews and unofficial comments and criticisms. While many readers greeted the publication as a welcome relief to the numerous translated western volumes available that many considered "falsified," the letters received by various public outlets speak to the contested nature associated with the memory of the war. What becomes evident is that many readers were caught up in familiar themes and discourses but simultaneously were also attempting to utilize the only tools at their

disposal to attack the familiar in order to reach a point where Stalin's cult was no longer able to dictate how they should act, react, feel and think.

The final chapter focuses on select meetings in 1963 and 1964 that discussed the continued impact of Stalin's cult on the war's history. By this point in time, Khrushchev's position within both the Soviet state and the war's history was becoming untenable. Stalin's Cult of Personality was the main topic of concentration as authors and editors attempted to analyze his presence in the war's history and what could be done to reduce it in future editions. Simultaneously, however, there were calls for taking a more "objective" approach to Stalin and his actions while Khrushchev's role was slowly reduced, signifying a turn in the Soviet historiography of the war that would continue under Brezhnev and eventually transform into the Cult of the Great Patriotic War.

CHAPTER 1

CRAFTING THE WAR'S INITIAL NARRATIVE IN THE WAR AND POSTWAR PERIOD UNDER STALIN

Historian Catherine Merridale in *Ivan's War* argued that “Red Army troops were presented, effectively, with two wars simultaneously. The first, the one that they alone could know, was the war of the battlefield, the screaming war of shells and smoke, the shameful war of terror and retreat. But the other, whose shape was crafted by writers, was a war that propaganda created.”¹ This binary, which draws on the traditional dichotomy through which the relationship between the Soviet masses and state have been viewed by scholars, does not fully explain the situation that developed during the war. In numerous instances the language and rhetoric used by Stalin, newspaper correspondents and readers came to resemble each other throughout the war and left a lasting memory preference that many turned to when recalling the war period. This raises the question of to what extent each influenced the others and whether the discourse created during the course of the Great Patriotic War was a combination of efforts from information producers and consumers as well as censors, all of whom initially occupied a partly flexible territory thanks to the limited openness created by the German invasion.

The main purpose of this chapter is to understand how the system that created the war's narrative operated, and to showcase some of the myths that were developed around the reasons for the Red Army's early defeats. I raise the question of how much influence journalists and writers at the forefront of reporting on the progress of the war had on the creation of its history and memory. To help answer that question, this chapter draws on

¹ Merridale, *Ivan's War*, 109.

letters from previously published collections and some unpublished letters, written by civilians and veterans, and archival sources to strengthen and reinforce my central arguments about the creation of the war's narrative.²

In conjunction with dismantling the traditional dichotomy of state vs. society, this chapter reinforces but also creates a space for inquiry into the concept of “speaking Bolshevik,” where Soviet citizens were involved in a system that provided them with tools which they could in turn utilize to criticize the Soviet state.³ It will become evident that the textual language available to state representatives, correspondents and the reading public often mirrored each other but the question of who wielded the greater influence or if it was shared rather than directed is open-ended. The analysis offered here creates a foundation for later chapters that will deal with how much of that narrative remained ingrained in both literature and people's minds, especially during Nikita Khrushchev's “Thaw.”

It has been well established that the German invasion of the Soviet Union created an opening within Soviet society, literally and metaphorically. Although the publications that appeared were hardly free of censorship, this period was consistently viewed as defined by a “freedom” that many fondly recalled years after the war. The topic of censorship has received scant attention, and even less when it comes to the war period itself. A recent article mentioned that to date there are no publications in Soviet

² Benedikt Sarnov, *Stalin i Pisateli, kniga Pervaia* (Moscow: EKSMO, 2010); Benedikt Sarnov, *Stalin i Pisateli, kniga chetvertaia* (Moscow: EKSMO, 2011); I. I. Anisimov, ed., *Sovetskie Pisateli Na Frontakh Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny, kniga pervaia* (Moscow: ‘Nauka’, 1966); B. Ia. Frezinskii, ed., *Pochta Ili Erenburga: Ia slyshu vse...1916-1967* (Moscow: AGRAF, 2006).

³ Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 198-238.

historiography “concerning actual censorship during the Great Patriotic War.”⁴ The few scholarly works that exist concentrate on literature rather than newspapers and omit any systematic analysis of the day-to-day inner-workings of state censors and archival document collections only tangentially touch on the war.⁵

Even though there are examples of censors at work, including Stalin personally, there have been no in-depth studies to fully ascertain to what degree articles appearing in less ideologically important newspapers during the war were scrutinized or which organization and personality had the final say about each and every publication.⁶ During the war there were hundreds of full-time and thousands of part-time censors – including all newspaper editors – and secret reports were periodically created (every 10 days, month, and half-a-year) about censored and corrected material from newspapers and journals.⁷ Newspaper censorship was under the control of the Main Directorate of Literature and Presses (Glavlit). This directorate, in conjunction with the Main Political Administration of the Army (GlavPUR), headed by Aleksandr Shcherbakov, as well as

⁴ E. M. Petrovicheva, I. S. Triakhov, “Tsenzura v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny 1941-1945 gg. (po materialam Vladimirskogo kraia),” *Vestnik LGU imeni A. S. Pushkina* 1, no.4 (2015): 50.

⁵ For instance, see Herman Ermolaev, *Censorship in Soviet Literature, 1917-1991* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC., 1997); L. V. Maksimenkov, ed., *Bol'shaia Tsenzura. Pisateli i zhurnalisty v Strane Sovetov 1917-1956* (Moscow, 2005); D. L. Babichenko, *Pisateli i tsenzory. Sovetskaia literature 1940-x godov pod politicheskim kontrolem TsK* (Moscow: Rossiia Molodaia, 1994); G. V. Kostyrchenko, “Sovetskaia tsenzura v 1941- 1952 godakh,” *Voprosy istorii*, nos. 11-12 (1996): 87-94; A. V. Blium, *Sovetskaia tsenzura v epokhu total'nogo terrora. 1929 - 1953* (St. Petersburg, 2000).

⁶ For a more information on Soviet censors during the war, see Berkhoff, 30-34. The GlavLit archival collection (1922-1991) can be found in GARF, f. R-9425, consisting of 9 repositories and 7,905 folders.

⁷ As an example of the control exercised by censors, from 1 July 1941 through 1 November 1944, of 1,210,671 pieces of written text (excluding army and fleet publications), 44,331 were not published due to military secrecy concerns and 10,790 due to political and ideological reasons. Kostyrchenko, 89, 90, 91, 92; A. Ia. Livshin and I. B. Orlov, comps., *Sovetskaia propaganda v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny: “Kommunikatsiia ubezhdeniia” i mobilizatsionnye mekhanizmy* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2007), 254-255.

Stalin and other central organizations, made decisions about what should be publicized as the war's narrative and heroic imagery among the Red Army's soldiers was shaped and formed.⁸ Newspapers with the greatest ideological importance received the most scrutiny and attention. In his study of the Stalin Cult, Jan Plamper posits that the galleys of any articles in a central newspaper like *Pravda* were routinely sent to Stalin's secretariat for approval.⁹

This chapter's initial sections discuss Stalin's role in the media along with the importance of newspapers, correspondents and the propaganda that was utilized to define the Soviet war experience. These are followed by an examination of how the war's initial narrative, including the "cult of heroes," was created in 1941 and 1942, followed by a section on "internal language" which offers an examination of select military studies – produced during the war – to measure whether and to what extent the discourse that was presented to the public in newspapers mirrored internal dialogs within the military and academic community. Further sections look at the final developments within the war's narrative from 1943-1945. The final parts of the chapter examine how the memory of the war was treated in the immediate postwar period and what, if any, opposition was visible from the public.

By examining newspaper articles I analyze the war's initial period and the various threads developed to explain its course. As a result, the reader will encounter numerous references to the more prolific writers, such as Vasilii Grossman, Konstantin Simonov,

⁸ Ermolaev, 3. According to Roger Reese, GlavPUR regularly disregarded the truth and manipulated information so as to create a ready framework for the rest of the country to emulate. Reese, 191.

⁹ Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 33.

Ilya Ehrenburg and Alexander Werth. Werth, a British correspondent originally born in Russia, offers a look at the war that is a cross between an “insider” and an “outsider.” Grossman began his writing career in the late 1920s and worked as a correspondent for *Krasnaia zvezda* throughout the war, establishing him as a “household name” throughout the Soviet Union during the war.¹⁰ Simonov also became famous thanks to the war and his widely popular poem “Wait for Me.”¹¹ Ehrenburg, who was already well-known for his reports during the First World War from the Western Front, and his coverage of the Spanish Civil War, features in much of the material presented in the coverage of the war. He was one of the most popular authors in the USSR, writing hundreds of articles for domestic newspapers and the foreign press.¹² He also received a constant stream of letters from veterans and civilians during the war and after. Ehrenburg represents one of the central foundations of this chapter in that he helped define the war’s narrative and, in part through orders from above and in conversation with readers themselves, helped craft an initial narrative of the war’s history that has continued to influence our views. Thus, one of the most fruitful sources proved to be his articles, letters and memoirs, which have helped to enrich and enliven much of the other material presented in this chapter.¹³

¹⁰ Grossman’s publications appeared throughout the 1930s and by the start of the 1940s he was an established writer. He retreated with the Red Army in 1941, covered the Battle of Stalingrad, and the ensuing westward march, including the liberation of ghettos and concentration camps, ending the war in Berlin in 1945. Frank Ellis, *Vasily Grossman: The Genesis and Evolution of a Russian Heretic* (Providence: Berg, 1994), 2-6.

¹¹ Simonov wrote numerous articles but his position as a Stalinist was only renounced in the post-Stalin period when he directed blame at Stalin and his actions in the 1930s for the disastrous beginning of the war. Jones, *Myth, Memory, Trauma*, 175; Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private life in Stalin’s Russia* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 615-616.

¹² Louise McReynolds, “Dateline Stalingrad: Newspaper Correspondents at the Front,” in *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia*, ed. Richard Stites (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 34.

¹³ Ilya Ehrenburg, *The Tempering of Russia*, trans. Alexander Kaun (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944); Ilya Ehrenburg, *The War 1941-1945 Volume V of Men, Years – Life*, trans. Tatiana Shebunina and Yvonne

Replacing Stalin in the Media

Following the German invasion, Stalin's presence in the media was altered. The triumphs and successes of the 1930s, built on the shoulders of Lenin and the Revolution, were put in jeopardy. As it would inevitably transform Soviet society, so the war would modify the Stalin Cult in its wake as well. With news of initial defeats suffered by the Red Army a situation arose where the leader's name and image were increasingly marginalized for fear of defeat being identified with his leadership.¹⁴ Ehrenburg, looking through newspapers from July through November 1941, wrote in his 1960s memoirs how "Stalin's name was hardly ever mentioned. For the first time in many years there were neither portraits of him nor rapturous epithets..."¹⁵

As journalists were accustomed to having Stalin in the center of their reporting, it would have been out of the norm for him to wholly disappear. The truth of the first days of the war, although a disaster on the frontlines, could still be hidden from the majority of the population while using the familiarity of Stalin's image as a rallying cry for the defense of the state. Soviet journalists also began appealing to Russian patriotism as they bypassed Marxist-Leninist rhetoric and linked this theme to Stalin's name.¹⁶

Kapp (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1964); Ilya Ehrenburg and Konstantin Simonov, *In One Newspaper: A Chronicle of Unforgettable Years* (New York: Sphinx Press, 1985).

¹⁴ John Barber, "The Image of Stalin in Soviet Propaganda and Public Opinion during World War 2," in *World War 2 and the Soviet People*, eds. John Garrard and Carol Garrard (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 38, 40-41; Plamper, 48, 52-53.

¹⁵ Ehrenburg, *The War 1941-1945*, 15.

¹⁶ Appeals to "patriotism" were already evident in the 1930s. See David Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination, and Terror Under Stalin, 1927-1941* (Stanford: Yale University Press, 2011).

The war's official title came from a *Pravda* article on 23 June by Emel'ian Iaroslavskii, a revolutionary, journalist and historian, entitled "The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet People." The "Patriotic War of 1812" described the Napoleonic invasion of Russia, consequently the new title associated well known tales of Russian resilience, courage, and eventual triumph to the current war. In addition to the exceptionalism that the title "Great Patriotic War" imbued the Soviet war effort with, another possibility for why the war was "rebranded" in such a way could be to separate it from the war's previous events, to which the Soviet Union was not party, which described it as a conflict unleashed by two sides of the same capitalist coin (Britain and France – imperialists, and Germany and Italy – fascists).¹⁷

As attention shifted away from the Soviet leader, a lack of references to Stalin's words in the press was replaced by popular reporters such as Ehrenburg and Simonov. With Stalin failing to dictate all aspects of society and becoming a closed off figure, in order to deflect present and future blame, new narratives were allowed a place in the spotlight, which often resulted in more open conversations. Thus, argues Jeffrey Brooks, "the war had spawned a plurality of intertwined narratives and a range of perspectives. The press abandoned its single-minded effort to center all Soviet identity on Stalin."¹⁸

Between August and October, as the situation deteriorated further at the front, Stalin's image slowly faded from reports. It was only with Stalin's decision to remain in

¹⁷ Em. Iaroslavskii, "Velikaia otechestvennaia voina sovetskogo naroda," *Pravda*, June 23, 1941, 4; Mikhail Tsypkin, "The Soviet Military Culture and the Legacy of the Second World War," in *Histories of the Aftermath: The Legacies of the Second World War in Europe*, eds. Frank Biess and Robert G. Moeller (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 267.

¹⁸ Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin!: Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 160.

Moscow, while government institutions and party personnel were in the midst of evacuation, and his speech on the anniversary of the October Revolution in early November, that Stalin's image was published in *Pravda* on 7 November for the first time in many weeks. His cult was soon reinvented with the added qualities of a victorious general. As the Germans came to the end of Operation *Typhoon* before the gates of Moscow, Stalin's cult was once more evident in the press.¹⁹

Reactions to Stalin's role, and that of authorities in general, varied, ranging from silence and absolution to a type of "spontaneous de-Stalinization," to use historian Mikhail Gefter's words.²⁰ Boris Gorbachevsky, a veteran, writing in 2011 noted that "in those first tragic days of the war, I never heard a single reproach directed at the authorities." Viktor Nekrasov, a journalist and author of one of the most famous war novels, admitted in 1990: "We forgave Stalin everything, collectivization, 1937, his revenge on his comrades...And we, lads from intelligentsia families, became soldiers and believed the whole myth with a clear conscience."²¹ Ehrenburg, however, detected a sense of confusion and even hostility towards the leader and his advisors as a result of the defeats suffered in the war's first months. In October 1941, the writer met a colleague in Kuibyshev who claimed "that Stalin had been warned over and over again of the impending attack, that he knew nothing of how the country lived and that he was being misled." A general, in the summer of 1942, asked Ehrenburg whether he thought if "Stalin has the slightest idea what's going on?" and answered his own question: "I

¹⁹ Barber, 42, 43.

²⁰ Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead*, 65.

²¹ Boris Gorbachevskii, *Pobeda vopreki Stalinu: Frontovik protiv stalinistov* (Moscow: Iauza Eksmo, 2011), 41; Viktor Nekrasov, "Tragediia moego pokoleniia," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, September 12, 1990, 15.

believe he doesn't know a thing, and they misled him, told him we were well prepared.” Such beliefs might have been a necessary precondition for the creation and propagation of Stalin's cult.²²

In part, the partial and unannounced “de-Stalinization” that some saw taking place during the war, whether real or imagined, gave hope to many citizens that a change for the better awaited them as soon as the war was over. Ehrenburg recalled how many soldiers thought the postwar period “would be better, sounder, more just.”²³ Historian Peter Kenez called the war period “a small oasis of freedom” and David Shneer echoed this idea in his study of Jewish Soviet photographers during the war period, who in many ways were restricted in the same way that journalists were. With certain cultural regulations relaxed during the war “artists, photographers, filmmakers, and others had more license.” They might have been told *what* subjects to concentrate on but they were given some latitude in deciding *how* to portray them.²⁴ The enemy the Soviet Union faced was no longer hiding in secret among neighbors, co-workers, friends, and relatives. It was an existential threat, an external enemy that was visible and identifiable.

The hope and freedom many associated with the war years endured into the postwar period and made for a sense of failure when the expected changes never

²² Ehrenburg, *The War 1941-1945*, 18, 85; Barber, 47. See also Mary M. Leder, *My Life in Stalinist Russia: An American Woman Looks Back*, ed. Laurie Bernstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 133; Dominic Lieven, *The End of Tsarist Russia: WWI & The Road to Revolution* (New York: Viking, 2015), 97.

²³ *Ibid.*, 61. See also Kirschenbaum, *The Legacy of the Siege of Leningrad, 1941-1995*, 106-107; Boris Gorbachevsky, *Generalissimo Stalin: The Myth of Stalin as a Great Military Strategist* (Solihull: Helion, 2014), 117, 251.

²⁴ Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society from the Revolution to the Death of Stalin* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 182; David Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 91.

materialized. Ehrenburg recalled how he “firmly believed that after victory everything would suddenly change.” In retrospect he could only “confess” his “naivety and blindness.” Looking over the letters he received, it was clear to Ehrenburg that “at the time everybody expected that once victory had been won people would know real happiness.” One frontline soldier, writing to his parents in April 1942, claimed within a year of the war’s conclusion “we will have wonderful life” full of “abundance” with “foreign goods from America” while the Germans would rebuild everything they destroyed.²⁵

Journalists, Newspapers, and Propaganda

Newspapers became the “primary literary medium of wartime.” Correspondents themselves “waited for each communique with bated breath.”²⁶ While the Stalin cult was already entrenched in the Soviet media and in many citizens’ minds, the myths and legends that would soon permeate the histories and recollections of the Great Patriotic War were just becoming established during the first days of the war as heroic feats performed by soldiers at the front were reconfigured into symbolic, stylized productions.

Since the creation of the Soviet Union, there were rumors of war breaking out with references to the supposed “cordon sanitaire” built around the Soviet Union.²⁷ For

²⁵ Ehrenburg, *The War 1941-1945*, 124; Ilia Al'tman, Leonid Terushkin, and Irina Brodskaiia, eds., *Sokhrani Moi Pisma...: Sbornik Pisem Evreev Perioda Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny* (Moscow: “MIK”, 2010), 137.

²⁶ Anna Krylova, “‘Healers of Wounded Souls’: The Crisis of private Life in Soviet Literature, 1944-1946,” *The Journal of Modern History* 73, no. 2 (June 2001): 313-314; Ehrenburg, *The War 1941-1945*, 10.

²⁷ See Raymond W. Leonard, *Secret Soldiers of the Revolution: Soviet Military Intelligence, 1918-1933* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999).

Stalin, the end of the Civil War did not mean an end to hostilities. Until the beginning of the Second World War he was convinced the state was under threat from a coalition of capitalist powers. These fears were played out within the Soviet press during a number of “War Scares.”²⁸ As a result, the idea of war was not new for the population, but the surprise of an unannounced invasion became entrenched in the collective memory of the war and began to reinforce in Soviet minds the existence of an external threat.

The war provided a space where published reports were a result of the conflated needs of the population and government – simplistic wartime accounts and heroic tales that downplayed and concealed the administration’s prewar miscalculations while playing up the population’s penchant for self-sacrifice based on love for the motherland. Consequently, one of the most enduring aspects of the Great Patriotic War for the Soviet Union was the creation of what came to be the Cult of Heroes (or the Cult of Martyrs).²⁹

Wartime correspondents in general, since they first appeared on the scene in the mid-nineteenth century during the Crimean War, have been known to fudge facts, make up stories, and suffer from censorship – both from the military and their own conscience.³⁰ In that respect Soviet wartime accounts were in many ways the norm, the

²⁸ Fears of a “Capitalist Encirclement” were also used “to justify before public opinion the extraordinary demands of state policy,” leading to collectivization and industrialization, and eventually the Great Terror of the late 1930s. James Harris, “Encircled By Enemies: Stalin’s Perceptions of the Capitalist World, 1918-1941,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 30, no. 3 (2007): 514, 515, 531.

²⁹ Elena Seniavskaia argues that the myths created around various men and women were in part a spontaneous reaction from below and partly an organized, manufactured attempt from above by representatives of the state. Elena Seniavskaia, “Heroic Symbols: The Reality and Mythology of War,” *Russian Studies in History* 37, no. 1 (Summer, 1998): 61-63.

³⁰ For a detailed study of wartime correspondents and wartime reporting, see Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Iraq* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2002).

real issue became their continued dominance of the war's narrative in the postwar period.³¹

Frontline reports by journalists during the first days of the war included crude reprints of articles from central papers exhibiting a low level of professionalism. Therefore, in the early days of the war when correspondents were told of the importance newspapers carried for the war effort, they responded by requesting the removal of “stock phrases” and that they “be allowed to speak to readers in their own voices.” The atmosphere of the early period allowed such instances of “freedom” in creative thought to permeate articles on the war and Ehrenburg noticed the difference: “War inevitably brings with it the censor’s scissors, but in Russia during the first eighteen months of the war writers felt much freer...”³²

According to Ehrenburg, the “best agitator” was a writer who utilized his own voice, vocabulary, and tone when publishing. Especially in the harsh days of 1941, Ehrenburg claimed that writers could help the cause with their voice and literary skills.³³ Authors were highly regarded by both the state and the people. So much so, that as Osip Mandelshtam described, “In no other country is poetry so highly regarded as here; poets are killed for it.”³⁴

³¹ Even in this respect the Soviets, to a degree, were not alone. It took until the late 1950s and early 1960s for a fuller account of the “Miracle of Dunkirk” to become available to the British public. Knightley, 253.

³² S. V. Shpakovskaia, “Sovetskie gazety v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny,” in *Voprosy istorii* 5 (2014): 65; Ehrenburg, *The War 1941-1945*, 13, 20.

³³ RGASPI, f. 629, op. 1, d. 110, l. 1. Letter sent by Ehrenburg to Petr Pospelov and Emel’ian Iaroslavskii on January 30, 1942.

³⁴ Mandelshtam died before the war in 1938. Cited in John Garrard and Carol Garrard, *Life and Fate of Vasily Grossman* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2012), xxxvii.

The daily news provided to Soviet readers, in part, came from Sovinformburo communiques, which tracked changes on the frontlines and were tasked with controlling print and broadcast media as well as counterpropaganda work against “German and other enemy propaganda.” Much of the wartime reporting was undertaken by well-known authors, rather than journalists. As a result, writers offered newspapers pieces that reflected a “literary style” that deviated from traditional journalism. Throughout the war Soviet periodicals, above all, were tasked with fostering feelings of hatred toward the enemy. This was accomplished first and foremost by publications that related German atrocities throughout occupied Soviet territory.³⁵

Authors took up the fight in their own way and while serving on the frontlines they were fulfilling a separate although equally important role in “‘arming people’s souls with hatred’ toward the enemy...” Works by Simonov and Ehrenburg were akin to holy symbols and icons for soldiers. Some carried with them Simonov’s poem, *Wait for Me*, or Ehrenburg’s portrait and articles. They were “valuable documents” helping “in difficult times.”³⁶ The importance of journalists was commented on by Viacheslav Molotov who said Ehrenburg was “worth several divisions.”³⁷ Wartime accounts created a direct link between the readers and correspondents, forging a partnership.

³⁵ *Organy gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti SSSR v Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voine: Sbornik dokumentov*, tom vtoroi, kniga 1, *Nachalo 22 iunია – 31 avgusta 1941 goda* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo ‘Rus,’ 2000), 63; Marc Slonim, *Soviet Russian Literature: Writers & Problems 1917-1967* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 265; Knightley, 268-269; Shpakovskaia, 66.

³⁶ Krylova, “Healers of Wounded Souls,” 313-314; Alexander Werth, *The Year of Stalingrad: an historical record and a study of Russian mentality, methods and policies* (Florida: Simon Publications, 2001), 80; Frezinskii, 97; Ehrenburg, *The Tempering of Russia*, 246.

³⁷ Norman Davies, *No Simple Victory: World War II in Europe, 1939-1945* (New York: Viking, 2006), 452.

Due to the proximity of correspondents to soldiers, often readers could picture their own suffering or that of their families within wartime reports by authors like Ehrenburg, who received a letter in April 1942 from a Red Army captain mentioning how his mother remained in Kiev and asking if Ehrenburg “perchance” wrote “about her tears? Maybe you described her suffering?”³⁸ A letter from A. F. Morozov at the end of 1943 compared Ehrenburg’s productions with his memories of the war, filled with “blood clots, feelings and passionate convictions and exhortations.” Letters from readers could also point to their utilization of wartime propaganda, which they imbibed and reiterated with relish and conviction as when another Red Army captain wrote “... we shall have no mercy on our enemies...Our vengeance and our wrath are sacred.”³⁹

The importance accorded to newspapers was summed up by Ehrenburg in 1943: “In peacetime the newspaper is a supplier of information, but in wartime the newspaper becomes the very air one breathes...people open the newspaper before they open a letter from a friend, for their fate is tied up with what is printed in the newspaper.”⁴⁰ A day after the war began, in a directive signed by the head of GlavPUR, it was purported that newspapers needed to “help soldiers, commanders and political workers to better and more quickly acquaint themselves with the theater of military actions...to highlight the experiences of past wars, as well as [present] facts about the experiences of current

³⁸ Ehrenburg, *The Tempering of Russia*, 247. A similar sentiment was expressed in letters to Konstantin Simonov about his war novels. According to Polly Jones, “A mother from Omsk and a son from Moscow both wrote to Simonov expecting him to be able to clarify the manner of their relatives’ deaths, since they had perceived unmistakable parallels between their biographies and those of the fictional heroes. Another widow, Kuznetsova, wrote more angrily, complaining about Simonov’s failure to mention her husband’s contribution to the battle at Borisov.” Jones, *Myth, Memory, Trauma*, 191-192.

³⁹ Frezinskii, 142; Ehrenburg, *The Tempering of Russia*, 245.

⁴⁰ Ehrenburg and Simonov, xiii.

battles.” Finally, “The main tasks of the press in battle must be to develop heroism, bravery, military art, and selflessly carry out the commander’s orders.”⁴¹

Letters to Ehrenburg from frontline soldiers consistently reiterated the popularity and necessity of his articles. On 21 October 1941 Ehrenburg was sent a letter by a junior lieutenant who commented that “We read and value your articles, like bombs, they help us smash the enemy.” A letter written by a battalion commissar in April 1942 described the importance attributed to newspapers and how before going into the attack, he read Ehrenburg’s latest article from *Krasnaia zvezda* to his troops and “Everyone’s spirits were raised. We carried out our assignment with honors.” Ehrenburg often took the time to reply to letters and in response, Andrei Fedulov, writing in August 1942, commented how much the soldiers appreciated not only his articles but his generosity with his time. Partisans also wrote and pleaded for him to “send your leaflets to us in the rear more often. The people like them, read them with interest, learn to make fun of the fascists, and, what is more, carry out what is written in them.”⁴²

Much of the language incorporated and utilized in reports appealed to the soldiers at the front. Correspondents were regularly found among soldiers and in the midst of battles, entwining themselves and their struggles with those on the frontlines. Ehrenburg claimed that “on the first day of the war I forgot that I had previously written novels and poems. I became a journalist, only a journalist, whose place is on the firing line. I breathe the air of battle.” In one instance, correspondent Alexander Poliakov was

⁴¹ V. A. Zolotarev et al., eds., *Russkii arkhiv: Velikaia Otechestvennaia*, vol. 17–6 (Moscow, 1996), 17-18.

⁴² Frezinskii, 73, 97; Ehrenburg, *The Tempering of Russia*, 247, 269; Krylova, “Healers of Wounded Souls,” 311-312.

encircled with the 24th Rifle Division during the first days of the war. His reports regularly appeared in *Krasnaia zvezda* and were eventually published as a volume, in 1942, describing the division's struggles to get back to Soviet lines. Letters written to Ehrenburg from soldiers at the front attested to their feelings toward the author with one lieutenant telling him, "I write to you the way I would to an old friend" while another called him by the diminutive "Iliusha."⁴³

In all, the war's propaganda effort encompassed the work of more than 1000 writers. Hundreds participated on the front with 140 dying and 300 receiving decorations.⁴⁴ Many lived through much of what the Red Army suffered; utilizing their experiences, writers employed imagery and played up emotions as they crafted a tapestry of Soviet heroism based on a few select facts that often went unchallenged. Within the pages of Alexander Korneichuk's play, *The Front*, written in 1942, the war correspondent Krikun proudly proclaims to the front commander, "I get all important material here [at the front] and work it up. A hundred and five of my articles on heroes have already been published." All he needed was a single fact, "I create everything else."⁴⁵

An editorial in *Literaturnaia gazetta* discussed the place of writers in the war less than two months after its beginning. It explained that writers were provided with enough material by the numerous occurrences of heroism, both individual and collective,

⁴³ Ehrenburg, *The Tempering of Russia*, v, 35, 248; A. Poliakov, "V tylu vruga," *Krasnaia zvezda*, August 23, 1941, 4; A. Poliakov, *V tylu vruga* (Moscow: Voenno-Morskoe Izdatel'stvo NKVMF, 1942); Alexander Poliakov, *Russians Don't Surrender!* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., INC., 1942); Frezinskii, 105; Dmitrii Shepilov, *The Kremlin's Scholar: A Memoir of Soviet Politics Under Stalin and Khrushchev*, ed. Stephen V. Bittner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 206.

⁴⁴ Anisimov, 7; Krylova, "Healers of Wounded Souls," 313.

⁴⁵ Alexander Korneichuk, "The Front," in *Seven Soviet Plays*, trans. Bernard L. Kotem and Zina Voynow (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1946), 459-460.

exhibited by soldiers of the Red Army and Navy at the front. Writers needed “to create generalizations from these facts so as to reveal artistically in every example of heroism the national character of the Soviet people, the nobility of their ideas, which inculcate a scorn of death and hatred of the enemy.” Ehrenburg claimed many of his articles “were written at the front... I was not thinking about the objective truth when I was writing... I was thinking of one thing only: of victory...”⁴⁶ “Truth” and “objectivity” were overshadowed by the need for examples of heroism and the required slogans authors and censors wanted imbibed by soldiers and civilians.

Although Soviet authors had plenty to work with, they also operated within the confined space set up by Stalin, who limited talk of military defeats. At the same time, Stalin predicated the idea that surrender was the equivalent of treason and a brave death in battle was considered the norm. Heroic exploits, including death, became expected and acceptable for soldiers and their families. Stories of selfless heroism were crafted and refined by authors as Stalin personally edited drafts, while censors continually checked text and photographs for transgressions before and after publications were put out.⁴⁷ Stymieing newspapers and correspondents in their ability to report on events meant a repetition of stories and heroic exploits that became fixed in Soviet minds and were soon internalized and reiterated on a regular if not daily basis.

⁴⁶ “Mesto literatora v Otechestvennoi voine,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, August 20, 1941, 1, cited in Katharine Hodgson, *Written with the Bayonet: Soviet Russian poetry of World War Two* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996), 149; Ehrenburg, *The Tempering of Russia*, v.

⁴⁷ Berkhoff, 5, 35; Shneer, 90.

Making Sense of Defeat – 1941

In the wake of the German invasion, the war was transformed into a people's war with Stalin and the Party relegated to the background.⁴⁸ Like an assembly line, stories began to be churned out about the heroism of individuals and improvised small-unit resistance to the inexorable advances of the Wehrmacht.⁴⁹ Momentary control was even handed over to the population behind enemy lines as Stalin's 3 July speech emphasized an "all-out partisan war" against the invading forces of Nazi Germany. Soon, Red Army soldiers who found themselves behind enemy lines joined the partisan war effort.

Soviet pre-war propaganda that had portrayed fighting a future war on the enemy's territory with little blood lost proved erroneous. A high-ranking former Soviet general and defector, Victor Kravchenko, reminisced in his memoirs, published immediately abroad after his defection following victory in 1945, about how "for two decades we had been starved and tortured and driven in the name of military preparedness...Our leaders had boasted of Soviet superiority in training manpower and armament. Now the humiliating rout of our armies was being explained by lack of guns, planes, munitions."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Jeffrey Brooks, "Pravda Goes to War," in *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia*, ed. Richard Stites (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 14; Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, "Nothing is Forgotten: Individual Memory and the Myth of the Great Patriotic War," in *Histories of the Aftermath: The Legacies of the Second World War in Europe*, eds. Frank Biess and Robert G. Moeller (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 69-70.

⁴⁹ Stories featured Soviet pilots performing ramming (*taran*) attacks against the enemy, of which there were up to twenty on June 22. Eduard Polianovskii, "Dva kapitana," *Izvestia*, January 28 and 29, 1997.

⁵⁰ Victor Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom: The Personal and Political Life of a Soviet Official* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 2002), 359.

The extent of initial defeats was enormous and the population noticed the silence they were greeted with. Some evidence exists that they also understood they were being lied to. It should be noted that readers viewed Sovietinformburo communiques and reports from frontline correspondents differently. The former seem to have been regularly questioned while the latter were eagerly consumed and internalized. In September 1941 an anonymous letter arrived at the Sovinformburo claiming “You do not systematically inform [readers] about the situation on the front, instead, reports for more than a week [contain] the stereotypical phrase – ‘fighting along the entire front.’”⁵¹ Kravchenko claimed that war communiques proved so misleading “that few Russians believed them at any time thereafter.”⁵² Soviet citizens approached reports with skepticism as confidence in their press was undermined by what they witnessed with their own eyes in contrast to what they read in newspapers.⁵³ Looking back on the war period, Boris Polevoi, a correspondent and author, portrayed the Soviet distrust of official communiques in one of the most popular novels written about the war. He described how a cavalry officer known as the “commissar” responded to stories he encountered in newspapers:

When the newspapers were brought in he eagerly snatched them from the nurse’s hand and hurriedly read the communique of the Soviet Information Bureau, and

⁵¹ Cited in Kostyrchenko, 88.

⁵² Kravchenko, 358. For further evidence of Soviet soldiers questioning reports, from as early as the Winter War against Finland, see Bair Irincheev, *War of the White Death: Finland against the Soviet Union 1939-40* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2011), 26; Brooks, *Thank you, comrade Stalin*, 161; V. K. Vinogradov, ed., *Lubianka v dni bitvy za Moskvu: Po rassekrechennym dokumentam FSB RF* (Moscow: Evonnitsa, 2002), 209, 263, 304, 310.

⁵³ Shpakovskaia, 69. Dictating his memoirs, Nikita Khrushchev discussed the heroism of the troops of the Voronezh Front during the Battle of Kursk and commented how “True heroism was displayed here, not the kind you read about in newspapers, but genuine heroism.” Sergei Khrushchev, ed., *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev: Commissar, 1918-1945, Vol. 1* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 522.

after that calmly and slowly read the reports of the war correspondents from the different fronts. He had a way of his own in reading, which might be called “active reading.” At one moment he would repeat in a whisper a passage in a report that pleased him and mutter “that’s right,” and mark the passage; or suddenly he would exclaim: “He’s lying, the sonofabitch! I bet my head to a beer bottle he was not near the place. The rascal! And yet he writes!” One day he got so angry over something a highly imaginative war correspondent had written that he at once wrote a postcard to the newspaper stating in irate terms that such things don’t and can’t happen in war, and requesting that some restraint be put on this “unmitigated liar.”⁵⁴

The Red Army High Command bulletin on the first day of the war reported the downing of 65 enemy planes and said that the enemy’s blows were being repelled everywhere, setting a standard for the rest of the war.⁵⁵ As defeat followed defeat, Soviet press reports continued to describe the fighting as “fierce,” “stubborn,” and “heavy.” Soon the vocabulary proved more adaptable with “fought to the end,” “fell back to a new defensive line,” and “shift of positions” making an appearance.⁵⁶ Unlike the British, who portrayed Dunkirk as a “national epic” or the Germans who utilized the struggle for Stalingrad “to energize their forces,” the loss of Soviet cities was concealed throughout the summer of 1941.⁵⁷

Instead, Soviet authors concentrated on familiar cultural differences and utilized history and culture to depict Germany as uncivilized while emphasizing the Russian

⁵⁴ Boris Polevoi, *A Story About a Real Man* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Pub. House, 1952), 176-177.

⁵⁵ A report discussing aircraft losses over the first two days claimed the Red Army lost 374 planes, mainly on the ground, while the Germans lost 161 in the air and 200 on airfields. This was one of the few times Soviet newspapers admitted to greater, although not by much, losses on the part of the Red Army. Shpakovskaia, 65. Exaggerated numbers of enemy losses continued to appear in internal Soviet reports. Khrushchev recounted an incident from 1942 when an air force general wanted to submit a report for 500 German tanks destroyed in one day by the Soviet air force. Khrushchev claimed he could not believe the report and attempted to talk down the figure to be submitted, especially since Soviet troops continued to retreat the next day. Khrushchev, *Commissar, 1918-1945*, 555-556.

⁵⁶ Berkhoff, 36; Gorbachevsky, 16.

⁵⁷ Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin*, xviii; Hellbeck, 12.

national character and Russia's cultural heritage. Even Ehrenburg, a Jew, when addressing American Jews, commented how "my country, and in the forefront the Russian people, the people of Pushkin and Tolstoy, have accepted the battle." A week after the war began there was an announcement in *Pravda* about the imminent publication of a series of books dealing with the Soviet fight against the German "occupiers" in 1918. When mention was made of Soviet partisans, Ehrenburg asked "Who are the partisans?" and answered with "ordinary Russian people."⁵⁸

In mid-1942 Ehrenburg justified his previous singling out of "Russians." "The older brother in the Soviet family, the Russian people, has gained the respect of other peoples not through self-assertion, but by self-denial; they have marched and are marching ahead of others along the road where man meets not only flowers but also bullets. That is why the Russian people and the Russian language are treated with such honor."⁵⁹ Readers noticed how often "Russians" were being written about, stirring feelings of Russian patriotism.⁶⁰ Simonov also emphasized "Russians" most visibly in his play, *Russian People*, which appeared on the pages of *Pravda* in the summer of 1942.⁶¹ In effect, when Stalin in 1945 famously singled out the Russian people as being the victors of the war, he could have been leaning on the numerous discussions of them

⁵⁸ Ehrenburg, *The Tempering of Russia*, 24, 47, 55; "Knigi o geroizme russkogo naroda," *Pravda*, June 29, 1941, 6.

⁵⁹ Ehrenburg commented that "When we say Russia, we do not by this distinguish one people or another. The word 'Russia' is now not the name of a state, but is something deeply innermost which links us with our history: the second People's War with the first, the young Red Army man with Suvorov, the cradles of children with the graves of our ancestors." Iliia Ehrenburg, "O patriotizme," *Pravda*, June 14, 1942, 2.

⁶⁰ Frezinskii, 101.

⁶¹ Konstantin Simonov, "Russkie Liudi," *Pravda*, July 13, 1942, 2.

as such throughout the war. Unfortunately, where the emphasis on “Russians” originated from during the war is a question left unanswered but the roots of Russocentrism could be found in the 1930s.⁶²

As the German invasion unfolded Soviet Sovinformburo announcements needed to conceal the true extent of the chaos engulfing the frontlines. In turn, readers soon had an understanding of how to read between the lines of official reports. When Minsk fell on 29 June the Sovinformburo announced “in the direction of Minsk...Red Army troops continued their successful struggle with the tanks of the enemy, opposing his movement to the east.” The British correspondent Alexander Werth commented on the “codes” that became familiar to all readers of communiques. Reports often consisted of three phrases, “fierce fighting,” “stubborn fighting,” and “heavy fighting,” the last of which meant “things are going very badly.”⁶³ On 5 July Soviet sources denied German claims of capturing large numbers of Red Army prisoners but ceased mentioning the plight of Red Army troops defending Minsk as new reports began to reference battles “in the direction of Mogilev-Podolskii,” east of the Belorussian capital.⁶⁴ Gorbachevsky, a veteran, commented that “with each passing day of the war, people began to understand better what the disappearance of some directions and the appearance of new directions of German advance really meant...The communiques [from the Sovinformburo] were so

⁶² See Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis*.

⁶³ Knightley, 268; Similar occurrences and techniques could also be found during the retreats of 1942 when cities were being lost newspapers continued to report fighting “in the area,” which while not untrue hid the real situation. Werth, *The Year of Stalingrad*, 113, 129-130, 138, 215.

⁶⁴ Richard Stites, “Introduction: Russia’s Holy War,” in *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia*, ed. Richard Stites (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 12.

brief, illogical and unclear while the newspapers primarily trumpeted news of the first heroic pilot and the exploits of tankers who'd given a fitting rebuff to the aggressor."⁶⁵

Descriptions of Red Army actions were sometimes censored or altered by Stalin or the head of the Red Army's Political Directorate, but they seemingly strove for a type of uniformity rather than simple embellishments.⁶⁶ Furthermore, it was not always Stalin or the censors who altered the narrative of the war. On 3 July 1941 a letter to the secretary of the Central Committee of the Komsomol, described how an article presented an inaccurate compilation of previously published articles from at least two separate newspapers, *Pravda* and *Komsomolskaia pravda*. The author, Seliushkin, inflated figures of enemy killed and the number of aircraft a Soviet pilot engaged in combat, enhancing his deed. A reply followed on 7 July from the Department of Agitation and Propaganda (Agitprop) claiming the author was "instructed on the unacceptability of [the] misuse of facts previously published in newspapers." Thus, the question arises of how much influence correspondents wielded when it came to creating the initial narrative of the war. From the above, it seems censors wanted uniformity rather than exaggerations that enhanced Soviet heroism and achievements.⁶⁷

When Stalin finally addressed the nation, one of the events he discussed was the signing of the non-aggression pact with Germany in August of 1939. Stalin's radio address on 3 July claimed the peaceful policy pursued by the Soviet Union made it

⁶⁵ Gorbachevsky, 15-16; Richard Bidlack and Nikita Lomagin, *The Leningrad Blockade, 1941-1944: A New Documentary History from the Soviet Archives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 43.

⁶⁶ Berkhoff, 36, 37. Later in the war Stalin also altered parts of Aleksandr Korneichuk's *The Front* and sections of an article on Andrei Vlasov. Maksimenkov, 531-532, 538-539.

⁶⁷ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 125, d. 59, l. 22, 28. Fond 17 is the depository of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and this register contained files from Agitprop.

impossible to ignore the actions of the Western Allies and compelled him to negotiate with Nazi Germany – prewar propaganda highlighted the duplicitous nature of the Western Allies. Signing the pact, however, also meant the USSR gained a year-and-a-half to strengthen its borders and defenses. The idea that the Western Allies backed Stalin into a corner and forced him to make a deal with the devil became a part of future Soviet narratives of the war.⁶⁸

Stalin’s radio address came a few days after the Wehrmacht’s first major victory, the encirclement of Minsk on 29 June. The speech masked the loss of the city with mention of heroic Red Army resistance and the destruction of the enemy’s “finest” divisions and air force units, as fresh enemy forces continued to advance. Stalin blamed the Red Army’s first major defeat on the commander and command staff of the Western Front. The shifting of blame onto the shoulders of commanding generals seemingly set a precedent and Stalin continued to place mistakes and miscalculations onto the shoulders of commanders and away from the Supreme Command, which he headed.⁶⁹

The 3 July address included assessments of the German invasion and the aftermath of the Minsk encirclement. Stalin leaned on the idea that not only was the Wehrmacht mobilized, while the Red Army was not, the Germans were also able to apply their previous battle experience and achieve a “sudden and treacherous” attack by

⁶⁸ Tobias Privitelli, “Two Different Wars? World War II as ‘Second Imperialist War’ and ‘Great Patriotic War’ in the Russian-Soviet Tradition,” in *Recalling the Past – (Re)constructing the Past: Collective and Individual Memory of World War II in Russia and Germany*, edited by Withold Bonner and Arja Rosenholm (Helsinki: Aleksanteri Institute, 2008), 261.

⁶⁹ “Brothers and Sisters! Radio Address by Iosif Stalin (July 3, 1941),” *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, accessed February 18, 2016, <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1943-2/the-cult-of-leadership/1943-the-cult-of-leadership-audio/brothers-and-sisters-radio-address-by-iosif-stalin-july-3-1941/>; Pavlenko, 356, 357.

breaking the non-aggression pact. Stalin overlooked the fact that he himself ignored the proposals of his military commanders, among them Georgii Zhukov and Semen Timoshenko, and forbade any mobilization in the border districts.⁷⁰

The ambiguous nature of reports about activities on the front by the Red Army translated into problems for the troops themselves. Petro Grigorenko, a Red Army commander, reflected in his memoirs, written and published in the west after his defection, on some of the issues Soviet forces faced:

...the communiques were written in such a way that it was difficult to know whether our armies were attacking, on the defense, or in full flight. "With crushing blows our armies dealt serious losses to the enemy and, driving him back, our advance units are conducting battles on the line..." Naturally, after reading such language, we would look for the line of the advance units out in front of the front line of yesterday. Not finding it, we would look for it back a bit, but not far. Finally, we would find it forty to sixty kilometers back.⁷¹

In his memoirs, written in the late 1960s, Khrushchev recalled that the situation at the front, combined with the atmosphere created by the purges, dictated "that a commander dared not say he was abandoning a defensive position. This was totally ruled out, because he might have to pay for it later. The standard formulation was to express a kind of hope that perhaps the Germans would not break through here, or even a certainty that they could not, and later to say that under the pressure of superior enemy forces our troops had had to abandon the area after all – that was the standard..."⁷² As such, in part

⁷⁰ By the time the war ended Stalin went as far as making the comparison between the surprise achieved and defeat inflicted against the Western allies at Pearl Harbor and Singapore. Evan Mawdsley, "Explaining Military Failure: Stalin, the Red Army, and the First Period of the Great Patriotic War, 1941-42," in *Stalin – His Times and Ours*, ed. Geoffrey Roberts (Irish Association for Russian and Eastern European Studies, 2005), 136; Privitelli, 261; Pavlenko, 354.

⁷¹ Petro G. Grigorenko, *Memoirs* (New York: Norton, 1982), 129.

⁷² Khrushchev, *Commissar, 1918-1945*, 336-337.

it could be argued that military reports in 1941 were reflective of Sovinformburo announcements, where the reality of the situation at the front was reconfigured as a hopeful evaluation.

Aside from fraudulent reports on the frontline situation, communiqués routinely concealed the real number of casualties the Red Army suffered. Altering figures, however, was something most participants of the war, including Britain and Germany, were guilty of.⁷³ When there were instances of losses published and broken down by category they seemed to be a response to German victory claims in their own reports rather than needed information for readers. It is difficult to ascertain to what extent the Soviet population, aside from those under German occupation or soldiers on the frontlines, were exposed to German propaganda efforts, but Soviet claims in major newspapers addressing German assertions about losses might have also been for the benefit of the Western Allies. A Sovinformburo announcement in *Pravda* on 30 June claimed the last seven-to-eight days saw German losses of no less than 2,500 tanks and up to 1,500 planes, with 30,000 prisoners of war. In the same period Red Army losses were listed as 850 planes, up to 900 tanks and 15,000 missing and prisoners of war. A report on 14 July announced that Soviet losses, including dead, wounded and missing, were up to 250,000. Soviet forces claimed to have destroyed up to 2,300 enemy planes and 3,000 tanks while suffering losses of 1,900 planes and 2,200 tanks.⁷⁴ What was not made clear, however, was why after suffering such losses the Germans continued to

⁷³ Knightley, 258.

⁷⁴ “Fashizm budet razbit!,” *Pravda*, June 30, 1941, 1; “Ot sovetskogo informbiuro,” *Pravda*, July 14, 1941, 2.

advance, especially since newspaper reports in 1941 about captured Germans claimed these men did not want to fight, were doing it under duress and were “tired of the war.”⁷⁵

In response to these claims, V. Kazik, an invalid Soviet citizen, wrote to the editors of *Pravda* in the summer of 1941 stating that readers of a newspaper entitled “Truth” expected the truth, no matter how harsh. Listening to daily reports, Kazik noticed a consistency to Soviet military prowess when compared to the Germans. While the Luftwaffe lost hundreds of planes, Soviet losses were in the tens. The ratios when it came to tanks ranged from 1:3 up to 1:9 in the Red Army’s favor. Yet somehow information gleaned from reports that presented general numbers contradicted day-to-day announcements. According to the above two articles, between 30 June and 14 July the Germans lost 800 planes and 500 tanks. Soviet losses for the same period were listed as 1,050 planes and 1,300 tanks. Thus, Kazik asked, “how is it that we have lost in this period 2.6 times more tanks than the Germans?” As well as “30% more aircraft...Check, how can this be? Every German tank knocked out almost 3 of ours?”⁷⁶

Soviet readers, eager for information, were keeping daily track of the numbers newspapers supplied and yet less than a month into the war inconsistencies were already creeping into *Pravda* reports. Soviet censors were more interested in seeing a wide range between the Red Army’s losses and that of the Germans, as reported, but seemed less concerned with checking previously provided general figures while readers wanted the bitter “truth.” This reliance and need to see “truthful” numbers by readers could be interpreted as a relic of the 1930s, a decade filled with reports on collectivization,

⁷⁵ Shpakovskaia, 65-66.

⁷⁶ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 125, d. 58, l. 95-96.

industrialization, party purges, and Five Year Plans that pushed Soviet industry to great heights. Reports and speeches from the period were filled with figures and percentages that regularly touted Soviet advances and achievements. Internalizing these ideas, relying on statistics as a barometer of progress, Soviet readers utilized the numbers they were presented with to either praise or criticize the government.⁷⁷

Red Army defeats could not be portrayed as the result of an inherent German superiority on the field of battle. Thus, an early October article mentioned how “the whole industry of Europe” was “working for” the “powerful military machine” that was the Wehrmacht. Germany’s “one idea” was “to prepare for war” and now a “technically powerful country” had directed its “weight” in the direction of the Soviet Union, leaving only “forty-year-old men, Austrians, and half-cripples” in occupied territories. Conversely, battles were a learning experience for the Red Army, a bloody arena for gaining an understanding of German strengths and weaknesses.⁷⁸

Supporting Soviet resistance was allied economic aid in the form of Lend Lease, a subject that was featured in high profile articles. However, such reports slowly ceased after 1941 and 1942. Timothy Johnston contends that Lend Lease was ignored by the media because it took attention away from the idea that the Soviet Union could win the war with its own technology and production capabilities, as well as weapons.⁷⁹ Soviet reports, when they did focus on Lend Lease, greatly played up what material was sent.

⁷⁷ Replies to German claims necessitated a Soviet admission of ever-larger, overall, figures for the losses sustained by the Red Army. Werth, *The Year of Stalingrad*, 172.

⁷⁸ Ehrenburg, *The Tempering of Russia*, 51, 52.

⁷⁹ Timothy Johnston, *Being Soviet: Identity, Rumour, and Everyday Life under Stalin 1939-1953* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 92.

Praise for United States manufacturing in the press inadvertently created a powerful aura around American technical capabilities. Nonetheless, when the media made mention of Lend Lease tanks being used by Red Army troops, the praise went to Soviet tankers and their skills, including how they quickly familiarized themselves with western equipment and dealt defeats onto the enemy.⁸⁰ Thus, allied support was juxtaposed with Soviet education and ingenuity.

Stalin's speech on 6 November 1941 saw the reasons for the Red Army's defeats multiply.⁸¹ After Minsk, the German army achieved major encirclements at Smolensk, Kiev, and Viaz'ma-Briansk. An evacuation of the capital in mid-October followed. Ehrenburg's article on 25 October attempted to describe the Soviet mindset: "We are not discouraged by failures. Since olden times our military leaders have learned and grown from failures. Since olden times our nation has been tempered by misfortune...we shall correct our deficiencies...we shall withstand and defend ourselves – not only the history of Russia, but also the defense of Moscow gives proof of this."⁸² In justifying the failures of 1941 he made allowances for future mistakes, from which the Red Army would learn.

With defeats mounting months after the initial German invasion, it was impossible to continue claiming surprise as the reason for the October encirclement at Viaz'ma-Briansk. Enemy superiority and experience was still stressed, as Stalin explained how "the German Army was more of a professional army, a 'cadre army' (*kadrovaia armii*)" while the Red Army was still "young." But two additional

⁸⁰ Shpakovskaia, 70; Ehrenburg, 207.

⁸¹ Frederick C. Barghoorn, *The Soviet Image of the United States: A Study in Distortion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), 60.

⁸² Ehrenburg and Simonov, 77.

explanations were added to clarify the “temporary setbacks” experienced by Soviet forces: German numerical superiority as well as the lack of allied support in the form of a second front. Here, another oft-cited justification became part of the Soviet narrative of the war on the Eastern Front, as Stalin claimed that the reason the Germans had more tanks was due to their ability to “exploit the tank industry of Czechoslovakia, Belgium, Holland, and France.”⁸³

As newspapers continued to explain away recent defeats, continued German advances meant additional figures could be found in newspapers for both Red Army and Wehrmacht casualties setting a precedent among Red Army commanders. German claims continued to be challenged by Soviet reports as both in part exaggerated or hid the real casualties they inflicted and losses they suffered.⁸⁴ In some respects the losses were unavoidable given the state of the Red Army and Stalin’s refusal to mobilize, but they seemingly set a precedent. The high rates of casualties sustained by the Red Army were regarded as acceptable by commanding officers and the troops themselves, so much so that even after the Red Army went over to the offensive similar levels were encountered in operations where Soviet advantages in men and equipment should have avoided such

⁸³ Berkhoff, 250-251; Kulish, 316; Mawdsley, “Explaining Military Failure,” 136-137, 145, 146. Earlier articles matched Stalin’s tone and reasoning, see Ehrenburg, *The Tempering of Russia*, 62, 75, 206. Recent studies show that as much as the Third Reich benefited from conquered territories, Germany’s resources were also continually stretched due to occupation duties and helping facilitate the continued delivery of needed material and supplies. For a detailed discussion of this topic, see Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007).

⁸⁴ Robert M. Citino, *Death of the Wehrmacht. The German Campaigns of 1942* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 48; Sovinformburo, “Smekhotvorennye izmyshleniia gitlerovskikh fal’shivomonetchikov o poteriakh sovetskikh voisk,” *Krasnaia zvezda*, November 26, 1941, 1. For the Red Army, “official figures” would only appear in 1993. Geoffrey Jukes, *Stalingrad to Kursk: Triumph of the Red Army* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2011), 205.

excessive human and material costs. The mentality of many commanders in the wake of 1941, however, allowed for a ready justifications for disproportionate future casualties.

There is evidence that the “heroic” narrative propagated by the Soviet media affected how junior officers came to define “heroism” in the early period of the war. In one instance, in 1941, the sniper Joseph Pilyushin recalled a conversation in his memoirs (published in 1958) between assembled company commanders and their battalion commander. After continued retreats one company commander insisted “that it was better to die in battle, than to remain in the foxhole, waiting for the Germans to shoot you down or grind you to pieces.” He maintained that “there’s only one way out...attack and sell our lives as dearly as possible!” To which the battalion commander replied: “it’s a bit too early, friend, to think of dying. We need to know how to fight...there’s no point in spilling our own blood for nothing. To hurl ourselves headlong straight into the barrels of enemy guns and machine guns – that isn’t heroism; that’s cowardice in the face of enemy strength.”⁸⁵ Thus, one junior officer viewed needlessly sacrificing the entirety of the battalion as exemplifying “heroism” while the battalion commander had a rather different understanding of a reckless headlong attack into an entrenched enemy position.

According to press reports, Red Army losses reflected the noble nature of the Soviet system. Ehrenburg’s 4 November article, “To the Czechoslovaks,” painted a picture of the Red Army not only fighting for the liberation of its own territory but also for the freedom of enslaved nations.⁸⁶ Similarly, an article in *Krasnaia zvezda* contained

⁸⁵ Joseph Pilyushin, *Red Sniper on the Eastern Front: The Memoirs of Joseph Pilyushin* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2010). 77.

⁸⁶ Ehrenburg and Simonov, 80. Ehrenburg regularly recycled this theme, see Ilia Ehrenburg, “Opravdanie nenavisti,” *Pravda*, May 26, 1942, 4.

words of encouragement and respect toward the allied war effort, yet simultaneously exclaimed “Moscow is fighting for itself, for Russia, and for you, distant friends, for humanity and for the whole world.” For Ehrenburg, Moscow remained “a beacon for tortured humanity.”⁸⁷

Heroes and Martyrs

As much as Ehrenburg’s articles inspired readers so did tales of undaunted heroism and self-sacrifice. Since the first days of the war, Soviet readers were presented with articles mentioning ramming attacks by Red Air Force pilots against the German Luftwaffe and dive ramming attacks by pilots whose planes had caught fire and they were left with few other options. One of the most famous heroes was Captain Nikolai Gastello who purportedly flew his damaged plane into an enemy column of fuel trucks, or in some accounts enemy tanks, killing himself (and his crew) and inflicting damage and death on the enemy. For his selfless action, Gastello was awarded the title Hero of the Soviet Union posthumously, the rest of his crew became the recipients of the Order of the Patriotic War, First Degree – although sharing the same fate they reached different heights of glory.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Ilia Ehrenburg, “Liubov’ I nenavist,” *Krasnaia zvezda*, November 7, 1941, 4; Ehrenburg, *The Tempering of Russia*, 86.

⁸⁸ Seniavskaia, 73. In 1951 authorities discovered Nikolai Gastello was not the hero he was purported to be. It was, in fact, Aleksandr Maslov, another captain from the same unit as Gastello, who, according to evidence, attempted to fly his plane into a German anti-aircraft emplacement and wound up hitting the ground some 180 meters away from the highway. One witness stated: “The plane, which you are asking about, it fell in the rye field on 26 June. And not one bomb or plane fell on the German tank column.” Additional evidence suggested that Gastello’s entire crew did not perish in the plane, but one unknown person attempted to parachute to safety. Yet even after this discovery, the myth was never exposed and continued as a part of Soviet collective memory of the Great Patriotic War. Polianovskii, “Dva kapitana.”

However, while ramming in general was described as a heroic feat, some disagreed. When Grossman visited a fighter regiment, he was met with a variety of views on the heroic nature of ramming. One thought ramming was representative of the “Russian character” and “Soviet upbringing” but another claimed that “Ramming isn’t heroism. Heroism is to shoot down as many of them as possible” and a third insisted on asking: “What sort of a hero is a man who has a full load [of ammunition] and doesn’t manage to shoot [an enemy plane] down and has to ram [it]?”⁸⁹

Heroism on the ground was epitomized on the approaches to Moscow where supposedly 28 men of Ivan Panfilov’s 316th Rifle Division made the ultimate sacrifice.⁹⁰ On 16 November 1941, to the east of Volokolamsk, at the railroad junction of Dubosekovo, the Germans launched an attack against the 1075th Rifle Regiment, which sustained hundreds of casualties in hours of fierce fighting. The following day, before news about the German attack made its way through to higher headquarters, the division, at Zhukov’s request, was renamed the 8th Guards Rifle Division “in view of its staunchness.” Panfilov was killed on 18 November, making it that much easier to associate the heroic deed with a fallen commander.⁹¹

Among the many threads that made up the myth of the Panfilovtsy was the role played by a *politruk* (political instructor), who purportedly exclaimed to the men “Russia

⁸⁹ Vasily Semenovich Grossman, Antony Beevor, and Luba Vinogradova, *A Writer at War: Vasily Grossman with the Red Army, 1941-1945* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005), 80.

⁹⁰ To date the best case study of the history around the Panfilov’s men legend is Alexander Statiev, “‘La Garde muert mais ne se rend pas!’ Once Again on the 28 Panfilov Heroes,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 13, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 769-798.

⁹¹ Berkhoff, 62. A 1948 report about Panfilov’s men by Nikolai Afansiev, the Chief Military Prosecutor, was sent to Stalin and a number of high ranking officials detailing how the story was crafted from the imagination of journalists and the editor of *Krasnaia zvezda*. RGASPI, f. 82, op. 2, d. 890, l. 85-88.

is big, but there is no place to retreat to, because Moscow is behind us!” He then threw himself under an enemy tank with a bundle of grenades. More important than heroic actions or slogans was the role played by journalists and editors who, without the involvement of state representatives on the ground, knew without any direction from above what was required of them. Soviet authors took the initiative and aimed to serve a higher goal; they needed to mobilize soldiers for battle.⁹² The popularity of the Panfilovtsy was then readily utilized to define “heroism,” resulting in countless reiterations of similar actions by other individuals or groups.⁹³ Additionally, the tale of the 28 Panfilovtsy can be dated to a similar story in a 1931 Soviet play, *The Final Battle*, which highlighted the idea of an imminent war for Soviet citizens.⁹⁴ It could be argued that the writing was already on the proverbial wall, the deeds described and entrenched in Soviet memory and consciousness, all that was missing was a war to superimpose familiar memories onto.

Another hero appeared in the form of Zoia Kosmodem’ianskaia, a high-school girl selected to go behind enemy lines as a partisan but was caught torching a stable of German horses. Although tortured, she refused to give the enemy any useful information and died while defiantly proclaiming “it is happiness to die for my people” and “Stalin is

⁹² Sergei Kudryashov, “Remembering and Researching The War: The Soviet and Russian Experience,” in *Experience and Memory: The Second World War in Europe*, eds. Jorg Echternkamp and Stefan Martens (New York: Berghahn, 2010), 100.

⁹³ See Ehrenburg, *The Tempering of Russia*, 157, 259; Georgy Zhukov, *Marshal of Victory: The Autobiography of General Georgy Zhukov*, vol. 2, edited by Geoffrey Roberts (Havertown: Pen & Sword, 2014), 206; “Moskovskaia oblast’ ochishchena ot gitlerovskogo zver’ia,” *Pravda*, January 27, 1942, 1; Il’ia Erenburg, “O nenavisti,” *Krasnaia zvezda*, May 5, 1942, 4.

⁹⁴ Jochen Hellbeck described how “The final scene shows a group of twenty-seven Red Army soldiers defending the border against an imperialist enemy. In a hail of machine gun fire, all die but one. The injured survivor drags himself to a blackboard, where just before collapsing, he writes, ‘162,000,000 – 27 = 161,999,973.’” Hellbeck, 30.

with us” before being hanged.⁹⁵ A few weeks later, in the midst of the Red Army’s Moscow Counter-Offensive, a reporter from *Pravda* glorified her deeds in an article after her frozen corpse was discovered – thus began one of the most recognized and repeated stories. It became a national cry for vengeance and an assurance of eventual victory. Werth remarked in 1946 that while there were others who were performed similar deeds and suffered a similar fate, Kosmodem’ianskaia “was the name people were made to remember.”⁹⁶

The state never struggled to find heroes to embrace and emulate, especially since histories and facts could be amended to suit the needs of the greater collective. Similarly, journalists reporting on heroic events proved the state could just as easily ignore as cast them into celebrity status. Thus, when it came to Kosmodem’ianskaia, two articles appeared, in *Pravda* and *Komsomolka*. Petr Lidov’s “Tania” appeared in the former and received the nation’s attention because of its “vivid” quality.⁹⁷ Elena Seniavskaia recounts that according to “legend,” “Stalin, on reading the newspaper account of the partisan’s response to the Hitlerites’ question, ‘Where is Stalin?’ namely, ‘Stalin is at his post!’ – himself uttered the words that decided her posthumous fate: ‘There is a true national heroine.’” The propaganda apparatus went into action and Tania, an unknown member of the Komsomol, was turned into Zoia, the first woman to be awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union in the war.⁹⁸ Details surrounding how Kosmodem’ianskaia

⁹⁵ Graeme J. Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 143.

⁹⁶ Werth, *The Year of Stalingrad*, 76.

⁹⁷ P. Lidov, “Tania,” *Pravda*, January 27, 1942, 3.

⁹⁸ Seniavskaia, 76.

was found and the local response to her capture remained in the shadows, as did the fact that the sabotage she was responsible for in the village of Petrishchevo left several families without a roof as winter was fast approaching.

Turning Defeat into Victory: Reasserting Stalin's Role

Soon, the defeat of the Wehrmacht outside Moscow marked a physical as well as psychological turning point. The German invasion had altered Soviet society, "We were a people at construction. We became a people at war." Writing in the latter period of the war, Ehrenburg claimed that "...if politicians and lovers of politics discuss how many months separate us from the defeat of Germany, it is because Russia held out in 1941 and '42." Not only did Germany's defeat signal an eventual end to the war as a possibility, but, according to Ehrenburg, it also created the conditions for England and the United States to "calmly prepare for the coming battles."⁹⁹

By the end of the year, attention was drawn to the role played by the party with references to "Bolsheviks" and their influence on the reversal of German fortunes outside Moscow. In October 1941, Ehrenburg had written in *Krasnaia zvezda* that "all distinctions between Bolsheviks and non-party people, between believers and Marxists, have been obliterated..."¹⁰⁰ As Simonov recalled the darkest days of the initial Red Army retreat, in a December 1941 article he described how journalists "were searching and in most cases found, those whose stories inspired faith in victory: these were the

⁹⁹ Ehrenburg, *The Tempering of Russia*, vii, viii, 99.

¹⁰⁰ McReynolds, 34.

Bolsheviks of the Army, the soldiers with Bolshevik training; during the most difficult days they took the whole brunt of the struggle onto their shoulders.”¹⁰¹

Among the justifications the Soviet population was offered by the press, there remained one major omission, Stalin, the government and Party were absent from any criticism or accusations when it came to miscalculations either before or during the war.¹⁰² Luckily, by the time of the Moscow Counter-Offensive, some could foresee an eventual victorious end to the struggle unleashed just six months earlier. For Simonov, in December 1941, German arrogance transformed into something new as German prisoners “tremble and cry and breathlessly spill all that they know; others are sullenly silent, locking themselves up in their despair.” The German army had “changed,” previously accustomed to “easy victories” they now had to endure defeat.¹⁰³ Not only had a Red Army with “Bolshevik training” stood up to German advances longer than any other nation, they had also inflicted the first major reverse to a previously undefeated foe.

With the retreat of German forces outside Moscow in January 1942, Stalin began to dictate how much public recognition commanders like Zhukov could receive. At the start of 1942, Stalin crossed out Zhukov’s name from a list of commanders awarded orders for their role in the Battle of Moscow on January 2, 1942. Those at the editorial offices of *Krasnaia zvezda* responded by altering the next day’s caption. Originally, it was supposed to have read “Troops on the central front press the enemy,” but the editor

¹⁰¹ Ehrenburg and Simonov, 103. The future study on the Battle of Moscow by the General Staff would single out party and Komsomol members for their “bravery” and “valor,” an inspiration to others. Richard W. Harrison, trans., *The Battle of Moscow 1941-1942: The Red Army’s Defensive Operations and Counter-Offensive along the Moscow Strategic Direction* (Solihull: Helion & Company Limited, 2015), 284.

¹⁰² Gallagher, 14.

¹⁰³ Ehrenburg and Simonov, 108.

crossed it out and in its place wrote “General Zhukov’s Troops Press the Enemy.” “I do not know whether anyone noticed this tribute from *Red Star* to the commander of the front,” wrote Ortenberg, “but such a heading was a first for us!”¹⁰⁴ Although Stalin’s attempts to take attention away from Zhukov was met with some opposition from newspaper editors, the Soviet leader’s role in the war was about to be redefined.

If 1941 was defined by Stalin’s marginalization in the press, the beginning of 1942 found the Soviet leader portrayed as a strategic genius. On 4 January, writing in *Pravda*, Major General Konstantin Golubev, commented on how he was “fulfilling the instructions of Comrade Stalin about destroying the German fascist occupiers.” He was sure that “Comrade Stalin’s practical plan establishes a basis for the more grandiose defeat of the enemy. The Maloiaroslavets operation is only part of the brilliant commander’s general plan.”¹⁰⁵ Now, previous defeats could begin to be portrayed as part of Stalin’s grandiose plans to lure the Germans into the hinterland, while preparations were made for their ultimate defeat, a rehashing of 1812.¹⁰⁶ Commanding generals were not the only proponents of this new approach; similar ideas could be found among soldiers at the front. In a letter to his parents in April 1942, a frontline soldier wrote how Stalin’s “ingenious strategy” was responsible for the successful defense of Moscow.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin*, 167; D. Ortenberg, *God 1942* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1988), 17-18; Ia. Miletskii, “Voiska generala Zhukova tesniat vruga,” *Krasnaia zvezda*, January 3, 1942, 2.

¹⁰⁵ General-Major K. D. Golubev, “Maloiaroslavetskaia operatsiia,” *Pravda*, January 4, 1942, 2; Stites, 15.

¹⁰⁶ Ehrenburg, *The Tempering of Russia*, 191-192. For additional references to 1812, see Mikhail Bragin, “1812 – Borodinskaia Bitva – 1942,” *Pravda*, September 7, 1942, 3; “Rasshirenie vystavki ‘Otechestvennaia voina 1812 goda,’” *Pravda*, July 2, 1941, 3.

¹⁰⁷ Al’tman, Terushkin, and Brodskaia, 137.

Some authors could readily see through the fog of propaganda that was ever-present in the media. In early 1942 Grossman grew “extremely impatient with much of the propaganda that tried to conceal the incompetence of Soviet military leadership” throughout 1941. He saw the line being drawn between the “Kutuzov myth about the strategy of 1812” during the Patriotic War and the current Great Patriotic War: “The blood-soaked body of war is being dressed in snow-white robes of ideological, strategic and artistic convention. There are those who saw the retreat and those who dressed it. The myth of the First and the Second Great Patriotic War.”¹⁰⁸

In Stalin’s Order of the Day on 23 February 1942 he introduced a “definitive...interpretation” for understanding the war’s beginning. With 1941 over, five “permanent operating factors” were formulated by Stalin to explain future Red Army performance. They included “the strength of the rear, the state of the army’s morale, the quantity and quality of divisions, the army’s weaponry, and the command element’s organizing capabilities.”¹⁰⁹ These operating factors were partly created by the Red Army retreats in 1941 when the enemy was regularly checked and his strength “exhausted.” With the enemy’s inferiority now evident, it appeared that the end of the war might be near.¹¹⁰ Unfortunately, this idea was based on an erroneous understanding of the Red Army’s capabilities.

¹⁰⁸ Grossman, *A Writer at War*, 96. Mary Leder, an American living in Moscow in 1941, commented that “from the official reports, you’d think that the surrenders were a matter of strategy – like Kutuzov’s strategy, in the war of 1812 against Napoleon...” Leder, 195.

¹⁰⁹ Harrison, 154; Tsytkin, 279.

¹¹⁰ Mawdsley, “Explaining Military Failure,” 138.

By early 1942 Stalin was once more a central figure in both the Red Army's ability to dictate the course of events and the German defeat outside Moscow.¹¹¹ Soviet aspirations of victory were restrained by a *Krasnaia zvezda* article on 7 March that quoted General Andrei Vlasov mentioning how German reserves, material resources, experience, and discipline still merited attention. Whether consciously or not, Vlasov's language and ideas matched those from the previous year, excusing the Red Army's unpreparedness and poor performance by leaning on German experience. Another article claimed the Red Army during 1941 was "without experience." In addressing the cadres of the Red Army the author explained that the Wehrmacht "crushed us with the numerical superiority" of their armaments but, referencing Stalin's 3 July radio address, the article mentioned how Soviet forces "in the first months rooted out Hitler's best divisions, they cleared the way to victory..." for a new generation of Red Army troops.¹¹²

Soviet failures in 1942 were omitted, covered up or excused in a variety of ways. Due to strict censorship, Rostov's regional newspaper, *Molot*, was denied the ability to cover any defensive or offensive actions of the city's defenders for sixteen months. As the Germans began their advance in the spring of 1942 Ehrenburg was warned to not "mention the Kharkov direction" as there were "instructions" to refrain from doing so. A few weeks later Soviet forces were surrounded outside Kharkov, in part a result of a failed offensive. In the beginning of June, Shcherbakov called Ehrenburg ordering him to "write articles for the foreign press about the Second Front." Undoubtedly this order

¹¹¹ Ilia Ehrenburg, "Chudo," *Krasnaia zvezda*, February 8, 1942, 3.

¹¹² Ehrenburg, *The Tempering of Russia*, 154; Ilia Ehrenburg, "Martovskii Veter," *Krasnaia zvezda*, March 13, 1942, 3.

was to deflect attention away from the Soviet failure and the German encirclement at Kharkov and possibly an authentic and urgent plea for a second front.¹¹³

Taking attention away from the continuing German advances at the front was a continuous stream of names, dates, and battles consisting “of interchangeable tales of military heroism and feats.” Some 14,400 names of soldiers were mentioned during the war. Soviet newspapers often presented long lists of heroes and their achievements, which mirrored a practice of the 1930s when the achievements of shock workers were cited on an individual basis in newspapers.¹¹⁴

Although Soviet propaganda continued to tout heroic acts performed by the Red Army, there were limits placed on what could be reported. Early in 1942 Aleksei Mares’ev’s plane was downed near Novgorod. To rescue himself, Mares’ev crawled through the snow for eighteen days. His legs were amputated, but he resumed flying and scored additional victories against the German Luftwaffe. However, recognition of the courageous fighter’s deeds was missing from the media. As it turned out, Stalin refused to allow publication of Boris Polevoi’s article on the pilot in *Pravda*, adding comments to the article’s page proofs that German propaganda might take advantage of the report to portray the Red Army as exhausted. Only in the summer of 1943 did *Krasnaia zvezda* publish an article about Mares’ev, another Hero of the Soviet Union.¹¹⁵ Similar stories of

¹¹³ A correlation was noticed between the worsening situation at the front and the “more urgent and insistent...outcry for the Second Front.” Werth, *The Year of Stalingrad*, 61, 79; Ehrenburg, *The War 1941-1945*, 73; Ehrenburg, *The Tempering of Russia*, 190; Kostyrchenko, 89.

¹¹⁴ Berkhoff, 60-61; Hellbeck, 49; Shneer, 193.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 55. Polevoi later wrote a book on Mares’ev and a movie was created as well. Polevoi, *A Story About a Real Man*.

courageous deeds, performed before Mares'ev, by pilots who also lost their legs to frostbite after being shot down by the enemy were readily forgotten.¹¹⁶

While ordinary soldiers and pilots were praised in the press, the scapegoating of defeats onto the shoulders of commanders intensified in 1942. After the capture of Rostov by the Germans, Werth noticed how the press “dropped” hints that relegated the loss of the city onto the shoulders of panicky Red Army units and their commanding officers. The result was an introduction of “iron discipline” and a “cry of ‘pull yourselves together’ went through the country.”¹¹⁷

Continued Red Army retreats in 1942 were met with a stern order from Stalin at the end of July, an order that soldiers intended to fulfill and the media regularly emphasized as the Battle for Stalingrad began. Order 227 was read out to every unit in the Red Army but was never published in Stalin's lifetime. On 30 July *Pravda* exclaimed “Not a step back!” at the top of its front page and a leading article invoked the feat of the 28 Panfilovtsy during the defense of Moscow. The same day *Krasnaia zvezda* featured an article exhorting the troops to stand their ground. “Not one step back! – such is the country's order, such is the order of the Commissar of Defense, our leader and general comrade Stalin.” For those who retreated without orders, no “mercy” was to be expected as soldiers were allowed to utilize all the “powers given” to them by the “state.”¹¹⁸ Soon

¹¹⁶ A twenty-four-year-old fighter pilot, Lieutenant Zakhar Sorokin, had both his frostbitten legs amputated after being shot down and spending six days in the arctic cold in October 1941. A year later Sorokin returned to the frontline with two artificial legs, determined to continue the fight against the German enemy. He survived the war with a total of thirteen victories. Christer Bergstrom and Andrey Mikhailov, *Black Cross/Red Star: Operation Barbarossa 1941* (Pacifica: Pacifica Military History, 2000), 177.

¹¹⁷ In addition to playing down the loss of Rostov, the press hinted that the allies were in part responsible, listing divisions flowing from the west to the Eastern Front. Werth, *The Year of Stalingrad*, 137, 161.

¹¹⁸ *Pravda*, July 30, 1942, 1; “Stoiko zashchishchat' rodnuiu zemliu!,” *Krasnaia zvezda*, July 30, 1942, 1.

soldiers themselves exhibited the same mindset. Iosif Gil'man, in an August 1942 letter commented how "Every day we beat the Fascists under the slogan 'Not one step back,' and we fulfill this slogan with honor."¹¹⁹

While order 227 attempted to stem the tide of retreats in the south of the country, an answer needed to be found for why those withdrawals occurred in the first place. The pages of *Pravda* soon provided an answer. Frontline correspondent Alexander Poliakov's *Russians Don't Surrender* (originally entitled *V tylu vraga*) presented a description of the fighting the Red Army experienced in 1941. Poliakov portrayed a battle hardened division and a commander, Kuzma Nikitovich Galitskii, with enough self-assurance that when presented with a German propaganda leaflet outlining the dire situation his division was in, within days of the invasion, through the use of a diagram, responded with "Well, thanks for orienting us..."¹²⁰

Removing responsibility from Stalin and his leadership and supporting this cheerleading of a younger, more educated generation was another 1942 text. In August a major publication appeared in the pages of *Pravda*, Aleksandr Korneichuk's play, *The Front*.¹²¹ How important the play was for Stalin is "evidenced by the fact that members of military councils of the fronts were required to provide reports on the views and statements of the command staff on Korneichuk's play."¹²² Amir Weiner describes how it led to the "uneasy coexistence of conflicting myths at the core of" the Soviet Union's

¹¹⁹ Al'tman, Terushkin, and Brodskaiia, 157.

¹²⁰ Poliakov, *V tylu vraga*, 16; Poliakov, *Russians Don't Surrender*, 25.

¹²¹ Aleksandr Korneichuk, "Front," *Pravda*, August 24 – August 27, 1942.

¹²² Pavlenko, 358.

“social and political legitimacy.”¹²³ The play featured a battle between generations, a front commander who made his reputation during the Civil War, a relic of an outdated past, and an army commander, who quickly rose through the ranks after the war began, exemplifying the new breed of officers needed to win the war. This narrative worked well in reinforcing the idea that the Red Army was previously inexperienced, and had to learn to wage war as a result of Germany’s surprise attack.

Similar to 1941, Stalin continued to scapegoat battlefield failures onto the shoulders of commanders, but now he had a playwright and author supporting his position and propagating it to the reading public. General Aleksei Zygin, a Civil War veteran and an army commander during the Second World War, considered the play reflective of the true situation at the front, complaining only that it took so long to be published. Marshal Timoshenko, however, viewed it as damaging “for centuries to come” and wanted the author and those connected with the publication of the play to be investigated. No doubt Timoshenko was also concerned that he was representative of those under attack by the play, especially as he had just suffered a major defeat in May 1942 outside Kharkov. In reply, Stalin thought Timoshenko incorrect, stating “the play will have enormous educational significance for the Red Army and its command staff; the play correctly notes the Red Army’s shortcomings and it would be incorrect to close our eyes to these deficiencies. It takes courage to acknowledge shortcomings and to take

¹²³ Weiner, *Making Sense of War*, 43-44.

measures to liquidate them.” It was, according to Stalin, the only way to improve Red Army performance.¹²⁴

The Front presented a fundamental explanation to the setbacks the Red Army experienced in 1942. Ehrenburg recalled how the retreat in 1942 seemed “more frightening than that of 1941,” which was explained by the factor of “surprise.”¹²⁵ Explanations for defeats in 1942 could be justified by leaning on Korneichuk’s play and commanders could be singled out for blame. According to a recent publication, based on interviews with Red Army veterans, officers “noted a growing divide within the military” and an army commander blamed the play for inciting criticisms and accusations among the rank-and-file against commanding officers as the Germans advanced on Stalingrad.¹²⁶

Throughout the text of *The Front* there is no doubt that Gorlov, the front command, is of the generation that came up the ranks through sheer force of will and without adequate military education. He is “neither an academician nor a theoretician” but simply “an old battle horse.” Gorlov relied on personal bravery of his troops in overcoming his narrow-minded views of modern warfare. The main ideas within Korneichuk’s play revolved around the notion that Civil War era commanders were in

¹²⁴ Ehrenburg, *The War 1941-1945*, 85; Aleksander A. Maslov, *Fallen Soviet Generals* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), 218-219; M. M. Gareev and V. F. Simonov, *Pobediteli 1941-1945: polkovodtsy i voenachal'niki* (Moscow: Ekzamen, 2005), 269. Similarly, Konev, future Marshal of the Soviet Union and liberator of Berlin, was berated by Stalin for his opposition to the play. Gorbachevsky, 72-74, 82; Sarnov, *Stalin i Pisateli, kniga chetvertaia*, 856.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹²⁶ Hellbeck, 63.

need of replacement, their old ways caused grievous losses and reverses at the front that new, younger, talented commanders reared in Soviet institutions needed to correct.¹²⁷

Gorlov is eager to admit his faults and limits, almost forcefully, somewhat reflecting Stalin's need to have the public understand on whose shoulders the defeats rest. Even the answer to the question of what should be done reeks of Stalinist rhetoric as Miron, Gorlov's brother, exclaims that "we must smash them, these conceited ignoramuses, beat them till they bleed, beat them to pulp, and replace them as soon as possible with new young talented people. If we don't, our great cause is in danger."¹²⁸

The end of *The Front* assures the reader that Stalin is working behind the scenes to ensure a final victory is made possible. His actions are reminiscent of how during industrialization *vydvizhentsy* assumed many top positions within industries thanks to the Central Committee of the Party. By the end of the play, a member of the military council pontificates on how "Stalin says that it's necessary to advance young, talented military commanders to leading positions, to work together with the older men to conduct war along modern lines and not in the old-fashioned way."¹²⁹ Consequently, Gorlov is forced to hand over command of the front to the young, educated and talented Ognev.

In conjunction with the failure of older Soviet commanders, the Western Allies were discussed in Soviet articles to help explain the course of events on the Eastern Front. An April 1942 article mentioned how German forces were siphoned off from the west and transferred to the Eastern Front. These references become more frequent as the

¹²⁷ Korneichuk, "The Front," 465, 483, 516.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 484.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 479, 520.

German summer offensive unfolded. In part they were a ready tool to be used to explain away Soviet defeats. Another article mentioned the help Germany received from her allies while waging war in Southern Russia. While Soviet forces clearly saw the threat of constant German advances against the Red Army, the continued lack of a second front meant allied inaction was resulting in dangerous delays to the war effort.¹³⁰ In a speech delivered in November of 1942, Stalin, while avoiding the question of why exactly it was that the allies had yet to invade mainland Europe, argued that the absence of an invasion allowed for the success Germany enjoyed throughout 1942.¹³¹ Thus, not only was all of Europe working for Hitler's war machine, but, in addition, the inactivity of the allies allowed German forces and her allies to advance as far as Stalin's namesake city.

While stressing the lack of a second front, Soviet newspapers increasingly emphasized that other fronts were merely "appendages" to the definitive nature of the Eastern Front. Reports were expected to prioritize the Soviet-German front and put into context allied victories. Red Army resistance was claimed to have "saved the neutral countries" of Europe. The invasion of the Soviet Union was continually underlined as the main event of the war, "in one brief June night the war suddenly blazed up and

¹³⁰ At one point, Ehrenburg claimed he was kept awake with the news that a new German division had "arrived at Voronezh – from France." Ehrenburg, *The Tempering of Russia*, 224-225, 335; Werth, *The Year of Stalingrad*, 139, 141; G. Aleksandrov, "O reshaiushchikh usloviakh pobedy nad vragom," *Pravda*, July 13, 1942, 4.

¹³¹ References were made to the reactionary groups among allied governments, particularly, isolationists in the case of the United States or those who favored a rapprochement with Germany among the British. Johnston, 52-53.

embroiled the world. The Tommy and the Russian soldier clasped each other's hands. We were in the war alone, on us had descended all the military might of Germany.”¹³²

Articles described how England, thanks to Germany's defeat outside Moscow, was given “a chance to create a powerful army.” It was thanks to Soviet workers and collective farmers that “the English now can talk about a second front, it is only because through the winter our front, the first and only one, held firm.” The Soviet war effort also gave “America a chance to mobilize her industry, to build transports, to dispatch American troops to Europe. We were alone all that year. Now we are waiting on the front line for our friends in battle.”¹³³

Simultaneously, articles pointed out how Red Army soldiers questioned their hope for an eventual appearance of a second front. If in the middle of June 1942 Ehrenburg wrote how “we are awaiting the second front as one awaits a good comrade at the front line – it is jollier to fight together,” by the end of July he held a more subdued stance: “now I should say that our men are awaiting the second front in silence and intently...” The second front within the pages of Soviet newspapers might not have been described as crucial to the war effort, but it was portrayed as a welcomed relief. *Pravda* described Europe waiting for a second front “as in the shaft of a mine men wait for a draft of air.”¹³⁴ Consequently, according to Soviet reports, Europe's need for a second front was the equivalent of waiting for a draft of air, while Russia waited for a second front

¹³² Ibid., 53; Ehrenburg, *The Tempering of Russia*, 297; Ilia Ehrenburg, “Serdtsse Anglii,” *Pravda*, June 19, 1942, 4.

¹³³ Ehrenburg, *The Tempering of Russia*, 302, 322. See also Ilia Ehrenburg, “Sevastopol,” *Krasnaia zvezda*, June 6, 1942, 3; Ilia Ehrenburg, “Serdtsse Anglii,” *Pravda*, June 19, 1942, 4.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 355; Ilia Ehrenburg, “Serdtsse Anglii,” *Pravda*, June 19, 1942, 4.

because “it is jollier to fight together.” One needed it to survive, the other to share in the jollity. It appeared the Soviet Union not only bought time for the western allies to arm themselves and “mobilize” their industries, but additionally inflicted significant casualties on the Germans making it that much easier for an eventual allied invasion to occur.

As the Red Army’s performance on the field of battle offered potential help to the Western Allies, simultaneously the war was not only uniting but also strengthening the population of the Soviet Union. By late June a *Krasnaia zvezda* article discussed what the end of the war would signify for the Soviet population: “We are not conceited: we know how much inertia, bureaucracy, and stupidity we had. In one year of war we learned a great deal. When we return to our work benches, to our tractors, to our books, we shall be different and better, we shall work more intelligently, we shall live more honestly.” The war became a device by which to unite the nation and people. Although large swaths of territory were lost, Ehrenburg argued that “we can say that we are stronger now than in the 22nd of June, 1941...” Ehrenburg urged his audience to “remember about what has been acquired and tell ourselves that the man who will return from the Front is worth ten prewar men...In the war we have acquired initiative, discipline, and inner freedom.”¹³⁵ Ehrenburg’s thoughts were reflected in a letter he received from a Guards First Lieutenant in the summer of 1942 who exclaimed: “We shall return from the war, not purer, not more upright – before the war we were as pure as

¹³⁵ Ilia Ehrenburg, “Ispytanie Ognem,” *Krasnaia zvezda*, June 27, 1942, 3; Ehrenburg and Simonov, 230, 231, 232.

white snow and completely upright. We shall return wise, more clear-sighted, and sterner.”¹³⁶

If the above offered an example of when reader’s thoughts matched Ehrenburg’s, the summer of 1942 also witnessed an exchange where Ehrenburg reflected the thoughts of this readers. On 14 July a letter from S. Kazantsev to Ehrenburg read:

...we, the men at the front, beg you to write articles which may still more effectively summon the Russian men, small and great, to fine deeds and to heroism. It is necessary to arouse in our Russian people such fury, such hatred for the Germans that the Russian will fight the German with whatever is available. So that a woman, and a little girl, an old man, and a boy may arm themselves with axes, scythes, stones, and in any encounter with a German kill him. It is necessary to say more loudly to the Russian man: he who does not kill a German is helping the Germans.¹³⁷

Undoubtedly Ehrenburg’s response was an article he became quite infamous for, “Kill!,” published in *Krasnaia zvezda* on 24 July:

We know everything. We remember everything. We have understood: the Germans are not human beings. From now on the word ‘German’ is for us the most horrible curse. From now on the word ‘German’ discharges a rifle. We shall do no talking. We shall not express indignation. We will kill. If you have not killed one German during the day, you have lost a day. If you think that instead of you your neighbor will kill a German, you have failed to understand the menace. If you will not kill a German, a German will kill you. He will take away your people, and will torture them in his accursed Germany. If you cannot kill a German with a bullet, kill him with a bayonet. If there is a momentary calm in your sector, if you are awaiting a battle, kill a German before the battle. If you leave a German alive, a German will hang a Russian man and will dishonor a Russian woman. If you have killed one German, kill another – nothing gladdens us more than German corpses. Do not count the days. Do not count the miles. Count one thing: the Germans you have killed. Kill a German! – this is what an old mother begs of you. Kill a German! – this is what a child implores you to do. Kill a German! – this is what your native land cries to you. Do not miss fire. Do not let him by. Kill!¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Ehrenburg, *The Tempering of Russia*, 350.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 351.

¹³⁸ Ilia Ehrenburg, “Ubei!,” *Krasnaia zvezda*, July 24, 1942, 4.

The above exchange between the reader and Ehrenburg's response in the form of one of his most often quoted pieces is one example of the population working in tandem with correspondents during the war, or even of readers as muses. Ehrenburg himself comments in his memoirs that he received "hundreds" of requests from soldiers at the front to "tear the Fritzes to pieces in *Red Star*."¹³⁹ Not only were correspondents like Ehrenburg taking cues from Stalin and the censors, but readers themselves offered support and championed the creation of a narrative of the war that became inseparable from themes focused on by journalists and at times enforced by the Soviet leadership.

Another letter sent to Ehrenburg on 25 September 1942 was a mixture of emotions and exhibited once more the intertwining of the official narrative with how soldiers viewed the course the war was taking. Giorgii Kobyl'nik began the war on 22 June 1941 and witnessed Red Army retreats from Lithuania of 40-50 kilometers a day. Eventually, his unit remained entrenched outside Leningrad while the Germans advanced in the south. He could not make sense of the situation and confessed that "I lost my mother, wife, son, [but] I do not cry, as I have seen more grief than I have tears. But we lost all of Ukraine, the Kuban and northern Caucasus – this is what hurts [my] heart, and the enemy moreover is at Stalingrad and crawls further." Having read many of Ehrenburg's articles Kobyl'nik attested to the fact that "Russians" fight well: "They go into the attack, die, but they go and go." But Russian bravery could only achieve so

¹³⁹ Ehrenburg, *The War 1941-1945*, 58. Similar articles, written before Ehrenburg's piece, included Alexei Tolstoy's "Kill the Beast," published in late June 1942. Werth, *The Year of Stalingrad*, 108-109. Simonov, in his poem "Kill Him," published on 18 July urged soldiers to "Kill a German, so that he, and not you, should lie in the ground...Kill him, kill him every time you see him." Konstantin Simonov, "Ubei ego!," *Krasnaia zvezda*, July 18, 1942, 3.

much. The author reiterated familiar ideas in that the army needed more tanks and planes, which they lacked compared to the Germans who had all of Europe working for them.¹⁴⁰

By the end of 1942 Soviet journalists began authoring articles that pointed to the tangible differences evident between the Red Army of June 1941 and December 1942. When visiting a general at his observation post, Simonov witnessed the report of a German tank advance. After listening to the report, the general “calmly gives orders to fire at the tanks from all available artillery, and issues a few additional orders regarding artillery support.” Simonov wrote how “The calmness of the division commander is not the ostentatious calmness of a man who only wants to inspire bravery in the hearts of subordinates, but the inner calmness of a man who is confident that the danger will be overcome. I am convinced that the same commander would not have been as calm fifteen months ago when confronted with the same report about advancing tanks...”¹⁴¹

By the end of 1942 Soviet reporters perceived a radical change in the course of the war, if Moscow signaled the Germans could be defeated, victory at Stalingrad meant they would be. While the Wehrmacht advanced to Stalingrad and held the city under siege for months, by the end of November a Soviet counter-offensive encircled the largest German army on the Eastern Front. The end of large-scale retreats and the ability to counter the enemy with commanders engrained with a confidence they lacked fifteen months previously proved a turning point for the Red Army. In the latter phase of the war Ehrenburg wrote, “if all the enslaved peoples have gained hope, it is because in

¹⁴⁰ Frezinskii, 104.

¹⁴¹ Ehrenburg and Simonov, 237-238.

October 1941 Russia...did not surrender; it is because Stalingrad was the personification of the Russian and Soviet soul.”¹⁴² By the end of 1942, those who might question Stalin’s actions during the first six months of the war now had new scapegoats to fixate on, while a new narrative was spun around the mistakes made and turned them into foreseen consequences of a grandiose strategy meant to disorient and destroy an opponent that all of Europe quaked under and worked for.

German advances against Stalingrad and their eventual defeat lined up with Soviet attempts to tighten control over the media as there was a fear of reporters inadvertently divulging military secrets due to inadequate experience. Limits were placed on the number of reporters at the front as the state hoped to control the flow of information. Correspondents went through additional training, while lists were circulated with pre-approved subjects for both journalists and photojournalists to adhere to. Simultaneously, censors continued their work. In 1943 Ehrenburg’s book *One Hundred Letters*, a collection of articles and letters received from soldiers at the front, was about to be published when all of a sudden it was “withdrawn.” When inquiring for a reason about its rejection from publication he was told: “This isn’t 1941.”¹⁴³

¹⁴² Ehrenburg, *The Tempering of Russia*, viii.

¹⁴³ Shneer, 111-112; Ehrenburg, *The War 1941-1945*, 121.

Studying War while Waging War

As the war unfolded, there were academic and military publications that documented and attempted to explain its course. Major General Mikhail Galaktionov's June 1942 article in *Voennaia Mysl*, put forward an analysis behind the reasons for Germany's failed Blitzkrieg against the Soviet Union and provided the initial framework for what became the concept of "active defense," which Stalin soon appropriated in order to explain away the defeats of 1941 and 1942. Galaktionov stressed that German forces were insufficient to take on the great expanses of Russia and described how Soviet defensive tactics strained the Wehrmacht's ability to advance. In viewing the results of the 1941-42 campaign against the Red Army, Galaktionov saw only "inglorious ruin" for the Germans among "the boundless Russian expanses."¹⁴⁴

Similarly, in July 1943, another article in *Voennaia Mysl*, written by Lieutenant General Evgenii Shilovskii, a professor at the General Staff Academy, gave a more objective overview of Soviet operations during the Moscow Counter-Offensive stating: "the troops mastered and successfully applied mainly the more simple methods of operations; more complex methods – operations of encirclement, deep penetrations – were less successful, and sometimes failed completely." The overestimation of Red Army abilities could be further seen as Shilovskii observed how "decisive objectives were set as soon as possible before the beginning of operations. Sometimes, the scope of these objectives exceeded available forces and means. In the future, we learned better to match operational tasks with forces available for their execution."¹⁴⁵ Where Galaktionov

¹⁴⁴ Cited in Gallagher, 72-73.

¹⁴⁵ Cited in Ibid., 72.

championed “active defense,” Shilovskii spoke of the Red Army’s education through war, both ideas supported Stalin’s dominant narrative of the war.

In conjunction with the above examples, a “historic” narrative was being created by a commission – authorized by a decision of the Moscow Committee in December 1941 – tasked with compiling a history of the defense of Moscow. The result of the commission’s initial work was a 360 page study entitled “The Defense of Moscow with troops from the Moscow Defensive Zone,” submitted on 22 February 1942.¹⁴⁶ It contained not only “historic” but “current value.” The study offered a description of the defense of Moscow, a very dry and technical document meant for academic and military consumption. It included material on the formation of volunteer units, the movements and creation of units assigned to the Moscow defensive zone, and discussed some of the inadequacies of the Red Army but never listed casualties sustained by Soviet troops while sometimes mentioning German trophies and losses in passing. The significance of this work lies in that it was one of the first, if not *the* first, attempts to document aspects of the war’s development for future academic studies.

In examining this document it becomes apparent that the internal language used in studies created for military experts to describe the war mirrored that which the population was regularly exposed to. Throughout the report there is little to no mention about the beginning of the war or what lessons could be drawn from it. The text described the German strategy up to the Moscow Counter-Offensive as “vicious and adventurous”

¹⁴⁶ “Oborona moskvy Voiskam Moskovskoi Zony oborony.” RGASPI, f. 17, op. 125, d. 204, l. 1, 8, 9. Recently this study was reprinted, S.S. Elizarov, S.V. Kostina, eds., *Bitva za Moskvu: Istoriiia Moskovskoi zonyi oboronyi* (Moscow: AO “Moskovskie uchebniki i Kartolitografiia”, 2001). My thanks to Alexander Hill for making me aware of this publication.

while opposing it with “full force” the “Stalinist strategy” was revealed and enriched existing Soviet military doctrine.¹⁴⁷

Stalin’s role was emphasized as his 3 July 1941 radio address was treated as the reason for a surge of “patriotic enthusiasm” unleashed by the “masses of Soviet citizens,” leading to the swelling of the people’s militia ranks with “patriots of our country.” In describing the German lunge toward Moscow, the report noted that when confronted “with the tactics of active defense and persistent counter-attacks by the Red Army, the German command was forced to quickly abandon the frontal attack against Moscow...”¹⁴⁸ This mention of an “active defense” ran counter to orders issued by Red Army commanders. For instance, Konstantin Rokossovskii’s commanding officer, Ivan Konev, forbid any mention of a “mobile defense” and insisted that Rokossovskii’s forces fight stubbornly on their defensive line.¹⁴⁹ The idea of an active defense, soon to become entrenched in Soviet thinking about 1941, masked the true situation the Red Army encountered.

At the gates of Moscow, the Wehrmacht was met with a “carefully thought-out, wise Stalinist strategy,” which came to define the initial period of war on the Eastern Front. Concentrated from the far rear were new armies, moved up in a timely manner for measured counter-strikes at specific strategic points. Stalinist strategy not only came to mean the use of “active defense” to lure the enemy into the hinterland, but also everything that was needed to eventually defeat the Wehrmacht on the approaches to

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 16.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 17, 27.

¹⁴⁹ TsAMO, f. 208, op. 2511, d. 191, l. 54, cited in Lev Lopukhovskii, *Viazemskaia katastrofa* (Moscow: Iauza Eksmo, 2008), 117.

Moscow. This included husbanding resources and manpower within the Red Army. The timing of the attack was also left up to Stalin to dictate, as a perfectly timed counter-strike would result in the creation of a “fracture” along the front.¹⁵⁰

This internal study was initially set to expand its parameters as a 2 January 1943 letter to the secretary of the Central Committee, Shcherbakov, and the head of Agitprop, Aleksandrov, described how the commission’s work had evolved since its creation “beyond the original assignment.” Studies about the defense of Moscow needed to encompass discussions of operations around Tula and Kalinin, which were heavily tied into the defensive operations around Moscow as the Germans were planning to encircle Moscow from the north and south. The Academy of Sciences of the USSR created a group consisting of researchers to collect and organize materials dealing with the entire Great Patriotic War.¹⁵¹ Their assignment was to collect material and compile histories of the defense of Moscow, Leningrad, Stalingrad, Tula, Sevastopol, and Odessa as well as a general compilation chronicling the events of the Second World War and the histories of individual combat formations, primarily the accomplishments of Guards units.

Soon, the creation of numerous commissions to outline the war’s history meant the NKVD felt a need to intervene and create barriers to the perceived unlimited use of archival information. In May of 1943 Aleksandrov received a letter from Beria’s deputy, Sergei Kruglov, outlining how commissions on the history of the war have formed in each republic as well as the formation of regional and provincial commissions. These

¹⁵⁰ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 125, d. 204, l. 18-19.

¹⁵¹ The personnel tasked with creating a history of the Great Patriotic War included: E. M. Iaroslavskii, P. N. Pospelov, G. F. Aleksandrov, I. V. Shikin, I. V. Rogov, I. I. Mints, P. K Ponomarenko, A. I. Makhanov, M. B. Mitin, and N. A. Mikhailov. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 125, d. 204, l. 1-2.

organizations began soliciting files from institutions, which Kruglov insisted contradicted decision No. 723 of the People's Commissar of the USSR from 29 March 1941 in that the access to materials violated the historical orderliness of the documents that was created by institutions during the war. The use of archival information by so many different organizations made it more difficult to utilize needed information on a scientific and historical basis as well as for "practical purposes," and created the possibility that valuable materials might become lost or damaged.¹⁵²

With the archives under the aegis of the NKVD, Kruglov outlined conditions for their continued use and simultaneously placed limits on future research. The forwarding of materials for the purpose of study or publication should only be done by copies and they should be "certified" as authentic copies. All commissions needed to include a representative of the Department of the State Archives of the NKVD and their local organs. The removal of individual documents from the archives was to be prohibited and the commission, in tandem with the Department of the State Archives of the NKVD, needed to develop a procedure for the use of documents. The implementation of these measures would "enable the commissions, on the basis of already collected material from state archives, to comprehensively study the history of the Patriotic War."¹⁵³ These procedures, although cloaked in some necessary concerns over archival collections,

¹⁵² Ibid., 1-2, 3. A similar "haphazard process" was seen by Aleksandrov to have taken place in 1942 when he commented how "from 1941 to 1942, a series of organizations has taken upon itself the task of collecting materials about the crimes of the German army. This work is being taken up by local executive committees, planning committees, the Ministry of Health, the Union of Architects, the Commission for the History of the Patriotic War, the Institute for the History of Material Culture, the Historical Museum, and other organizations. There is no unifying plan and we will not be able to effectively use the results of this work in propaganda now or after the war." Cited in Shneer, 141.

¹⁵³ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 125, d. 204, l. 3-4.

undoubtedly served an ulterior purpose and helped limit future research and publications on the war.

Another internal document, published in 1943 under the aegis of the General Staff's military-historical section, was the study of the Battle of Moscow, originally titled "Razgrom nemetskikh voisk pod Moskvoy."¹⁵⁴ While the previous study was authored by mid-ranking Red Army commanders, this General Staff study was edited by Marshal Boris Shaposhnikov, and compiled by a commission headed by previously mentioned Lieutenant General Evgenii Shilovskii, working with colonels and generals. In some ways this report can be seen as the culmination of the previous study on the Moscow Defensive Zone. Whereas the account of the defensive zone attempted to explain how the Germans were stopped, the discussion of the German defeat outside Moscow brought to closure the initial period of the war and signaled a turning point. The study discussed the reasons for why the German armed forces were able to achieve victories in the initial period of the war. They included: 1) Germany's armed forces were mobilized and were superior to their Red Army opponent; 2) Germany had two years of wartime experience; 3) The Wehrmacht enjoyed a superiority in mechanized forces and air power; 4) Germany began the war with a "perfidious attack" against the Soviet Union without a declaration of war; 5) German troops were "drunk" on previous victories and raised in the "spirit of 'invincibility' and disdain for the enemy."¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Harrison, *The Battle of Moscow 1941-1942: The Red Army's Defensive Operations and Counter-Offensive along the Moscow Strategic Direction*.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, xii, xiv.

The study epitomized ideas and the textual language of future Soviet literature on the war years while Stalin was alive. Superior German equipment permitted the Wehrmacht to attack in multiple directions and “carry out maneuver operations” allowing for large advances. The Red Army, compared to the Wehrmacht, was a “still young” force that “having fought only four months” had yet to become a “fully cadre force, while facing at the same time the Germans cadre navy and army, which have been waging war for two years.” Soviet operations were presented as if part of a larger plan to defeat the Germans at Moscow, masking the ad hoc measures being implemented by Stalin and his commanders. German losses were regularly stated while mention of general Soviet losses was avoided.¹⁵⁶

Stalin took center stage while Red Army commanders were hardly mentioned and members of military councils were omitted. Commanding officers, like Zhukov, when mentioned were described as “executors” of “the operational plans of the Supreme Commander-in-Chief.” Stalin was portrayed as the “manipulator” of events as due to his “wise leadership” Red Army troops were able to wear down the enemy. German plans “proved to be impracticable and adventuristic and led the German-Fascist troops to defeat at Moscow.” Stalin’s speech on the anniversary of the October Revolution “answered all the questions which at that moment were agitating the soldiers and commanders. They learned of the reasons behind our armies temporary setbacks...” Stalin’s words “literally

¹⁵⁶ Rare admissions of the number of tanks and manpower that remained of units was the only way to ascertain some of the casualties inflicted on the Red Army. In addition, giving credence both to the Red Army’s abilities and German losses in the field, there were numerous mentions made of trophies taken by the Red Army. Ibid., 29, 30, 36, 58, 65, 69, 71, 80, 95, 188, 189, 194, 195, 200, 261, 293, 307, 394, 444.

transformed” how the “rank and file” viewed the war. The result was “a sharp turning point...in the consciousness and attitudes of the soldiers and commanders.”¹⁵⁷

It is quite telling that both internal studies meant for professional military analysis were riddled with such inaccuracies and hosannas toward Stalin. He not only led the army, including the air force and people, but also managed to organize reserves and their timely arrival at needed sectors of the front, which “played a decisive role in the course of the Battle of Moscow.”¹⁵⁸ References to “active defense” were continuously made as orders from the Supreme High Command called for “waging a stubborn and active defense” in the face of the German advance so as to “delay” the enemy “until favorable conditions arose for passing over to a decisive counteroffensive.” By the end of November and beginning of December the previously mentioned “permanent operating factors” were now at work and signaled that “realistic conditions for changing the overall course” of the war on the Soviet-German front existed.¹⁵⁹ The eventual victory before Moscow was made possible by “the grand patriotism of the Soviet people, the bravery and skill of the Red Army, and comrade Stalin’s wise leadership.”¹⁶⁰ Thus, the seeds of a Stalinist dominated wartime and postwar narrative can be seen to have been planted within this study.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 29, 39, 98, 151-153, 436.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 41, 44, 125, 136, 140, 144.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 28, 29, 35, 37, 38, 73, 154, 160.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 275, 280, 284, 299, 453.

The Red Army Victorious and on the Offensive – 1943-1945

By the beginning of February 1943, Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus's Sixth Army was destroyed by Red Army forces in and around Stalingrad and Stalin's place within the war's narrative assumed a new form. Werth found a change in official reports that now began to mention "Stalinist strategy" and "the Stalinist military school of thought" combined with "the military genius of Stalin."¹⁶¹ From this point on Soviet advances against the Wehrmacht were the norm with slight reverses giving Germans false hope and the Red Army continued awareness that the enemy had yet to be critically weakened.

With Red Army forces attacking, Stalin still searched for answers as to why the Red Army was defeated in the initial period of the war while putting into context the Soviet Union's role in the anti-Hitler coalition. The "laws of history" (perhaps leaning on a Marxist interpretation) were put forward as an explanation, stating that the aggressor nation is always better prepared for war than peace-loving nations.¹⁶² Simultaneously, the second front remained a significant issue. The Sovinformburo insisted that Ehrenburg's articles for the foreign press needed to "stress" Soviet loyalty to the allies but at the same time "not fail to remind them that it was time to open the Second Front."¹⁶³ Stalin considered the activities of the Western Allies on secondary fronts as creating the necessary conditions for an eventual invasion of mainland Europe, ultimately

¹⁶¹ Alexander Werth, *Russia at War, 1941-1945* (New York: Dutton, 1964), 595.

¹⁶² Pavlenko, 359.

¹⁶³ Ehrenburg, *The War 1941-1945*, 120-121.

treating the second front as a means to a quicker conclusion, rather than a necessity for victory.¹⁶⁴

Soviet advances coincided with an increase in Lend Lease deliveries but a reduction in reportage on allied aid. While the lack of a second front was regularly singled out as part of the reason for German victories, the import of allied war materials was a “sensitive issue” for the Soviets. Industrialization needed to be justified as part of the crash program Stalin created in order for the country to catch up to the west. As a result, one of the reasons the defeats in 1941 came as such a shock to Soviet citizens was due to their continuous exposure to propaganda assurances about the amount of technology that stood behind the Red Army. Lauding the enemy’s technological prowess could result in accusations of a defeatist attitude. 1943, however, was not 1941. By the beginning of 1943, Soviet technological and scientific achievements were declared one of the causes for the war’s crucial turn against the Germans and the press went as far as to deny “that Germany had enjoyed a technological advantage at the start of the war.”¹⁶⁵

Previously, there was an omission of any open condemnation of military ineptitude regarding the deployment of the Red Army during the initial period of the war. On 14 January 1943 an article argued that “we had no combat experience in 1941, we learned to fight by fighting.” This explanation, however true, fit well with existing circumstances.¹⁶⁶ By February 1943, earlier shortcomings within Soviet forces were allowed mention as it was claimed “stupid and harmful linear tactics” were now replaced

¹⁶⁴ Johnston, 51-52.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 91-92.

¹⁶⁶ Ehrenburg and Simonov, 252.

by maneuver warfare.¹⁶⁷ Simonov's 22 July article, "In the District of Ponyry," echoed the above change. Speaking from the point of view of a Red Army Brigade commander, Simonov saw how officers "had acquired experience and calm...they were becoming cured of the 'infantile' disorders which had tormented them during the first months of the war."¹⁶⁸ While the Red Army was apparently learning to wage war on a more professional level, casualty reports continued to downplay Soviet losses while exaggerating German casualties.¹⁶⁹

At the end of 1943 Stalin spoke to a crowd gathered in Moscow and justified the legacy of his leadership. The Red Army might have played its part in defeating Germany at the gates of Moscow and Stalingrad, but he emphasized "that it had not been working on its own. It was time to celebrate the party and the government, the men and women who had stayed at home." For Stalin, "Soviet power that was established twenty-six years ago has turned our country – in a brief historical period – into an inviolable fortress."¹⁷⁰ The war served as vindication for the 1917 revolution and Stalinist practices in the 1920s and 1930s, Stalin and those who remained close to him were justified in their decision-making process which had resulted in an eventual ability to defeat the Germans and turn the war in the Red Army's favor.

¹⁶⁷ Mawdsley, "Explaining Military Failure," 147-148.

¹⁶⁸ Ehrenburg and Simonov, 320.

¹⁶⁹ On 22 June 1943, *Pravda* listed how Germany and her allies had suffered a total of 6.4 million killed and prisoner, while losing 56,500 pieces of artillery, 42,400 tanks and 43,000 airplanes. The Red Army, meanwhile, lost 4.2 million killed and missing, with 35,000 artillery pieces, 30,000 tanks and 23,000 planes. Sovinformburo, "Dva goda Otechestvennoi voyny Sovetskogo Soiuza," *Pravda*, June 22, 1943, 1.

¹⁷⁰ Merridale, *Ivan's War*, 227-228.

The long-awaited invasion of mainland Europe by the Western Allies took place in June 1944. Successive news broadcasts treated the landing in “glowing terms” the next day. Two full pages were devoted by *Pravda* to the story and Ehrenburg wrote in *Krasnaia zvezda* that “It has Begun!” while expressing “the pride of the Soviet people in their ‘brothers-in-arms.’” Over the next few days, the success enjoyed by the allies was “widely praised” with Stalin commenting that “the history of war does not know a similar undertaking in breadth of intention, grandiosity of scale and mastery of execution.”¹⁷¹

Even with the success of the Normandy landings the Soviet press continued to stress the important position the USSR maintained in comparison to the other allies, positioning the Soviet Union as “the moral and military head of the Grand Alliance.” The enthusiasm of the initial invasion in the days that followed was soon forgotten as coverage once more reverted to stale descriptions of strategic and operational movements in the West. The main concentration of the Soviet press remained the German-Soviet front. Soviet media fixated on the number of German divisions opposing the Red Army as Stalin himself joined in on November 1944 by noting “that there were 75 German divisions in the West and 200 in the East.”¹⁷²

Early 1945 saw a continuation of the Soviet media’s propaganda in regards to the burden the Red Army faced compared to the other allies. *Pravda’s* weekly summary of world news stressed that the vast majority of the fighting was taking place on the Eastern Front while German forces located in the “West were undertrained and undergunned.”¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ Johnston, 57-58.

¹⁷² Ibid., 59-60.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

An article by Ehrenburg on 11 April entitled “Enough!” described German soldiers surrendering to the western allies with “fanatical enthusiasm” in contrast to costly Red Army advances. He exclaimed that Soviet forces “did not take Koenigsberg by telephone” nor were they going to take Vienna with “cameras.”¹⁷⁴ Ehrenburg was soon rebuked by the head of Agitprop, Aleksandrov, for “over-simplifying” the situation.¹⁷⁵ Although Aleksandrov agreed that German troops were being moved east, he argued this was “an attempt to sow mistrust among the members of the anti-Hitler coalition.”¹⁷⁶ In response, Ehrenburg wrote to Stalin that he did not see himself guilty of Aleksandrov’s accusations, claiming instead that he was not expressing his own “line [but] the feelings of the people.”¹⁷⁷ Consequently, Ehrenburg seemed to believe that he retained a freedom and ability to portray and interpret events as he saw fit.

The public, to some extent, agreed with Ehrenburg’s line of thinking, demonstrating that they preferred the line some journalists were championing over that of highly placed officials who undoubtedly represented Stalin’s position. Ehrenburg himself commented how he “received so many sympathetic letters” in the wake of

¹⁷⁴ Ilia Ehrenburg, “Khvatit!,” *Krasnaia zvezda*, April 11, 1945, 3.

¹⁷⁵ Ehrenburg, *The War 1941-1945*, 176.

¹⁷⁶ G. Aleksandrov, “Tovarishch Erenburg uproshchaet,” *Pravda*, April 14, 1945, 2; Johnston, 59-60; Berkhoff, 193; Ehrenburg, *The War 1941-1945*, 31, 176. Aleksandrov’s article against Ehrenburg in all likelihood was a reaction to a denunciation sent to Stalin by Viktor Abakumov, head of SMERSH (Death to Spies), who claimed in a 29 March 1945 letter that a speech by Ehrenburg at the Frunze Military Academy accused the Red Army of being unprepared in restoring order in East Prussia and of soldiers having a poor political education. Sarnov, *Stalin i Pisateli, kniga pervaiia*, 710-711. A precursor to Aleksandrov’s reproach might have been changes to an article by Ehrenburg without his consultation, as is evident from a letter sent by Ehrenburg on 5 February 1944 where he asked that well-established practices not be departed from in regards to making changes without his input and consent. This was not the first time that Ehrenburg commented on changes made to his articles. RGASPI, f. 629, op. 1, d. 110, l. 1, 4.

¹⁷⁷ Sarnov, *Stalin i Pisateli, kniga pervaiia*, 620.

Aleksandrov's article.¹⁷⁸ A letter from Major Grigorii Kobyl'nik claimed that frontline troops were surprised by Aleksandrov's stance, and that Ehrenburg correctly described Germany as "one huge gang." Another frontline soldier wrote that "comrade Aleksandrov speaks from the point of view of the TsK [Central Committee] and reflects the party line, however my voice and the voice of my comrades are with you." Consequently, at least some evidence exists that correspondents had support for their version of the war and even public opposition by highly ranked officials did not always mean the party line would be blindly followed by readers and the opinions of correspondents ignored. Ehrenburg's rebuke did not mean an end to Soviet reports on Germany's lackluster performance in the west as articles continuously placed the USSR at the center of the allied effort and as the driving force behind the anti-Hitler coalition.¹⁷⁹

As the Soviet Union's role as liberator was being played out in the press, authors continued analyzing the significance of 1941. Ehrenburg's 16 June 1945 article commented on the "greatness" of the Soviet Union, whose "stoutness of heart is not tested by roses, but by iron." Ehrenburg saw 1941 and 1942 as years of "suffering" from which "our victory rose." As the German Army advanced past burnt cities and Red Army divisions were encircled and destroyed, the Soviet population "did not lose heart, they did not submit."¹⁸⁰ Grossman connected the liberation of Europe to the initial suffering the Soviet population underwent: "He who has not tasted the grief of the

¹⁷⁸ Ehrenburg, *The War 1941-1945*, 178.

¹⁷⁹ Frezinskii, 210, 211; Johnston, 59-60.

¹⁸⁰ Ehrenburg and Simonov, 489.

summer of 1941 will not understand in the depths of his being the happiness of our victory.”¹⁸¹

A minor concession was made by Stalin in May of 1945 when he addressed the Red Army’s victorious generals in the Great Kremlin Palace. Stalin admitted that “our government made not a few mistakes, there were times in 1941-1942 when we were in a desperate situation, when our army retreated...” but such an admission made little impact as publications on the war were forbidden and attention was soon taken up by a new enemy that had appeared on the cold horizon.¹⁸²

Controlling the Memory of the War

In the immediate postwar period Stalin started to do away with anything that was not part of a polished, sanitized version of Soviet experiences in the Second World War. The “freedom” of the early war years was forgotten as long as the memory of the war constituted a threat to Stalin’s power. According to a 1969 samizdat article, even private thoughts could result in arrest. Colonel Mikhail Meshcheriakov’s letter to Stalin, wherein he questioned aspects of the Stalinist narrative of the war, serves as one example – he lost six teeth during the ensuing “interrogation.” Consequently, Stalin’s cult of personality reached its zenith as it “manifest” itself to its greatest degree in the postwar period while his status as demigod was cemented in the minds of the population.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Ellis, *The Damned and The Dead*, 3.

¹⁸² Mawdsley, “Explaining Military Failure,” 150.

¹⁸³ Barghoorn, xiii; Stephen F. Cohen, ed., *An End to Silence: Uncensored Opinion in the Soviet Union* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1982), 121; RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, l. 4, 13. This folder contained the transcripts of a theoretical conference on the “Liquidation of the consequences of the

As Stalin's cult dominated the war's narrative, there appeared limits on publications of personal experiences. The idea of a "strategy of active defense," as championed by many in the wake of 1941, depicted the war as all part of Stalin's "genius plan" that consisted of luring the enemy into the depths of the country, while simultaneously preparing the necessary conditions for a counterattack at the gates of Moscow. The theme of sacrifice, so familiar to many during the war years, was played down by Soviet media outlets.¹⁸⁴ Many understood their memories needed to be amended to fit the state's version of events and mirror Stalin's interpretations, creating a shared war experience that extended from the top to the bottom. Deviation from the Stalinist version of events was initially evident but soon extinguished as memories that opposed the party line were publicly attacked.

With Stalin continuously found at the center of events, historians were left with nothing to do but repeat well known myths. Khrushchev would comment when recording his memoirs in the late 1960s that in general "no one else had the right to think as Stalin did. He was the only genius. Therefore he should be the only one to say anything new..." while everyone else could only "propagandize" and "popularize" his ideas, no matter the topic under discussion.¹⁸⁵ Military science, as a result, made no progress as

cult of personality..." as it pertained to the history of the Great Patriotic War, held on 20 February 1963. For a more detailed discussion, see Plamper, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power*.

¹⁸⁴ Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin*, 198.

¹⁸⁵ Sergei Khrushchev, ed. *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev: Reformer, 1945-1964, Vol. 2* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 123; Shepilov, 137, 192.

publications leaned on Stalinist rhetoric. Phrases snatched out of context became the backbone of historical arguments and publications.¹⁸⁶

Aside from amending the war's historiography, moves were also made to discourage discussions and public expressions revolving around the memory of the war. Moscow Radio announced on 9 May 1945 that in honor of the war's conclusion the day would be treated as a "festival" and a general holiday. The Victory Day parade was held on 24 June 1945. There was no parade the following year with localized events taking its place. In 1947 Victory Day was done away with as a state holiday, not to be resurrected until 1965. This decision, combined with the prohibition of demobilized soldiers to form veterans' organizations in the immediate postwar period, severed the ability of veterans to gather for public recognition. Another reason for abolishing Victory Day as a state holiday might have stemmed from its memory being entwined with the victory over Nazi Germany being an allied affair rather than remembered and commemorated *mainly* as a Russian/Soviet victory.¹⁸⁷ Finally, Stalin did not want the public to dwell on the damage sustained during the war years, instead the war needed to be seen as a stepping stone with focus oriented on the future rather than the past. Not only was the victory over Germany a justification of the 1930s, but it was a bridge to a new society, built on the blood and sacrifice of millions.

¹⁸⁶ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, l. 11, 12, 18, 24-25.

¹⁸⁷ Michael K. Jones, *After Hitler: The Last Ten Days of World War II in Europe* (New York: New American Library, 2015), 289; Gill, 152-153; Tumarkin, *The Living and The Dead*, 104; Stephen Lovell, *The Shadow of War: Russia and the USSR, 1941 to the Present* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 8-9; Barghoorn, 150. Additionally, after 1949 *Pravda* eliminated the commemoration of the lifting of the Leningrad Blockade. Bidlack and Lomagin, 76. On veterans' organizations, see Mark Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War: A Popular Movement in an Authoritarian Society 1941-1991* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Stalin also felt threatened by famous and well-known commanders and some, like Zhukov in June 1946, were reassigned to remote outposts for command duties while others suffered incarceration or execution. Zhukov's transfer came as a response to a denunciation by Aleksandr Novikov, Chief Marshal of aviation of the Soviet Air Force, who on 30 April 1946 accused Zhukov of appropriating many of the victories of the Great Patriotic War for himself while downplaying Stalin's role in them. Novikov's statements were in response to his own arrest and denunciation by Sergei Khudiakov, an air force commander who was arrested, interrogated and eventually executed in 1950.¹⁸⁸ However, when Stalin turned on a figure Soviet propaganda had regularly praised, he was met by opposition from Zhukov's wartime comrades. Marshal Konev believed it was only a matter of time before others would be targeted if Zhukov went undefended.¹⁸⁹ Thus, the war had given commanding officers something of a cushion when it came to defending their reputations in the face of Stalin's hostility – although that did not mean that consequences were not forthcoming. Further humiliations followed as Zhukov was excluded from the war's history.¹⁹⁰

As Zhukov was being written out of the memory of the war, some, like Marshal of the Soviet Union Aleksandr Vasilevskii, who considered publishing his memoirs, was told by Stalin that “to write memoirs right after great events, at a time when passions were still too high and unbalanced, the memoirs would not have the required

¹⁸⁸ Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin*, 199; Vladimir Daines, *Vasilevskii* (Moscow: Veche, 2012), 421; R. G. Pikhov, *Sovetskii Soiuz: istoriia vlasti 1945-1991* (Novosibirsk: Sibirskii khronograf, 2000), 35-43.

¹⁸⁹ Anatolii Ponomarev, “Marshaly. Kak Delili slavu posle 1945-go,” *Rodina*, no. 1 (1995): 78.

¹⁹⁰ Geoffrey Roberts, *Stalin's General: The Life of Georgy Zhukov* (New York: Random House, 2012), 7, 8, 250.

objectivity.”¹⁹¹ Similarly, Zhukov recalled how Stalin approached him to ask “What, are you going to write the history of the war? Don’t. Let historians handle it when we are dead.”¹⁹²

Historians, however, were hard pressed to publish anything as they “were muzzled” and their inability to explore the war period meant additional suffering for many of the war’s victims. Lazar Lazarev comments that “Historians quickly understood that their job was to embroider prepared patterns using beautiful materials to delight the eye, not to conduct research into facts.” With no access to archival documentation or original research taking place, former prisoners of war, survivors of Nazi concentration camps, and those who lived through the German occupation were discriminated against and continued to suffer based on the false assumptions propagated by the state during the war and the postwar period.¹⁹³

As veterans lost their identity within war literature, the film industry was another area where censorship about the war became the norm. Until Stalin’s death there was a “film famine” as for political and economic reasons Soviet film production was practically halted. What films did appear featured Stalin as the central figure; he soon became the only recognized “hero” of the war. While two successful movies appeared on Soviet screens relating the heroism of Soviet soldiers and partisans, specifically *Story of a*

¹⁹¹ Aleksandr Vasilevskii, *Delo vsei zhizni* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1973), 6.

¹⁹² Pavlenko, 353.

¹⁹³ Lazar Lazarev, “Russian Literature on the War and Historical Truth,” in *World War 2 and the Soviet People*, eds. John Garrard and Carol Garrard (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 31; Tumarkin, *The Living and The Dead*, 104.

Real Man and *The Young Guard*, Denise J. Youngblood argues how Soviet directors understood that in fact their films were really about Stalin, “the one true war hero.”¹⁹⁴

Other memories of the war were also suppressed or brought under Stalin’s control. For instance, few war photographs were allowed to be republished until the late 1950s.¹⁹⁵ Furthermore, one account claims that in the war’s aftermath, Stalin ordered all Soviet war photographers to destroy their negatives. Only those that best represented the “heroic struggle” of the war period escaped destruction.¹⁹⁶ Additionally, captured German photographs were stored away until decades after the war.¹⁹⁷ Thus, every aspect of the memory of the war came under attack as Stalin silenced literary figures, historians, film makers, photographers and veterans themselves.¹⁹⁸

Appropriating the Correct Terminology and Writing the War’s History

While veterans were silenced and historians “muzzled,” the state still needed to address the war’s history and in order to craft a narrative that centered on Stalin a familiar framework needed to be utilized. Thus, publications in the postwar period leaned on the idea of “active defense” to describe how German advantages were nullified as time was

¹⁹⁴ Denise J. Youngblood, *Russian War Films: On the Cinema Front, 1914-2005* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 7, 88, 90, 95-96.

¹⁹⁵ Shneer, 219.

¹⁹⁶ Supposedly, the only one to refuse was photographer Dmitrii Baltermants. Ron McKay, *Letters to Gorbachev: Life in Russia through the postbag of Argumenty i Fakty* (London: Michael Joseph, 1991), 177.

¹⁹⁷ Knightley, 286.

¹⁹⁸ The most recognized monuments to the Great Patriotic and Second World War in the Soviet Union were built throughout the 1960s under Khrushchev and Brezhnev. Petrone, 282; Scott W. Palmer, “How Memory was Made: The Construction of the Memorial to the Heroes of the Battle of Stalingrad,” *The Russian Review* 68 (July, 2009): 381.

gained for the reorganization of the country's economy for war and for the mobilization and deployment of the Red Army's major forces for an eventual "counteroffensive."¹⁹⁹

What began as military jargon entered the public sphere and was appropriated by Stalin. The concepts of active defense and the counteroffensive were reconfigured for political expediency to signify how retreats were preplanned defensive actions that were utilized "until the permanently operating factors of war could be brought into play."

Initially both terms were contextualized by Major-General N. Talenskii in an article published in *Voennaia mysl'* in 1946 under the title "The Strategic Counteroffensive."²⁰⁰

The concept was introduced to the public in a letter written by Stalin to a Colonel Razin, published in February 1947. In essence, Razin's letter consisted of the idea that Stalin implemented a highly complex yet subtle strategy against the German invasion, that of the "counteroffensive." The theory of the counteroffensive was "more sophisticated" and helped explain why an active defense was needed in the first place. From the arena of military historians the concept was transported into the public sphere after it appeared on 22 June 1947 in an article in *Pravda*, written by the above mentioned Talenskii. He argued the strategy of the counteroffensive was brought to perfection in the battles of the Second World War – under Stalin's guidance.²⁰¹

Although initially both concepts were propagated among military minds within military publications, they created a framework during the war that eventually allowed

¹⁹⁹ Gallagher, 43-44. The concept of the "counteroffensive" was elaborated on during the war in the journal *Voennaia mysl'*. Gallagher offers an in-depth discussion of how the concepts of "active defense" and the "counteroffensive" were utilized by Stalin and its evolution in publications.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

²⁰¹ Gallagher, 52, 54; N. Talenskii, "Bankrotstvo Planov Agressora," *Pravda*, June 22, 1947, 4.

Stalin to not only take the credit for military operations but to also utilize pieces written by military commanders and point to them as evidence of his own genius.²⁰² The stage was now set for the creation of a history of the Great Patriotic War dominated by Stalin's Cult of Personality.²⁰³ The limits Stalin placed on studying the Soviet war experience meant few could outright question his claims of genius in strategic planning and his command achievements.²⁰⁴

One of the most important sources for understanding the war's progression became Stalin's speech from 9 February 1945. With the war coming to an end, the speech spelled out an official formula made ready for "highly stylized recitations" that many others began to emulate. Historians agree that this speech, covering the lessons of victory, began to codify various themes that were previously present during the war.²⁰⁵ Stalin focused on three main lessons from the war years. In successfully withstanding and opposing the German invasion, the Soviet system demonstrated how popular it truly was and showcased that a socialist system could accomplish something many of its capitalist counterparts could not. Secondly, the unity of the population strengthened the Soviet war effort, providing evidence that the Soviet Union, as a multinational state,

²⁰² Ibid., 11, 70.

²⁰³ *Pravda*, June 27, 1945, 1; June 28, 1945, 1.

²⁰⁴ Raymond L. Garthoff, *Soviet Strategy in the Nuclear Age* (New York: Praeger, 1962), 62-63.

²⁰⁵ Gallagher, 37, 39, 81; Gill, 153-154; Patrick Finney, "Vasily Grossman and the Myths of the Great Patriotic War," *Journal of European Studies* 43:4 (2013): 314-315; Patrick Finney, *Remembering the Road to World War Two: International History, National Identity, Collective Memory* (London: Routledge, 2011), 40-41; Kulish, 298.

offered the best answer to cooperation among nationalities. Finally, the Soviet Union's power was confirmed through the strength and success of the Red Army's victory.²⁰⁶

The Stalinist narrative created the impression that victory was made possible due to the measures taken in the prewar period. The Soviet Union's entrance into the war was facilitated by the production and material potential of collectivization and industrialization, including the huge bureaucracy created as Stalin assumed greater control over the country. This was all preparation for an eventual showdown with Nazi Germany, while the purges of the 1930s strengthened the state. Stalinist methods were presented to the population as being central to saving the USSR from the German invasion, rather than guilty of making the war so costly for Soviet citizens.²⁰⁷

The baptism of fire encountered in the war forged an unbreakable bond between the Party and the rest of the population, creating a "morale-political unity of Soviet society."²⁰⁸ Attention was shifted away from the soldiers themselves and onto the system that sustained, taught, and led them. Inherent was the idea that behind the gallantry of the Red Army was the wise decision-making Party, the strengthened Soviet economy, and the preparations undertaken in the prewar period relying on "active defense" to see the country through its most desperate moments. Thus, the bravery and valor of Soviet troops took second place to Party policies and politics.

Stalin's speech signified a shift from military campaigns and achievements to the economic and political foundations that were able to sustain them. Such an adjustment to

²⁰⁶ Gill, 153-154.

²⁰⁷ Kulish, 298, 348.

²⁰⁸ Gill, 153-154.

the war's history facilitated two shifts that remained intrinsic parts of the postwar narrative. The role of the Party became enlarged while that of the people, soldiers and military leadership was diminished. The war's portrayal relied on abstract notions, rather than bloody encounters that left a marked trace on every frontline veteran and defined the war experience for more than one generation.²⁰⁹ With the war depicted as a "bloodless" affair, the memories of the defeats in 1941 were erased to be replaced by universal myths.

Propaganda put out by the state either outright ignored or denied the failures of the government and military during the initial period of the war. Arguments leaned on Stalin's 3 July 1941 speech in regards to Germany's advantages during the invasion and the unfavorable position Red Army forces found themselves in. Unlike German troops, Soviet forces needed to be mobilized and sent to the front. Success of the attack on the Soviet Union was said to have been aided by secret preparations, the suddenness of the invasion, and the violation of the non-aggression pact of August 1939.²¹⁰

These initial arguments were soon supplemented by a select group of publications that covered the Great Patriotic War and all focused on Stalin. The war was consigned to becoming a chapter of Stalin's biography, one of his achievements. These texts, building on wartime themes, along with other speeches and publications by Stalin, were the starting position for all research undertaken on the war. Additional support was provided by "laudatory articles" about Stalin and a few select pamphlets and texts, which further helped standardize the military narrative of the war, and *Fasifiers of History – A Historical Rectification*, which attacked western "falsifications" of the German-Soviet

²⁰⁹ Gallagher, 39-40.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xiii, 10; Kulish, 316.

war.²¹¹ Those who tried to utilize sources material deemed unacceptable were denied the use of key documents.²¹² Any literature that appeared before Stalin's death reiterated and leaned on these publications.

By 1948 the Stalinist narrative of the war was virtually complete in its dominance. That year Minister of the Armed Forces of the USSR, Nikolai Bulganin, presented a report entitled "Thirty Years of the Soviet Armed Forces." The report echoed previous Stalinist clichés while adding "the source of power of the Soviet Armed Forces is the wise leadership...of the organizer of our victories, our leader and teacher, Comrade Stalin. Comrade Stalin prepared our country for defense, [he] developed and implemented a program to defeat the enemy, uniting and directing all efforts of the people and army to achieve victory."²¹³ By 1949 the war's narrative existed within a self-contained system that relied on previous publications to continuously reiterate themes that set a precedent for future publications.²¹⁴ Stalin, as the external voice of authority, cultivated his image and role within the Second World War and made sure to silence any perceived opposition.

The existence of the idea of a "strategy of active defense" allowed for a number of erroneous conclusions to be reached when operations were evaluated. Although this

²¹¹ G. F. Aleksandrov et al., *Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin: Kratkaia Biografiia* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1947); I. V. Stalin, *O Velikoi Otechestvennoi voine Sovetskogo Soiuz*a (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1949); I. I. Mints, *Velikaia Otechestvennaia voina Sovetskogo Soiuz*a (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1947). *Falsifiers of History* was immediately translated into English as *Falsifiers of History (an historical note)* (Moscow: Soviet Information Bureau, 1948).

²¹² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, l. 17-18.

²¹³ Cited in Kulish, 299.

²¹⁴ Gallagher, 44, 49.

cover-up of failure was mainly concentrated on the first two years of the war, there were also operations in the latter period that were deemed too sensitive. For instance, the results of the German counteroffensive that became the third battle of Kharkov in 1943 were suppressed. When the official history of the war covered the battle in the third volume, the head editor recalled “how difficult it was to find materials and give an assessment of the facts, because these pages of history were simply suppressed. Nothing intelligible was ever published on this issue.”²¹⁵

Members of the commission assigned to write the war’s history under Khrushchev recalled how the “manifestation” of Stalin’s cult within histories of the war was most evident in how Stalin’s military talents were glorified. Lenin’s legacy “was consigned to oblivion” while the Party’s leadership abilities, the people and armed forces were “belittled.” Successful operations, such as Stalingrad, the “ten blows of 1944” and the final stages of the war, were attributed entirely to Stalin. The “ten blows of 1944,” as they were initially called, soon assumed the title of “Stalin’s blows.” During Stalin’s lifetime, in literature on the operations of 1944, the heroic actions of Soviet troops were overshadowed by the greater attention devoted to Stalin. Commanding officers were simply shown to be “transmitters of STAVKA directives to the troops,” a middleman who deserved little glory. Stalin’s “leadership, his insights, his alleged extraordinary military genius” dominated virtually all publications on the history of the war.²¹⁶

²¹⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, l. 14, 15-16.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 9-10, 87, 111.

Opposition

While Stalin's genius was championed and Soviet failures continued to be covered up there was an initial attempt at questioning the true reasons behind the retreats. In a 1945 article, the writer Fedor Panferov championed the need for "truthfulness in literature...in describing and analyzing the course of the war and the situation behind the front lines." In turn, he was heavily criticized within the pages of *Literaturnaya gazeta* and *Pravda*. Panferov attacked Stalin's portrayal of the initial period of war: "what kind of planned retreat was it when at one time the fate of our country was hanging by a hair." Criticism of Panferov's stance relied on the foundation set up during the war, including the idea of "active defense." The *Pravda* article argued how "Panferov completely fails to understand the significance of the period of our active defense...and is inclined to see in it only its dark sides."²¹⁷ Panferov contended that these issues needed to be studied, including that of "heroism." He saw how the heroism of wartime was treated by the state and commented that "the truth of life says that heroism is not a continuous triumphal procession. Heroism is the surmounting of the most terrible difficulties..."²¹⁸ Unfortunately, altering the definition and Soviet view of heroism was impossible.

In 1946 another article by Panferov appeared in the literary journal *Oktiabr'*. The article attacked the postwar treatment of the war's history denouncing "the literary bureaucracy...for promoting a false, prettified version of the sufferings, terrors, and majestic achievements of the war." He concluded his article with a discussion of the poor

²¹⁷ O. Kurganov and A. Koloskov, "Ob 'isповediakh' I 'propovediakh' v zhurnale 'Oktiabr'," *Pravda*, June 24, 1946, 5.

²¹⁸ Cited in Harold Swayze, *Political control of literature in the USSR, 1946-1959* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 33-34.

portrayal of the enemy in Soviet literature, disagreeing with the official tendency to denigrate the Wehrmacht's military competence. Panferov argued that diminishing the German military's abilities reduced the achievements of the Soviet Armed Forces and in turn "minimized the significance of the victory achieved by the Red Army." A memo from the Central Committee's Agitprop department criticizing the article mentioned how Panferov's article did not even point out how the Red Army's fighting retreat "exhausted the enemy."²¹⁹ Dmitrii Shepilov, the deputy chief of Agitprop in 1947, claims Stalin "sometimes displayed a surprising tolerance" when it came to certain writers, one of whom turned out to be Panferov.²²⁰ Thus, while Panferov's article was criticized in other journals, it was initially allowed to be published and went uncensored as his writing career continued until his death in 1960.

Another public attack against a text on the war took place against Olga Dzhigurda, who published her diary in 1948. She served as a doctor on a battleship during the war years and *Znamia* took up the publication of her *Teplokhod 'Kakhetiia*. She was accused of opposing the war's "official line" as her text included more representative descriptions of the war years that portrayed "unflattering moments..." Veterans came to her defense, both officers and rank-and-file soldiers. Dzhigurda's account, condemned by critics in *Literaturnaia gazeta* and *Zvezda*, gained support in a discussion held in May 1948. Participants were, like Dzhigurda, veterans of the war and

²¹⁹ Ted Hopf, *Reconstructing the Cold War: The Early Years, 1945-1958* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 40; Gallagher, 108, 112. After Stalin's death, his mischaracterization of the enemy was blamed on weakening the Red Army's ability to resist the German invasion. The German high command was "declared weak, inept" and "belittled with accusations of adventurism, stereotypes, etc." As a result, the "huge efforts" of the Soviet Union and Red Army to defeat the Wehrmacht were "degraded." RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, l. 15.

²²⁰ Shepilov, 107-108.

Matthew Gallagher argues that this was “not simply a literary meeting, but a broader public demonstration.”²²¹ In one spirited defense of Dzhigurda’s diary the “moral right of veterans” was proclaimed, including the argument that veterans had a right to tell their own version of events. One *frontovik* was said to have exclaimed “I shed enough blood for our people...to have the right to see their shortcomings and defects.”²²²

Petro Vershigora, a famous partisan commander, author and winner of the Stalin Prize, supported Dzhigurda. He argued against her critics saying they only encouraged “a hypocritical portrayal of the war instead of the honest accounts the people’s sacrifices deserved.” Additional support was found among military naval officers, such as Major General P. Musiakov, editor of the newspaper *Red Fleet* who claimed he could testify to the accuracy of Dzhigurda’s work through personal experiences while Colonel D. Kornienko, Deputy Chief of the Political Administration of the Navy, offered support to the author by showing her documentation that might enrich her work.²²³

Taking the presented opportunity, Vershigora drew attention to the lack of literature on the siege of Leningrad, and pointed to a “highly placed conference” that discussed literature produced on the war “at which one writer justifiably complained that he had not been able to write the truth about the feat of Leningrad ‘since the literary and critical channels filled up with people who never had a taste of blockade.’”²²⁴ The collective memory of the war was seemingly created by those who never went through

²²¹ Gallagher, 121.

²²² Cited in Weiner, *Making Sense of War*, 57.

²²³ Gallagher, 118-119, 121-122.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

the experiences they were describing on paper. Vershigora's protest of the presentation of the war's history showed the issue was, to some extent, a field of contested memory. In the case of Dzhigurda's diary, Weiner sees the voices of support as evidence of veterans "carving a space" for themselves "to voice their own versions of the wartime experience; it was also an expression of their desire to belong and participate..."²²⁵ And while perhaps many understood that they could not pen their own memories of the war, if they saw authentic accounts enter the public sphere they attempted to stand up in their defense.

Due to the continued limits placed on historical literature, readers were forced into analyzing the war's course through literary publications, from which much was expected. Not all were successful in their attempts. In 1946 Boris Polevoi's *A Story about a Real Man* was published, based on the previously mentioned heroic exploits of Meres'ev, and was able to get away with a subtle reference to the ideas being propagated by the administration. As Meres'ev sits next to an old man on an electric train in Moscow, the old man exclaims:

You mustn't think that because I'm a civilian that I don't understand our plan. I understand it perfectly. It's to entice the enemy into the steppes of the Volga, yes, and get him to stretch his lines of communication...then...cut his communications and smash him. Yes. And it's a very clever plan. We haven't got only Hitler against us. He is whipping the whole of Europe against us. We are fighting singlehanded against six countries. Singlehanded! We've got to weaken the force of their blow at least with the aid of space.

Here, in one example, came together numerous threads the Soviet public was exposed to for so long since the beginning of the war. The reader is presented with the idea that Stalin's ingenious plan was to lure the enemy into the Soviet hinterland only to

²²⁵ Weiner, *Making Sense of War*, 58.

then defeat him with a well-planned and timed counteroffensive. Additionally, there is mention of the numerous advantages Germany enjoyed, while the USSR was left to its own devices by the Western Allies. And yet to this monologue Meres'ev's response is to think the old man is talking "piffle," claiming "Our native land is too precious to use as a shock absorber..."²²⁶ Thus, with one sentence Polevoi subverts Stalin's genius planning.

Unlike Polevoi, when Aleksandr Fadeev published his famous novel, *Malaia Gvardiia*, in 1945, two years later, after an initially favorable reception, it was attacked for ignoring the role of the Party in the events portrayed. Fadeev took the next four years to rewrite the novel and by the time the second edition appeared, in 1951, the disclosures on the initial period of war were gone. The panic and retreats of the early period were replaced with sections concentrating on the role of the Party and its organizing of the partisan underground against the Germans. In all he would have to rewrite the novel twice. Grossman suffered a similar fate. His publications on the war, which received praise as late as 1946, were never again published while Stalin lived. Ehrenburg finished his novel, *The Storm*, in 1947 and was immediately criticized for his descriptions of the first months of the war. Although the population well remembered what happened, one criticism claimed that "Everything has been explained by Comrade Stalin."²²⁷

Consequently, novels and novellas about the war experience collapsed the line between fact and fiction. An August 1952 letter to Grossman from A. Adamovich, a

²²⁶ Polevoi, 342.

²²⁷ Shepilov, 184; Abraham Rothberg, *The Heirs of Stalin: Dissidence and the Soviet Regime 1953-1970* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 179; John Gordon Garrard and Carol Garrard, *Inside the Soviet Writers' Union* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 64; John Garrard and Carol Garrard, *Life and Fate of Vasilii Grossman* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2012), 215-216; Ilya Ehrenburg, *Post-War Years: 1945-1954* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1967), 45.

major in the reserves, claimed that “the Soviet reader requires good historical fiction literature on the Great Patriotic War from writers, but authors should work carefully and painstakingly around recent history, many pages of which are written in our blood.” To aid such a development within fictional literature, highly ranked veterans were ready, able, and willing to lend their expertise and “services” so that historical episodes could be “truthfully” recounted.²²⁸ Consequently, Grossman’s work was highly valued as a historical document, as testified by another letter from an “old miner,” sent in August 1952, which commented how Grossman’s *For a Just Cause* was the best thing written about the war. The author also took the opportunity to question how it was that Stalingrad was not evacuated in time, even though it was already the second year of the war. When evacuations did occur, they were in the midst of enemy bombardments – this signified an unforgiveable lack of foresight.²²⁹

Although authors that decided to discuss the war in the immediate postwar period were not punished for their views, even if criticized, they were the exception to the rule. In some ways literary authors were once again at the forefront as they could readily write about their own experiences without needing to consult government documents or archival information. Unfortunately, the function of the majority of literary works in this period was to reiterate previous ideas about the Party’s leadership and mobilizing

²²⁸ RGALI, f. 1702, op. 6, d. 55, l. 9, 25. Letter to Grossman from Hero of the Soviet Union, Colonel-General Ivan Liudnikov, undated but written and received in the second half of 1952. Liudnikov took part in the Battle of Stalingrad, which Grossman also witnessed and covered in his books *For a Just Cause* and *Life and Fate*.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

abilities, and highlight Stalin's genius.²³⁰ But a few literary figures started a process that would progress into the period after Stalin's death by allowing Soviet readers a more unvarnished appraisal of the war, including depictions of cowardice, ineptitude, and heroism at the front.²³¹

Opposition to the official narrative of the war's history was evident among the population, even if not regularly encountered. More so, Gallagher argues that since the history of the war was not subject to the usual propaganda campaign that other aspects of Soviet society were exposed to, this showed that "The official history of the war... was propagated more by indirection and innuendo than by the more usual methods of bandwagon publicity." From the available evidence, only a few publications made a lasting impact and censorship against anyone who tried to write on the war was evident. Gallagher thus contends, "The fact that prominent opponents of the official line suffered no immediate or open reprisal for their temerity testifies to the noiselessness of the campaign and the disinclination of the authorities to draw attention to embarrassing issues." Consequently, it can be argued that since there was no single officially propagandized narrative, subjects that were mentioned yet omitted from general discussion within available literature could not be easily dismissed without delving into issues that were best left forgotten. Although various investigations might have been carried out during this period, as when the attorney general investigated the 28 Panfilovtsy, the myth persisted. Without an official declaration of what could be

²³⁰ Deming Brown, "World War II in Soviet Literature," in *The Impact of World War II on the Soviet Union*, ed. Susan J. Linz (New Jersey: Rowman & Allanheld, 1985), 246.

²³¹ Ellis, *The Damned and The Dead*, 24.

discussed the limited freedom enjoyed by editors and authors meant they could “probe for the outer limits of official tolerance...”²³²

Voroshilov Cements Stalin’s Reputation

With an official publication on the war continually missing and Stalin selecting what parts of the wartime narrative to keep in place and what to relegate to the dustbin of history, the stage was set for a culminating twenty-four page publication in 1949 by Kliment Voroshilov. Voroshilov served in the war, although disgraced on a number of occasions, he was apparently deemed competent enough to claim authorship of *A Commander of Genius of the Great Patriotic War*.²³³ Voroshilov created a periodization of the war based on specific wartime events. The first period included operations from June 1941 through the German encirclement at Stalingrad, which, according to Voroshilov, was the result of “active defense” in combination with “counterattacks” culminating in a “counteroffensive in the most important strategic directions.” Soviet strategy “broke during this period the striking force of the fascist army and buried the German strategy of ‘lighting’ war.” This in turn set the stage for optimal conditions to coalesce where the Red Army gained operational and strategic initiative that altered the nature of the confrontation on the Eastern Front.²³⁴

²³² Gallagher, 124, 126-127.

²³³ Originally published as Kliment Voroshilov, *Genial’nyi polkovodets Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1949).

²³⁴ K. Voroshilov, *A Commander of Genius of the Great Patriotic War* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1950), 20.

The exploitation of German weaknesses and Soviet strengths was due to “the genius of Stalin’s leadership” in conjunction with the courage of the Red Army’s troops. Accolades were heaped on the Soviet population, those who manufactured war materials and those who fought on the front and behind enemy lines. The unity of the population was “never seen before on such a scale...” While praise and gratitude was shared in the general sense, the admiration Voroshilov showed in fact reflected the population’s capacity to wage battle thanks to Stalin’s leadership abilities on and off the field of battle. Furthermore, not one mention of the generals who were responsible for many of those victories achieved in the first year-and-a-half of war was made.²³⁵

For Voroshilov, Stalin’s genius extended to his “foreseeing even at the beginning of the war the inevitable defeat of the Hitlerite army,” which was “founded on knowledge of the relative political-economic and social weakness of Hitlerite Germany...and on the certitude of the stability of the Soviet rear, that is, of our whole state.” By drawing attention to the Soviet rear and the ability of the Red Army to successfully perform its duty, Voroshilov in turn praised the collectivization and industrialization of the 1930s, which created the infrastructure necessary for Germany’s eventual defeat.²³⁶

Stalin’s genius was not, however, limited to brilliant analysis of the enemy and the Soviet Union’s potential. Voroshilov explained how Stalin paid “very serious attention” to Red Army reserves while deciding where and when to husband resources while “creating command cadres.” Hence, “during the course of the war new Soviet military commanders, generals and cadres of officers grew up who proved in action their

²³⁵ Ibid., 6.

²³⁶ Ibid., 13.

devotion to their Motherland, to the Bolshevik Party and who were able in huge battles to turn Stalin's strategic and operational-tactical plans into living reality." Stalin's strategic genius served as inspiration for generals, officers, and rank-and-file soldiers to perform "heroic feats in the name of their Socialist Motherland." It was brilliant Stalinist planning that allowed for numerous Soviet fronts to work in tandem and achieve victory, all while being coordinated by the "unity of Stalin's strategic plan." All Soviet victories, from Moscow and Stalingrad to the taking of Berlin were attributed to Stalinist genius.²³⁷

With the Stalinist narrative of the war firmly in place, by 1953 there was evidence that Soviet historians had virtually abandoned work on the war's history. The war was deemed too sensitive a topic in the realm of politics "to be entrusted to historians."²³⁸ An example of a permitted military publication was a 1952 text by Musheg Minasian, about Operation Bagration, one of the "ten Stalinist blows" of 1944. The fifty-six page work was entitled *Pobeda v Belorussii: Piatyi stalinskii udar*, showcasing once more the reliance on Stalin as the primary vehicle of victory with the length of the work speaking volumes about how much was allowed to be written on even victorious campaigns.²³⁹

During the war's initial period, with the country facing its greatest threat, writers and correspondents dominated the war narrative and served at the behest of a system and leader who regularly justified their actions while avoiding mention of their mistakes. As such, much of the war's history was written through socialist realistic hues and often

²³⁷ Ibid., 16-17, 18-19.

²³⁸ Gallagher, 82.

²³⁹ M. M. Minasian, *Pobeda v Belorussii. Piatyi stalinskii udar* (Moscow: Voenizdat MVS SSSR, 1952).

presented events as they should have been – a leadership that understood what was needed to win and just needed time and a population regularly willing to make needed sacrifices.²⁴⁰ Journalists replaced Stalin’s muted voice during the war’s initial period and signaled a freer atmosphere. The proximity of journalists to the frontlines ensured that their descriptions and commentary often resonated with soldiers’ own experiences. Journalists began to offer examples of courage and self-sacrifice that the rest of the army and country needed to emulate while readers and the state’s propaganda apparatus decided which actions best defined Soviet bravery and valor.

Correspondents and editors were responsible for crafting heroic symbols that were appropriated and endorsed by the state and idealized by society as all three continuously participated in the propagation of heroic achievements throughout the war. During the war there were numerous instances when journalists attempted to oppose an acknowledged party line, seeing how far they could push against established boundaries as they tried to avoid criticism and reprimands. While they were not always successful, these attempts show the beginning of what would become contested territory of the memory of the war and its representation in the media.

The war years, according to Boris Pasternak, brought “real horrors, real danger, and the threat of real death” which “were beneficial in comparison with the inhuman reign of fiction, and brought relief, because they limited the magic power of the dead letter.”²⁴¹ Others shared this feeling. The children of those who took part in the war

²⁴⁰ For a discussion on Socialist Realism, see Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Reader* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

²⁴¹ Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volkhonsky (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 600.

recalled how their parents fondly reminisced about their time in the trenches.²⁴²

Although the “freedom” of the war years might have been more so perceived than lived through, it was still something many veterans fondly recalled decades after the war’s conclusion. A Jewish scientist in the 1970s claimed that the war was “the best time of our lives...Because at that time we all felt closer to our government than at any other time...It was not their country then, but our country...It was not their war, but our war. It was our country we were defending, our war effort.”²⁴³ The war offered the state an ability to unite a divided country tormented by constant trials against enemies of the people and concentrated their attention toward a visible external threat.

In many respects the journalistic reports found among Soviet newspapers discussing heroic actions and feats were a genuine part of the general war experience that was turned into the “Myth of the War Experience.” Writing on the memory of the World Wars, George L. Mosse explains, “those concerned with the image and the continuing appeal of the nation worked at constructing a myth which would draw the sting from death in war and emphasize the meaningfulness of the fighting and sacrifice...The aim was to make an inherently unpalatable past acceptable,” while justifying the regime “in whose name the war had been fought.” The result was a validation of the war experience, displacing and masking the war’s reality in order to legitimize the state and leadership.²⁴⁴

In many ways the narrative of the war that emerged during the war itself was a combination of efforts, including that of Stalin imposing his will through censors and

²⁴² Donald J. Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia's Cold War Generation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 252-253.

²⁴³ Cited in Figes, 432.

²⁴⁴ Mosse, 6-7.

literature as well as reporters who utilized the atmosphere left in the wake of the German invasion to craft a version of the war that resonated with the majority of the population. While Stalin was an instrumental figure during the war we would do well to recall that it was not Stalin who coined the term “Great Patriotic War,” the term which created an aura of exceptionalism for the Soviet war effort, embodied in the postwar period by the Soviets celebrating Victory Day on May 9 while the rest of Europe celebrated a day earlier.²⁴⁵ It was also not Stalin who created the lyrics for “Sacred War,” nor did he take the most iconic pictures of the war or craft tales of Soviet heroism that often enough turned out to be based on the imagination and whims of correspondents and editors. The death and destruction left in the wake of Germany’s advance and retreat was part of the Soviet wartime experience. Combined with photographic evidence and journalistic exhortations to seek revenge for a population and land defiled, in part endorsed from above, but also supported and pleaded for from below, it gives us reason to view the initial narrative of the Great Patriotic War as a flexible collaboration by information producers – including censors – and consumers rather than an imposed history/memory from above.

One of the defining features of the war years and the immediate postwar period was that much of the literature being published on the war was authored by literary figures and not trained historians. In essence, the propaganda apparatus created an environment where wartime reporting collapsed the line separating fact from fiction as long as the needed emotions and socialist realism were injected into the public sphere.

²⁴⁵ For a description surrounding the events of May 9 see, Jones, *After Hitler: The Last Ten Days of World War II in Europe*.

The culmination of a war narrative that forfeited realistic portrayals of heroic acts and propagated a specific archetype a hero and feat needed to fit into, meant a revised understanding of what was defined as heroism and victory while steering discussion away from fundamental errors perpetrated by the leadership and armed forces. The state and Stalin's failures "did not necessarily diminish" the "psychological utility" of drawing attention to "painful experiences" which became "meaningful memory" that was packaged by the state and adopted by survivors.²⁴⁶ The ability of the Soviet media to create a heroic narrative around the selfless sacrifices of the population paved the way for Stalin to reconfigure the portrayal of the war's initial period. Defeats were transformed into preplanned retreats, serving as part of a greater plan to defeat the enemy. The continued link to heroic names and cities within the public's collective memory has currently made it possible for Volgograd to be revived as Stalingrad six days out of the year.²⁴⁷

Wartime depictions of frontline and partisan heroism made a lasting impression that intertwined the war's narrative with its collective memory. During the war, in 1944, the film "Zoia" appeared in Soviet cinemas. The movie was shown at the front and a soldier, in a March 1945 letter to his family, commented on how the film "made a great impression" on him and he could "not find words to describe this movie. Here is the real truth [*istinnaia pravda*], [down] to the smallest detail."²⁴⁸ After the war, the film's

²⁴⁶ Kirschenbaum, *The Legacy of the Siege of Leningrad, 1941-1995*, 55-56, 253.

²⁴⁷ All are dates that commemorate the Soviet Union's victory in the Second World War. Andrew Roth, "Russia Revives the Namesake of 'Uncle Joe,'" *New York Times*, January 31, 2013, accessed February 1, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/01/world/europe/volgograd-named-stalingrad-again-at-least-sometimes.html?_r=0.

²⁴⁸ Al'tman, Terushkin, and Brodskaia, 256.

director met a friend, a war correspondent, who arrived from the front and hinted that the “real” story of Zoia differed from the cinematic production. The director, rather than being upset, replied: “I would have made the film just the same. The story is more important than the actual details.” Margarita Aliger, a poet who wrote about Zoia’s feat, agreed with this notion. Almost three decades after the war she continued to insist “that her depiction of Zoia was not invented, but ‘reflected the truth we believed in.’”²⁴⁹ Thus, the various representations of “Zoia” reflected stylized depictions that people wanted to believe in as the “truth,” superimposed onto their memories by wartime correspondents and state endorsed propaganda.

In the Soviet Union, writers found that while ideological controls still existed, their efforts on behalf of the Soviet war effort coincided with the needs of the state. In the immediate postwar period the history and memory of the war were marginalized, abused, and redirected for immediate government needs. Attention was refocused on Stalin and the Party whose contributions to the war effort overshadowed the courage and role of the Red Army’s leadership and rank-and-file. The connections veterans had to the war were severed as films, photographs, literature, and even commemorations like Victory Day were done away with or whitewashed for Stalin’s needs. Aspects of the war’s narrative were altered to meet immediate requirements, cementing Stalin’s cult while disparaging states previously considered allies.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁹ Rosalinde Sartorti, “On the Making of Heroes, Heroines, and Saints,” in *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia*, ed. Richard Stites (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 190.

²⁵⁰ For a discussion of Soviet views toward the allies, see Jones, *After Hitler*, 42; Barghoorn, 56-57, 148-149.

Historians were forced into repeating Stalin's statements to support their assertions, abandoning any type of objective analysis. While Stalin lived, his military reputation was solidified as that of a wise leader. He assumed responsibility for concepts developed by military minds during the war's progress. Censors limited publications on the war so that by 1949 a "deep freeze" settled over the topic. Literary attempts to disclose a truth about the war that differed from the party line were met with condemnation or were simply never again published during Stalin's lifetime.

Opposition or criticism signified the public's interest in the war years as veterans felt entitled to a say in the collective memory of the war and resented the truth they were being denied. Evidence from letters received by public figures shows how much the omission of the war's discussions in literature was questioned by the public. For instance, Ehrenburg received a letter in January 1953 questioning the neglect of Jewish participation in the war. How was it, the author demanded, that the Jewish struggle, from the frontlines, where Jews served with much distinction, to the homefront, where Jews were factory laborers and directors, was forgotten. "Why does not a single novel, which describes those terrible years, contain the description of the heroic actions of Jewish soldiers and officers?...Why is it that not in any war or Soviet Army yearly anniversaries, not in one picture, illustrating its multinational [character], is it possible to find a Jewish hero of the Soviet Union (and there were not a few of them!)...?"²⁵¹

Stalin in many ways built upon the foundation that was provided by wartime literature. Numerous statements were recycled and entered the Soviet vernacular, from

²⁵¹ Mordechai Altshuler et al., *Sovetskie evrei pishut Ite Erenburgu 1943-1966* (PRISMA-PRESS: Ierusalim, 1993), 303.

the contribution of the Western Allies, to the significance of specific battles. The few strands of information repeated by the Soviet propaganda apparatus made a dent in Soviet minds that continued to influence perceptions, ideas and beliefs. Olga Kucherenko comments that “as the war was gradually mythologized and limited to a handful of allowed narratives, the remembered events and interpretations also became standardized, creating an impression of universality of experience.” In such a way, “uncomfortable truths were either bent or concealed to fit the overall heroic picture, and personal experiences made irrelevant to the master narrative.”²⁵²

An immediate impact of a postwar period seemingly devoid of any propaganda or discussions centered on the war years was a population starved of information. Gallagher comments that, “a striking paradox of the Soviet postwar reinterpretation of the war is that it was effected without a propaganda campaign, in the usual sense of the word, and without a history text.”²⁵³ Although there was no officially sanctioned publication created specifically to describe the Soviet Union’s war experience in the Second World War, there were numerous texts crafted on ideas previously discussed by both the military and the population, ideas that soon became the backbone of the war’s history well into the post-Stalin period. The public and military saw the war’s history was taking on a face they did not recognize, but little could be done until Stalin’s death. Consequently, as the war was experienced by the entirety of the Soviet population, its history was contested territory during the war and in the immediate postwar period, and

²⁵² Kucherenko, *Little Soldiers*, 16.

²⁵³ Gallagher, 38.

under Khrushchev's administration the memory of the war was reconfigured into a political tool to use domestically and on the international arena.

CHAPTER 2

SETTING THE STAGE FOR THE EMERGENCE OF THE WAR'S OFFICIAL HISTORY

Starting on March 19, two weeks after Stalin's death, neither journals nor newspapers wrote about Stalin. Letters flooded into the Central Committee from the public asking for an explanation but were only greeted with silence. Stalin's name was omitted from all May Day slogans on 22 April and on 9 May it was decided to remove all portraits of leaders from parades and demonstrations, living and dead; the latter decision was rescinded two months later.¹ This hasty reaction by high ranking officials seemingly set a tone that divided the population. It took an additional three years for Nikita Khrushchev to denounce Stalin before the 20th Party Congress and as previously, any personality charged with being an "enemy of the people" was ripe for the status of "ghost" in historical publications. Stalin's wholesale disappearance from the press, even if temporary, spelled a precedent that many in the public would soon want to see replicated in historical texts, especially the war's official history.

Stalin's death meant a multitude of changes for the Soviet Union were on the horizon. Guidance that emanated from Stalin disappeared and his administration was soon discredited as targets were found for grievances and praise. Under Stalin, the system he created was well attuned to avoiding questions. After his death much of that infrastructure remained but the inevitable appearance of questions meant they were

¹ Iuri Zhukov, *Stalin: Tainy Vlasti* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2007), 638, 644. A similar idea was pronounced by Khrushchev on the eve of the 20th Party Congress when he wanted to "put Stalin in his place" and to "Get rid of his posters and pictures in the literature before the congress." Hopf, 153.

greeted by “a void” rather than ready answers.² Khrushchev assumed the mantle of leadership of the world’s second superpower and the internal “Thaw” that followed unsettled many in their previous beliefs and convictions. When Stalin’s crimes were exposed to the public, the people’s perception of their former leader changed, as did their views of those who would succeed him, they lost their “inviolability,” in the words of the post-Soviet historian Elena Zubkova, and “became mere mortals.”³ Stalin’s “heirs” could not look to the 1930s if they wanted their own legitimizing myths, especially since during their denunciation of Stalin in 1956 Khrushchev concentrated on post-1936 events while those that came before remained off-limits, instead they turned to the war period and what soon turned into the Cult of the Great Patriotic War.

This chapter sets the stage for the eventual decision in 1957 to create an official history of the Great Patriotic War, and in so doing discusses the succession struggle that placed Khrushchev in the position as head of the Soviet Union, followed by a look at the government’s treatment of history and historians in the immediate post-Stalin period. Although changes in history were noticeable overall, Stalinist thinking was still a formidable obstacle to questions and interpretations that might devalue the Soviet war effort when it came to the Second World War. For Khrushchev, the history of the Great Patriotic War was a tool to attack Stalin’s memory and his now described “Cult of Personality.” Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin’s role in the war “opened the door”

² Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin*, xiv.

³ Elena Zubkova, *Russia After the War: Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945-1957* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), 154, 190.

for revisionism in the war's history, a topic he called on historians to research "as much for its 'political, educative and practical significance' as its 'historical significance.'"⁴

The Succession Struggle and the Military's Rising Influence

With Stalin dead the country contradictorily yearned for reforms and simultaneously stability, which meant that Soviet institutions essentially remained Stalinist at their core and Stalin's "heirs" remained in powerful positions throughout the country with few of his accomplices brought to justice.⁵ William Taubman comments that when posthumously exonerating Stalin's victims, Khrushchev's "sympathy was reserved for Stalin's *Communist* victims, many of whom died with non-Communist blood still on their hands. Khrushchev not only spared Lenin and the Soviet regime itself but glorified them."⁶ As there were no previous plans that could be put into place in the wake of Stalin's death, outwardly the state appeared to move along a similar path as before his death – there were no guarantees that a Stalinist "revival" was out of the question. Reforms were implemented in the long run, but short-term solutions relied on "not rocking the ship of state."⁷ The "contradictory reality" that existed in the immediate post-Stalin period meant continued problems for the ruling elite during Khrushchev's

⁴ Roger D. Markwick, "Thaws and freezes in Soviet historiography, 1953-64," in *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating cultural and social change in the Khrushchev era*, ed. Polly Jones (New York: Routledge, 2006), 181.

⁵ Zubkova, 181.

⁶ William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 272.

⁷ Zubkova, 153, 156.

tenure.⁸ In the midst of Khrushchev's time in power the memory of the Second World War served as a source of pride and a foundational myth for the state. Unfortunately, the war's inherent entanglement with Stalin's cult meant the process of de-Stalinization, with regards to the war, was "complex" since Khrushchev regularly degraded Stalin's legacy while implementing his methods.⁹

Almost immediately after Stalin's death Lavrentii Beria began implementing a new type of order and called for a series of reforms that soon led to his arrest. These reforms were akin to an anti-Stalinist campaign that in many respects revealed Beria's desire to survive while blaming Stalin for recent terror campaigns. In turn Beria became Khrushchev's first target. Beria was accused of incorrect foreign and domestic policies, which eventually led to his arrest, trial, and execution.¹⁰ During his interrogation and trial, Beria was used as a scapegoat and accused of Stalinist excesses that in many respects cleared Stalin's reputation for the time being.¹¹ Beria's manipulation of Stalin meant not only a separation of Stalin from the crimes that occurred under his leadership, but, more significantly, a distinction between the flaws of the man and that of the system.

⁸ Rothberg, 41.

⁹ Jones, *Myth, Memory, Trauma*, 187; Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 189.

¹⁰ Zubkova, 154; Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 144. It did not take much to convince the other elites to join Khrushchev's conspiracy against Beria. He also received help from his supporters in the armed forces, Marshals Kirill Moskalenko and Georgii Zhukov, who initiated the arrest of Beria. Taubman, 238, 239.

¹¹ Beria's denunciation was reminiscent of Stalinist times as he was accused of espionage and of "undermin[ing] socialism," he was a simple "careerist" who made his way through the party's hierarchy for selfish reasons. Malenkov claimed that due to the "inadequate vigilance of the Central Committee, including that of Comrade Stalin" Beria was able to "discover the human weaknesses of Stalin" and "exploited them cunningly and successfully for a considerable length of time." Zubkova, 179. Similarly, Viktor Abakumov, the Minister of State Security at the time, received blame for the Leningrad affair rather than Stalin. Hopf, 146.

The eventual inability to separate Stalin from the system he operated offers an explanation for the continued ad hoc measures adopted by Khrushchev.

With Beria out of the way, Malenkov was perceived by many as the next successor and Khrushchev's next target. Khrushchev isolated and accused him of being Beria's "right hand," with the end result that Malenkov was removed from his position as prime minister.¹² The final obstacle for Khrushchev remained Molotov who was soon forced to relinquish his position in the Foreign Ministry.¹³ The final test to Khrushchev's rule came with an attempted coup in 1957.¹⁴ The coup attempt occurred during a Plenum in June of 1957 and conspirators quickly found themselves having to defend their own histories of Stalinist complicity rather than continue to launch accusations against Khrushchev. In the end, it was Molotov's continued hostility to the process of de-Stalinization, and his stance on Yugoslavia, that resulted in his loss of power.¹⁵

However, Khrushchev, in pointing out the complacency and acquiescence of many of the conspirators and himself during Stalin's rule, continued to offer reasons for the government's dependency on Stalinist methods and ideas, thus in effect slowly beginning a reversal of many previous anti-Stalinist positions. The coup attempt, combined with the Hungarian Uprising, convinced Khrushchev that a full nullification of

¹² Zubok, 96; Taubman, 264, 265; Zubok and Pleshakov, 140, 144. Malenkov was replaced by Nikolai Bulganin but was allowed to remain in the party Presidium. Zubkova, 162.

¹³ The position was turned over to a Khrushchev "disciple," Dmitrii Shepilov. Taubman, 267, 288-289.

¹⁴ Although his speeches and actions alienated many against him, including Malenkov and Molotov, some continued to offer their support. Anastas Mikoian recalled that the process of de-Stalinization would have been put in jeopardy if figures like Molotov, Kaganovich or Voroshilov were allowed to once more assume powerful positions as they were "unhappy that Stalin had been unmasked." *Ibid.*, 315.

¹⁵ Hopf, 191, 211, 228.

Stalin was impossible as it could lead to the discrediting not only of himself and the new elite but the entire socialist system in the Soviet Union and the new Soviet empire in Eastern Europe.¹⁶

From Stalin's death to the attempted coup against Khrushchev, military figures continued to play a dominant role in decisive events and accumulated political influence that they could soon use to help create the war's historical narrative. The arrest of Beria was entrusted to Khrushchev's wartime allies and the denunciations of Malenkov and Molotov featured a role for the representatives of the military as well. Garthoff argues that the military might have been "a decisive force in tipping the balance of decision." The Party leadership's "disunity" from mid-1953 to mid-1957 "weakened the ability of the political leadership to maintain the military in a subordinate position. Instead, during those four years the military were wooed and, under the pressure of circumstances, virtually invited to become a political force." The end result might very well have been that a newly dominant "political force" within the Party wanted to have a greater say in how the history of the Second World War was going to be presented to the public. Soon Khrushchev's role in the war would be magnified, including military commanders who found themselves around him, while others began to fade away from the memory of the war, like Malenkov and Stalin.¹⁷

The military's greater presence in the Party's hierarchy was partly matched by the process that took place in the war's aftermath. Commanding officers were

¹⁶ The numerous discussions that appeared to take place in the wake of the secret speech, and which officials could never hope to fully control, also came to a stop as there was a demand to terminate "any additional thawing of Soviet political and social life." Taubman, 320-321, 324; Hopf, 178.

¹⁷ Garthoff, 18-19, 25.

overwhelmingly made up of members (eighty percent) of the Party and *Komsomol*. While the Party's membership sustained massive losses in the war, the recruitment campaign launched during the war meant those numbers were soon replaced. Of the 8.4 million members and candidates recruited, close to eighty percent, over six million, came from the armed forces. The Party's membership was thus heavily influenced by wartime enrollment and differed greatly from the Party of the 1930s – it was less ideological and more “pragmatic.” Cynthia Kaplan comments that “The new mood was summarized by *Pravda* when it argued, in June 1944, in sharp contrast to the Party's pre-war principles, that the ‘personal qualities of every Party member should be judged by his practical contribution to the war effort’ rather than by his class origins or ideological correctness.” More importantly in some ways, those newly enrolled in the Party presented a younger membership with those under twenty-five making up less than 9% of the Party before the war and over 18% after.¹⁸ In the postwar period, as demobilized soldiers re-entered society, it was proximity and relevance to the war and the war effort that came to be increasingly utilized in defining a person's worth and future career advancements.

These veterans became a new type of citizen. Their assertiveness and wartime experience created someone who no doubt expected some entitlements when it came to the history and memory of the war.¹⁹ As much as the war experience altered how veterans viewed their past and surroundings, so too did the veterans themselves alter the

¹⁸ Cynthia S. Kaplan, “The Impact of World War II on the Party,” in *The Impact of World War II on the Soviet Union*, ed. Susan J. Linz (New Jersey: Rowman & Allanheld, 1985), 160, 161, 167, 173; Figes, 434; Weiner, *Making Sense of War*, 51; Bidlack and Lomagin, 3; Amir Weiner, “The Making of a Dominant Myth: The Second World War and the Construction of Political Identities within the Soviet Polity,” *The Russian Review* 55, no. 4 (Oct., 1996): 638.

¹⁹ Weiner, *Making Sense of War*, 67, 324; Amir Weiner, “In the Long Shadow of War: The Second World War and the Soviet and Post-Soviet World,” *Diplomatic History* 25, no. 3 (Summer, 2001): 455.

Party whose ranks they now dominated. Those propelled into positions of power, taking over from previously denounced victims, had yet to achieve a similar level of experience or knowledge and the losses sustained during the war only added to the inexperience that defined much of the Party leadership in the postwar period. Through the fires of war a new generation of Party leadership emerged. Although not possible until after Stalin's death, the myths created around the war effort in the postwar period reinforced a need and desire for veterans, occupying high and low positions throughout Soviet society, to define their war experience against that of the official narrative in order to justify their current standing and continue to propagate the war's importance.²⁰

History after Stalin

With Stalin gone, changes soon began to take place in the realms of historiography as the process of de-Stalinization was begun. The director of the Institute of History, Arkadii Sidorov, recommended a new editor-in-chief and deputy editor for *Voprosy istorii*, Anna Pankratova and Eduard Burdzhhalov.²¹ All were loyal to the regime during Stalin's time, especially Sidorov, who according to Roger Markwick, "had played a leading role in the viciously anti-Semitic 'anti-cosmopolitan' campaign." The "paradox" of the post-Stalin administration was in part mirrored in the historical

²⁰ Weiner, *The Making of a Dominant Myth*, 660. As a means of everyday unification, the war served a more "mundane purpose" in that any "social and economic deficiencies" were blamed on it. George Gibian, "World War 2 in Russian National Consciousness: Pristavkin (1981-7) and Kondratyev (1990)," in *World War 2 and the Soviet People*, eds. John Garrard and Carol Garrard (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 147.

²¹ Burdzhhalov criticized "the state of historical science" and among other aspects of Soviet history wanted to take "a closer look at the early years of the Great Patriotic War." Roger D. Markwick, *Rewriting History in Soviet Russia: The Politics of Revisionist Historiography, 1956-1974* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 51.

community. Just as the new ruling elite who attempted to initiate a process of de-Stalinization were made up of former Stalinists, so too were some of the historians, who previously walked the sometimes shifting Stalinist party line. Now they assumed positions of importance in the historical community responsible for laying “the ground work for the reinvigoration of historiography in the post-Stalin era.”²² Unfortunately, initially historical publications continued to offer little to nothing in terms of original research and analysis. When 600 historians participated in a conference in January 1956, Pankratova “lamented” how the articles appearing in *Voprosy istorii* consisted of numerous “shortcomings” including “dogmatism, rote-learning, vulgarization, political fashionableness and black-and-white representation of the past.”²³

Throughout the de-Stalinization process history continued to be transformed into patriotic propaganda as the Second World War was utilized by Khrushchev’s administration as a tool to inspire and educate future generations. The memory of the war was dominated by the current political elites in power and both foreign and domestic policies often utilized memories of the unfolding and outcome of the Second World War. Political institutions needed to be legitimized, most established myths reinforced and official policies rationalized.²⁴ The foundation of the Soviet Union needed to be portrayed as incorruptible and as such, while Stalin might have altered the path the Soviet state was following, his injustices were said to have taken place solely on the surface. The core remained good in essence. The process of de-Stalinization that ensued with

²² Markwick, “Thaws and freezes in Soviet historiography, 1953-64,” 174-175. He became best known, however, for revisionist views on the role of the Bolsheviks in 1917.

²³ *Ibid.*, 177, 178-179.

²⁴ Heer, vii.

Khrushchev's ascent to power walked a fine line in holding Stalin and those closest to him culpable of criminal actions yet steered any criticism away from the liability of Khrushchev's administration. Therefore, once initiated it was practically impossible to forgo employing the same Stalinist methods that were previously vilified in keeping the population docile and convinced that the new leadership was not entwined with previous Stalinist policies. As Abraham Rothberg comments, the aim of Khrushchev's reforms "was modernization and amelioration, not democratization or liberalization, not even the very limited liberalization many Soviet intellectuals hoped for."²⁵

The foundation of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization campaign was his denunciation of Stalin at the 20th Party Congress. The decade that followed Khrushchev's secret speech heralded one of the "most significant" periods in Soviet war literature.²⁶ The 20th Congress signified the first serious attempt at an examination of the Stalinist era, including a look at its significance, history and those who carried responsibility for it.²⁷

The shift in historical thinking was not signaled by trained historians but rather the Soviet intelligentsia. The term "Thaw" itself was coined by Ehrenburg's work *The Thaw* in early 1954.²⁸ Aided by thick journals of the time, specifically *Novyi Mir*, where Ehrenburg's "Thaw" first appeared, literature began to portray "public opinion" and served as a "catalyst" for the intelligentsia, including historians.²⁹ Literature provided a

²⁵ Rothberg, 7.

²⁶ Ellis, *Vasiliy Grossman*, 36.

²⁷ The more "favorable reactions" to the secret speech came from the intelligentsia and students while "former soldiers remained the most conservative in their perceptions of Stalin." Zubkova, 184, 189.

²⁸ Ilia Ehrenburg, *Ottepel'* (Moscow, 1954).

²⁹ Markwick, "Thaws and freezes in Soviet historiography, 1953-64," 174.

medium for historians to explore and confront the Soviet Union's history, from the Civil War through the Second World War. According to Denis Kozlov, "During the Thaw, politics, viewed as history, was debated via established literary channels. Politics as history became the domain of readers."³⁰ Roger Markwick similarly comments that literature was the "vehicle for the appearance of a genuine 'politic opinion'" as "art was transformed into politics and politics was aestheticized."³¹

Writers introduced questions, which in turn broadened the parameters of research. Professional historians as well as members of the military and Party entered discussions and confronted issues they would have rather ignored in part thanks to literary publications that required answers. Writers began to push against previously imposed boundaries and topics as a result of the atmosphere of the Thaw and limited guidance from the Party. This was undoubtedly aided by the fact that Khrushchev's policy when it came to literature was founded simply on an "anti-Stalinism" platform without any other guidance for authors. When it became apparent that liberal writers were thinking about their own agenda, Khrushchev attempted "to bully them back into line," but the floodgates were already opened.³² Publications following an anti-Stalinist line, like *Novyi Mir*, were met with charges of "nihilism" by the Writers' Union and irate Party members in 1954, but there were no decisive steps taken to silence dissenting voices in regards to how history was to be represented.³³

³⁰ Kozlov, 6-7.

³¹ Markwick, *Rewriting History in Soviet Russia*, 22.

³² Garrard and Garrard, *Inside the Soviet Writers' Union*, 78.

³³ Kathleen E. Smith, *Remembering Stalin's Victims: Popular Memory and the End of the USSR* (NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 33.

If authors could not be silenced, editors could still be targeted and some, like Simonov, found themselves having to address their previous views of the war. Consequently, at the end of 1954, Aleksandr Tvardovskii was dismissed from his position as editor in chief of *Novyi Mir* and replaced by Simonov. In letters to readers, Simonov was rather candid but simultaneously reserved about his participation in helping create the distorted image of the Great Patriotic War that was prevalent during the war itself and continued into the Thaw period, as was Alexei Surkov, the head of the Writers' Union. Simonov believed he participated in a process that most others, although unwilling, also took part in, and Surkov, in a forward to his *Old Field Notebook*, published in 1957, admitted how during the initial period of the war he helped in "concealing the defeatism that had actually prevailed in the army" and instead played up the "imaginary altruistic patriotism of the troops."³⁴

When it came to the war's history, creating a more truthful account was part of a larger struggle for the nation's "spiritual values" which were displaced by Stalin in the postwar period. The war served as a defining moment for an entire generation, and Soviet intellectuals wanted an outlet for their feelings and experiences. Stalin's "enforced silence" led to pent-up emotions and their eruption under Khrushchev. Those with the greatest conviction approached the ruling elite with a long-held belief that their suffering and sacrifice entitled them to a better life, spiritually and materially.³⁵

³⁴ L.I. Lazarev, ed., *Konstantin Simonov: Pis'ma o voine 1943-1979* (Moscow: Sovetskii Pisatel', 1990), 113-114, 119, 142; Jones, *Myth, Memory, Trauma*, 175; Figes, 615-616; Gallagher, 147-148.

³⁵ Seweryn Bialer, *Stalin and His Generals* (New York: Pegasus, 1969), 20-21.

Works that started to appear on the war by literary personalities, themselves soldiers and officers who had “seen sweat and blood on their tunics,” were of one mind in believing that the defeat of Nazi Germany was a result of the actions of the people, who in spite of Stalinist policies proved capable of victory.³⁶ Lazar Lazarev describes how the publication of their fictional works during the Thaw, which often “resembled memoirs in their autographical perspective...aroused furious discussion about topics that were so new that they required unfamiliar phrases and neologisms, such as ‘the truth of the trenches (*okopnaya Pravda*), ‘deheroisation’ (*degeroizatsiya*)...the uncompromising assault of these works on official dogma aroused violent counterattacks by supporters of Stalinist myth.”³⁷

By 1963, close to the end of Khrushchev’s time in power, literature on the war portrayed the war experience in a way that would have been unimaginable a decade earlier. Vorob’ev’s, *Ubity pod Moskvoi*, gave a more realistic portrayal of the war’s nature, describing how students, untrained and poorly equipped, were sent to the frontline to oppose the advancing enemy while in the chaos of war the chain of command stopped functioning. Unlike Aleksandr Bek’s popular *Volokolamskoe shosse*, published in 1945, Vorob’ev’s work was a far more depressing novel that dealt with the defense of Moscow in 1941.³⁸

Soviet literary personalities attempted their best to widen discussions, questions, and debates about the war while the Party and censors continued to limit what could be

³⁶ This included authors such as Grigorii Baklanov, Iuri Bondarev, Vasil’ Bykov, Konstantin Vorob’ev, Ales Adamovich and Bulat Okudzhava.

³⁷ Lazarev, “Russian Literature on the War and Historical Truth,” 32-33.

³⁸ Ellis, *The Damned and The Dead*, 24-25.

said or admitted about the true costs of the Soviet war effort. As much as Stalin and his cult were blamed for the blunders encountered in the war, Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin portrayed the ensuing advances of the Red Army as a result of the Party's organizational prowess while the "truth of the trenches" took away from the patriotic all-people's war that propaganda continued to try to impose onto the war's narrative. Nonetheless, selfless admissions by the likes of Simonov and others allowed military historians to make their own additions to the war's narrative, although throughout the entire process they would be met with a state and censors that were still unsure of what was allowed to be said and what should continue to be guarded as state secrets.

Writing the War's History and Khrushchev's Secret Speech

The first-ten year postwar period featured limited writing on the war years aside from Stalin's short history and biography as well as laudatory articles written by select political and military personalities, which solely echoed the Stalinist narrative. Nonetheless, initial changes to the historiography of the war were evident soon after Stalin's death. In part, the changes were evidence of a legitimization of select personalities who were soon to compete for the leadership role of the country, thus the foundation of their own myths – intertwined with the history of the war – could be seen to already be established on paper. The Party's dominant position in the war was illustrated by a Central Committee document, published in July of 1953, which "portrayed the war as a triumph of Party policy and ignored Stalin."³⁹

³⁹ Gallagher, 129.

A further change was traced by Gallagher to an article in *Voennaia Mysl'*, published in the spring of 1955, which claimed military literature on the war contributed “not only to the distortion of the actual military events of 1941, but to the idealization of this form of combat.” The editorial warned that a history of the war riddled with errors would “incorrectly orient our military cadres to the possibilities of repeating it in a future war.” Military historians were also attacked and blamed for having developed a “subservient attitude toward Stalin.” The Red Army’s performance in the initial period of the war was described as a defeat and the idea of a plan of “active defense,” which had become associated with 1941, was disparaged. “Active defense,” it was claimed, was utilized to conceal the numerous errors perpetrated and the defeats sustained by the Red Army, simultaneously denying “due credit to the soldiers, commanders, and people for their patriotism, staunchness, and courage.”⁴⁰ Furthermore, the editorial clearly pointed to an inherent weakness in Soviet military scientific studies, “It is necessary to say frankly that in connection with the cult of the individual, no science sinned so much as did military science.” Finally, it was argued that publications on the war consisted of a regurgitation of Stalinist speeches and quotes “instead of objective research on military theory and historical facts...Such copying, freeing one from the necessity to think about serious problems, holds back creative thought, and clearly brings *harm* to our military science.”⁴¹ The redundancy of Soviet ritualized performances in texts was evident within the Soviet establishment, at least to some, but this voice proved an exception to the rule.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 133; James Frederick Gebhardt, *Soviet Historiography of Soviet Foreknowledge of the German Invasion of 1941*, (MA Thesis, 1976), 19-20.

⁴¹ Garthoff, 61-62.

There were attempts to mask the repetition of Stalinist positions. Stalin's "operating factors," first published and discussed during the war itself, continued to make an appearance in Soviet military science and strategy discussions through 1956. After Khrushchev's denunciation, references to these factors seemingly disappeared, but it was solely the "old rubric" that was done away with. The reiteration and confirmation of the "decisive significance" of the operating factors continued to be visible in publications and were soon related back to Lenin. In 1957 *Krasnaia zvezda* published an article entitled "V. I. Lenin on the Fundamental Factors Which Decide the Course and Outcome of Wars." These "fundamental factors" were Stalin's "permanently operating factors" repackaged and "paraphrased."⁴²

Although some of Stalin's positions were returned to, discussions that were previously disallowed were finally addressed. Discussions centered around 1941 assumed ever greater importance and one of the questions associated with this period was the factor of surprise, which led to an eventual reinterpretation of the initial phase of the war. Those who survived the chaos and disasters of the first two years knew the bitter truth even though Stalin's official narrative remained in place after his death. Geoffrey Jukes comments that it was only in 1955 that it was "publicly admitted that the long retreats had not been voluntary." More substantial revelations would have to wait until Khrushchev's speech. Several prominent generals joined in the chorus of voices raised against Stalin and his leadership, tracing the disasters of 1941 back to the purges of the 1930s and Stalin's initial erroneous wartime decisions. These allegations against Stalin, while containing more than a grain of truth, also served an ulterior purpose in helping to

⁴² Ibid., 82, 83-84.

mask the failures of the generals themselves, both in their preparations for the war and their initial conduct after hostilities began.⁴³

The initial period of the war, however, needed to serve an important function and lessons needed to be drawn from 1941 in order to prepare for future conflicts. While military technology evolved, due to the “stagnation” experienced under Stalin military science suffered.⁴⁴ In 1955 an article in *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, by the deputy chief of the Main Political Administration of the Ministry of Defense, Lieutenant General S. Shatilov, emphasized how the “increased peril to the Soviet Union posed by the existence of new nuclear weapons and delivery systems gave new significance to the question of surprise in war.” Shatilov claimed, specifically, that the factor of surprise needed to be emphasized in order to show how it “had dominated the first period of the last war, since a false portrayal of this period might encourage erroneous notions about the nature of a future war...”⁴⁵

Unfortunately, a few articles, no matter how reflective of the past and present, could not do away with the ingrained rhetoric of the Stalinist period that so many were accustomed to. As a result, a publication by Grigorii Deborin, doctor of economic sciences, marking the 10th anniversary of the victory of the Soviet Union over Nazi

⁴³ Jukes, 2.

⁴⁴ Provisions for a future war that included atomic weapons were absent from Soviet publications until 1954, something very much entwined with the factor of surprise that was to become so important for Soviet studies of the Great Patriotic War. Furthermore, the future importance of both surprise and nuclear capabilities soon meant the main obligation of Soviet military intelligence (GRU) during the Cold War “was to provide early warning against thermonuclear war from the United States.” Gebhardt, 17-18; Jonathan Haslam, *Near and Distant Neighbors: A New History of Soviet Intelligence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 197.

⁴⁵ Cited in Gebhardt, 20.

Germany, repeated practically verbatim many of the ideas cemented during Stalin's time. A similar explanation was offered by a publication later in the year by the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences by Boris Tel'pukhovskii. Both were participants in commission meetings during the creation of the war's official history.⁴⁶

Soviet military historians were now faced with a need to reexamine the war's initial period and ascertain what actual role the factor of surprise played in German victories and Soviet defeats.⁴⁷ While Soviet military doctrine necessitated a reevaluation of the German invasion, due to the dearth of source material – published statistics and archival documents – discussions and debates consisted of familiar arguments about why the Red Army suffered such heavy losses and defeats. One figure who might have been able to add to this conversation, Zhukov, when brought back from exile by Khrushchev, steered conversations away from 1941, choosing to concentrate on the purges of the Red Army in the 1930s. After his dismissal by Khrushchev, in 1957, Zhukov became an additional target and was included in a broader attack by Khrushchev when discussing 1941 and Zhukov's failure at anticipating and preparing for Germany's surprise attack.⁴⁸

Aside from members of the military steering conversations away from needed analysis, another impediment to analyzing the history of the war was that the end of Stalin's image as a master manipulator of events during the war meant a parceling out of

⁴⁶ The former, *Velikaia Pobeda Sovetskogo Naroda*, argued that Germany's victories in the initial period of the war were due to a "surprise" invasion of the Soviet Union and facilitated by two years of battle experienced and by both a qualitative and quantitative superiority of troops and military equipment. The latter, *Ocherki Istorii Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny, 1941-1945*, also leaned on the aforementioned reasons as well as the inclusion of a lack of a Second Front in Europe, also recycled from Stalinist explanations. *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴⁸ Roberts, *Stalin's General*, 118.

credit for the victories achieved by the Red Army to others, more often than not those who could immediately profit while shouldering Stalin with all the blame.⁴⁹ Answers for inconvenient questions were partly given out, and usually encompassed Stalin's name or cult in one form or another, but this change in the Soviet narrative of the war meant a continued impairment for historians to deal with one of the most defining events within Soviet history.⁵⁰ Consequently, Stalin's cult continued to impede discussions on the war. Unfortunately, it was easier to proclaim a liberation from the cult and its influence than to actually go through the process of "liberation." Some authors simply replaced Stalin's name in their narrative with all-encompassing institutions like "Party," "GKO," "STAVKA," etc. This signaled a further removal of the human element from the history of the war.⁵¹

If the first postwar decade witnessed limited changes in its historiography, the next period began with the 20th Party Congress on February 25, 1956, when Khrushchev denounced Stalin's leadership and ushered in a radical change in Soviet perceptions of their past. In a closed session Khrushchev laid bare his thoughts on Stalin and those responsible for the injustices meted out to the Soviet state and people. Although the speech was "secret" it was a well-known secret. Some 1,500 delegates were in session to hear it, including foreigners, while a slightly edited text was read out at Party meetings

⁴⁹ The importance attributed to Stalin again meant a failure to investigate the "moral and political situation in the country, party, and army, the political, social, and strategic mechanisms of management," the Soviet state's development in the 1930s and the country's preparation on the eve of the war to meet a future German threat. Kulish, 324.

⁵⁰ Earl F. Ziemke, "Stalin as a Strategist, 1940-1941," *Military Affairs* 47, no. 4 (Dec., 1983): 179.

⁵¹ Kulish, 303-304. This was very much evident in the early-mid 1960s when discussions were held to discuss the impact of the cult on the history of the war after the publication of at least the first four volumes had already taken place. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, 111.

across the entire country. In this fashion a wide audience was presented with disclosures about Stalin's crimes.⁵²

The speech held at its center a discussion of the war years and Stalin's role. Khrushchev traced the accumulation of power into Stalin's hands as leading "to serious consequences" throughout the war. He stated:

When we look at many of our novels, films and historical "scientific studies," the role of Stalin in the Patriotic War appears to be entirely improbable. Stalin had foreseen everything. The Soviet Army, on the basis of a strategic plan prepared by Stalin long before, used the tactics of so-called "active defense," i.e., tactics which, as we know, allowed the Germans to come up to Moscow and Stalingrad. Using such tactics the Soviet Army, supposedly, thanks only to Stalin's genius, turned to the offensive and subdued the enemy. The epic victory gained through the armed might of the Land of the Soviets, through our heroic people, is ascribed in this type of novel, film and "scientific study" as being completely due to the strategic genius of Stalin. We have to analyze this matter carefully because it has a tremendous significance not only from the historical, but especially from the political, educational and practical point of view.⁵³

The aspects of "surprise" and "unexpectedness" that characterized the initial period of the war, for Khrushchev, were nonsense since "as soon as Hitler came to power in Germany he assigned to himself the task of liquidating Communism." The mass repression of the Red Army during the 1930s only served to "undermine military discipline" and had a "negative influence" on the initial period of the war. Stalin was blamed for ignoring information from intelligence, military, and diplomatic sources, "because the leadership was conditioned against such information, such data was dispatched with fear and assessed with reservation." Although warnings were received, "necessary steps were not

⁵² Smith, *Remembering Stalin's Victims*, 27; Stephen F. Cohen, *The Victims Return: Survivors of the Gulag after Stalin* (Exeter, NH: Publishingworks, 2010), 37.

⁵³ The Russian Institute Columbia University, ed., *The Anti-Stalin Campaign and International Communism: A Selection of Documents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), 42-43.

taken to prepare the country properly for defense and to prevent it from being caught unawares.” Soviet industry was lauded and deemed “so developed that it was capable of supplying fully the Soviet army with everything that it needed.” Such an assessment readily ignored the role of Lend Lease and was in part a praising of Stalin’s efforts during industrialization and collectivization. Yet Khrushchev believed it was accurate since it was proven true “by the fact that although during the war we lost almost half of our industry and important industrial and food production areas as the result of enemy occupation of the Ukraine, Northern Caucasus and other western parts of the country, the Soviet people was still able to organize the production of military equipment in the eastern parts of the country, install there equipment taken from the Western industrial areas, and to supply our armed forces with everything which was necessary to destroy the enemy.”⁵⁴

With Germany’s invasion Stalin’s mistakes only multiplied as “Moscow” was accused of issuing orders that Red Army troops could not return fire. “Why? It was because Stalin, despite evident facts, thought that the war had not yet started, that this was only a provocative action on the part of several undisciplined sections of the German army, and that our reaction might serve as a reason for the Germans to begin the war.” Not only did warnings go unheeded, but reports from soldiers and commanders on the frontline were ignored as the Air Force was destroyed on the ground and the enemy’s armies “annihilated large numbers of our military cadres and disorganized our military

⁵⁴ Ibid., 43, 44, 45-46, 49.

leadership; consequently we could not prevent the enemy from marching deep into the country.”⁵⁵

Khrushchev called attention to Stalin’s breakdown and lack of leadership during the initial German advance claiming Stalin did not oversee operations or do much of anything. The end result was a “threatening danger” hung over the Soviet state, which reflected Stalin’s “faulty methods of directing the nation and the Party.” When he did regain his composure and went on to issue directives, they were far removed from reality as the actual situation on the frontlines could not support his orders and resulted in enormous losses for the Red Army.⁵⁶

When Khrushchev first mentioned who deserved credit for the victory in the war, it was the result of the Party, the Soviet Government, the people, and the army, including its “talented” commanders and “brave soldiers,” who in spite of Stalin’s leadership were able to emerge victorious. The second mention, however, put the Party in the spotlight as he claimed that “the main role and the main credit for the victorious ending of the war belongs to our Communist Party, to the armed forces of the Soviet Union, and to the tens of millions of Soviet people raised by the Party.”⁵⁷

In the wake of Khrushchev’s revelations new journals were published on both the history of the war and the Soviet state in general.⁵⁸ The call for research would culminate in the publication of the six-volume history of the Great Patriotic War, and in a decade

⁵⁵ Ibid., 47-48.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 50-51.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 55, 56.

⁵⁸ These included *Voprosy istorii KPSS*, *Istoriia SSSR*, *Novaia i noveishaia istoriia*, and the journal *Voенно-istoricheskii zhurnal* resumed publications. Kulish, 302.

hundreds of full-length books and articles appeared. Lisa Kirschenbaum comments that “Khrushchev’s decision to lift the ban on war stories that focused on something other than Stalin’s military genius constituted the most durable, if least sensational, part of the de-Stalinization process...”⁵⁹ But even with a wave of new publications, the history of the war remained in many ways linked to Stalin’s cult, its rhetoric, ideas, and nostalgia.

History in general in the post-Stalin period was being rewritten and adjusted for Khrushchev’s new tenure. This also meant the entourage that grew around Khrushchev focused on his achievements during the war, one of the most important of which came to be his time spent at Stalingrad. Once again the initial period of the war was omitted as both Khrushchev and the military men that united around him were more interested in discussing their glorious victory at Stalingrad than the defeats and chaos of the initial period of the war. Concentrating on this key battle allowed for a look at a victorious period and event in the history of the Great Patriotic War and an omission of the realities of 1941 and early 1942 – an understanding of how the enemy arrived at Stalingrad.

Khrushchev was careful in depicting the leading ranks of the party that continued to support him as victims of Stalin’s time in power rather than active accomplices or perpetrators, although select personalities, like Beria and Molotov, were included in the “cult of personality” as having robbed the Soviet state of so much.⁶⁰ Without a more honest and open reflection on Stalin and his cult, the history of the war served the Party’s needs first and foremost as Stalin’s infallibility was replaced by institutions. As Stalin’s name disappeared, into the vacuum were placed the general ideas of “Party” and “people”

⁵⁹ Kirschenbaum, “Nothing is Forgotten,” 76-77.

⁶⁰ Sherlock, 75.

to assume the role of responsibility for previous achievements, including victory in the Great Patriotic War and the Second World War in general. The Party also became tightly entwined with the population. The de-Stalinization process would bind the people with the new elite running the state. As Khrushchev portrayed his administration as victims of Stalin's cult, so he claimed the same was true for the Party and people; they were "victims and unwitting accomplices in the terror." Additionally, "he reminded people that they too had cheered Stalin and supported the death penalty for 'enemies of the people.'"⁶¹ Consequently, the victory that Stalin previously took credit for now became a victory of the people led by the Party – a victory they could only take credit for if they appropriated Khrushchev's new version of events and victimhood status as their own.

The removal of Stalin's mistakes from the Soviet state's development meant Lenin reassumed a position of importance, even though he died in 1924, well before WWII, a position Stalin previously coopted for his own needs during the production of the *Short Course*.⁶² This text offered a historical interpretation that was not marred by "difficulties, mistakes, and shortcomings" with no real need "to be understood but memorized, learned by heart."⁶³ With Khrushchev aiming to "modernize the Soviet system" the needed inspiration and "enthusiasm" came from "Leninist ideals," which assumed the ideological position that Stalin's death left vacant.⁶⁴ Taking a cue from

⁶¹ Bialer, 18; Gallagher, 129; Smith, *Remembering Stalin's Victims*, 39.

⁶² Rustem Nureev, "The Short Course of the History of the All-Union Communist Party: *The Distorted Mirror of Party Propaganda*," in *The lost Politburo Transcripts: From Collective Rule to Stalin's Dictatorship* eds. Paul R. Gregory and Norman Naimark (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 168.

⁶³ Markwick, *Rewriting History*, 43.

⁶⁴ Finney, "Vasily Grossman and the Myths of the Great Patriotic War," 316. Leaning on Lenin's name and ideas presented a linear progression in the Soviet system. Stalin utilized Lenin's legacy in regards to

Khrushchev's reference to Lenin, others began to take apart the Stalin cult's rhetoric and redirect it back to the thoughts, ideas, and actions of Lenin. Debates raging around the war's history, including the purges of the 1930s, invoked the Leninist legacy of the Party and the Red Army's strategy. Lenin would be intertwined with the Party of the 1930s while Stalinist rhetoric was omitted yet his repressions were simultaneously justified in a feat of political acrobatics.⁶⁵

Thanks to Khrushchev's invitation to begin questioning the war years, conditions were created to not only reevaluate the history of the war but also utilize the war as a tool to look at other aspects of Soviet history, including the 1930s, where Stalin played a key role. Khrushchev traced the conditions that allowed the Germans to advance to Moscow and Stalingrad and what caused so much trauma and harm to the Soviet people and state as emanating directly from Stalin.⁶⁶ If under Stalin any miscalculations and errors were avoided or denied then under Khrushchev the numerous deficiencies that occurred due to Stalin and were overcome by the Party, army, and people, were all achievements that could be claimed and utilized for the purpose of enhancing Soviet prestige domestically and internationally. But it was no coincidence that most of the merit for the victories

war communism to justify collectivization and industrialization. Similarly, the purges also leaned on a Leninist legacy when Stalin argued that Lenin "not only defeated his opponents, but 'crushed' them." While Khrushchev "employed the Lenin myth to justify his denigration of Stalin and his selective rejection of the Stalinist inheritance in the foreign and domestic spheres." Sherlock, 53.

⁶⁵ For instance, see RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 11, l. 9; d. 12, l. 15; d. 30, l. 26-27. The first two folders contain the transcript of the editorial commission and its discussion about the periodization of the war, from 11 November 1957 and 28 December 1957. The last folder discusses the manuscript of the second volume on 20 June 1959.

⁶⁶ Ziemke, 173; Roberts, *Stalin's General*, 269.

attained went to those who continued to wield the most influence and had the most to gain within the Party.⁶⁷

Authors of memoirs finally found an outlet for their grief and attempted to rehabilitate their comrades, those who participated in the war and those purged in the 1930s. Members of the Armed Forces could undo the slander their reputations suffered as their commanding officers were accused of treason in the prewar period and their frontline commanders were accused of cowardice and defeatism throughout the chaotic initial period of the war. They had previously attributed the entire course of events of the Second World War, the greatest military victory achieved in Soviet and Russian history, to Stalin. As a result, the military's status improved, once more providing a stronger foundation for moves inside the political realm of the state.⁶⁸ Now, commanders could finally be avenged not through the sword, but through the pen. Putting their support behind Khrushchev meant they could reinterpret the initial period of the war, "wherein their reputation was most tarnished."⁶⁹ Unfortunately, the end result was a "devaluation of Stalin's military role" with no real in-depth look at the causes of the Red Army's failures.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Bialer, 20.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 21-22, 86; Garthoff, 26.

⁶⁹ James Frederick Gebhardt points to Stalin's February 1946 speech, where he downplayed the Red Army's importance to the victory over Nazi Germany as still fresh in the minds' of Red Army commanders. "One can readily understand, then, the desire of the military establishment to rectify this perception and to elevate the contribution of the military establishment to victory in the Great Patriotic War." Gebhardt, 19.

⁷⁰ Garthoff, 26-27.

Supporting Khrushchev meant following in his footsteps as he aimed for de-Stalinization while utilizing Stalinist methods. The resulting mixed signals meant disagreements were evident in publications as they attempted to keep up. Nancy Whittier Heer documented how a *Krasnaia zvezda* article on 9 May 1956 contained “an indignant rebuff to the editorial board for the journal *Voennii vestnik*.” As it turned out, a lead article in *Voennii vestnik* mentioned the numerous defeats the Red Army’s unprepared forces suffered at the beginning of the German invasion, which was perceived as “belittling the importance of Soviet victory in World War II.” *Krasnaia zvezda* contended that the journal presented these events under the guise of opposition to Stalin’s cult, but the newspaper wanted such a campaign to keep in mind that attacks against the Party and its Central Committee would only undermine their role. Both newspaper and journal were published by the Defense Ministry, yet the line followed in terms of ideas could be seen as diverging between a more honest look at the war and one entrenched in Stalinist thinking thanks to the atmosphere created in the wake of Khrushchev’s speech.⁷¹

The new “great power status” of the Soviet Union combined with the military requirements of the new leadership, allowed for and stimulated the growth of military studies on the war. The stagnation of literature on the war years under Stalin set a “dangerous precedent” since it continuously led to allowed research on the Second World War being subordinated “to narrow propagandistic and ideological schemes.” If the Red Army wanted to prepare itself for future conflict then professional standards and military competence needed to be rooted in discussions that featured an exploration and in-depth analysis of the Soviet combat experience. Khrushchev’s Thaw allowed not only for an

⁷¹ Heer, 83-84.

increase in literature dealing with the war period, but also an improvement in its quality and reliability.⁷² Additionally, the publication of documentary material, in conjunction with translated foreign publications, allowed for a “more open and deeply textured treatment” of the war years.⁷³

Even with new disclosures in the wake of Khrushchev’s speech, some ideas and events began to mirror the Stalin period all too quickly. Khrushchev’s 20th Congress speech leaned on aspects of the Stalinist narrative when it came to the initial period of the war, entwined with attacks on Stalin himself, as when he bemoaned the Soviet Union’s state of readiness and claimed that “had our industry been mobilized properly and in time to supply the army with necessary materiel, our wartime losses would have been decidedly smaller. Such mobilization had not been, however, started in time. And already in the first days of the war it became evident that our army was badly armed, that we did not have enough artillery, tanks and planes to throw the enemy back.”⁷⁴

Censorship was not lifted as the country’s elite would never be able to survive a full investigation into their activities during the 1930s.⁷⁵ According to Nekrich, some within the Soviet Union “made statements calling for restraint and caution. Some hinted that Khrushchev, perhaps, should not have said all that he had, and others had doubts about the security of Khrushchev’s position.” Nekrich’s colleague, “a very well educated historian but a hopeless careerist, said thoughtfully, ‘Well, now, for the next ten years it

⁷² Bialer, 20.

⁷³ Finney, *Remembering the Road to World War Two*, 44.

⁷⁴ The Russian Institute Columbia University, 46.

⁷⁵ Smith, *Remembering Stalin's Victims*, 40.

will be better not to publish anything.’ And he took his own advice. He wrote and defended his doctoral dissertation on the history of Soviet society, but published it only after Khrushchev’s removal.”⁷⁶ Moreover, as in the Stalin period, history was still created to be shaped for the Party’s needs, often with the intention of altering the population’s attitudes.⁷⁷

With Stalin gone and no plans for what to do in his absence, it came as no surprise that his successors continued to follow many of the previously developed procedures and attitudes with minor alterations. Getting rid of his competition, Khrushchev utilized Stalinist methods and played one side off another until he had accumulated enough power to eliminate the rest of his competitors. The military’s presence rose within the Party’s ranks as Khrushchev’s wartime comrades were relied on to not only support his positions but also initiate the arrest of Beria. The creation of the war’s official history would undoubtedly both benefit and suffer from this development as defeats were marginalized and hidden while accomplishments, especially those that included Khrushchev and members of the armed forces that found themselves in the spotlight, were embellished.

Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin at the 20th Party Congress created an opening for discussions, questions, and commentary on previously closed off aspects of the Soviet past. The war narrative created under Stalin was so entrenched within the Soviet system that even those who attacked the cult still had misgivings about questioning his role in the Soviet victory. As was shown earlier, the war cemented Stalin’s reputation and was used

⁷⁶ Nekrich, *Forsake Fear*, 92.

⁷⁷ Bialer, 17.

to legitimize many of the Soviet Union's policies, both foreign and domestic. Thus, it was often the intelligentsia that began to probe previously created boundaries. When it came to the Second World War, many participated or witnessed the war's development and did not need access to archives or documentation to describe their own recollections and thoughts. Thus journals like *Novyi Mir*, among others, were vehicles for literature that offered an original look into the Soviet past.

A spring 1955 publication by a military specialist broached the subject of the defeats in 1941 and the silence and omissions of "military science" under Stalin with respect to the war years, but this article was an exception to the rule. Stalinist ideas were repeated, cloaked in new forms and attributed to Lenin, and commanding officers who bore responsibility for the war's disastrous initial period did their best to steer conversations away from defeats and concentrated on victories. While much of Stalin's narrative of the war years lived on, his reputation suffered as he was continuously blamed for inadequacies. Khrushchev's secret speech created a new template from which historians and intellectuals could work off of looking at the Soviet past and the war experience. But the continued references to Stalinist accomplishments, like collectivization and industrialization, meant Stalin continued to receive some credit for the Red Army's victory in the war.

CHAPTER 3

WRITING THE SIX-VOLUME HISTORY OF THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR

At the 5th Congress of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, held in July 1958, Khrushchev claimed in his speech that the peoples of the Soviet Union “bore the brunt of the war against Hitler's fascism and defeated it. The entire world won [as a result] of this victory...” Similar sentiments were expressed by members of the commission assigned to create the war’s official history. They treated the event as one that had no equal in its “grandiosity and intensity.”¹ This mentality, a relic of the war’s original narrative that portrayed the Soviet Union as head of the anti-Hitler coalition and cemented the Red Army’s reputation as liberator, mirrored the thought process of the collective team of authors and editors who would pen the war’s first official history, beginning in 1957.

This chapter looks at the initial decision to create an official history of the Great Patriotic War and the meetings that were held to discuss its initiation and production, concentrating on the debates around the first and second volumes specifically. Here I develop the themes discussed in the first chapter as historians, scholars, high ranking military commanders and party representatives scrambled to create a framework with which to understand the war’s motivations and consequences, while continuously exhibiting an inability to escape the Stalinist terminology, framework, and conclusions with which many were already well familiar. But without Stalin to dictate the “laws” of the land, any attempts to author a history, even if based on archival source material, raised more questions than authors and editors were able or willing to answer.

¹ E. Boltin, “O khode raboti po sozdaniiu ‘Istorii Velikoi Otechestvennoi voini,’ in *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal* No. 1 (1959): 109-110.

In analyzing the numerous debates and discussions among authors and editors of the war's multi-volume history, Alexei Yurchak's arguments about the disappearance of Stalin's external voice become all too clearly visible in how Stalin and his ideas were treated. With Stalin dead, his "prophetic authority" and the position of "master" fell by the wayside and created contradictions within the realm of "knowledge" that were continually, although not head on, challenged by all sectors of society. With the disappearance of an "external" voice, "language structures became increasingly normalized, cumbersome, citational, and circular..." This result was an "unintended" consequence of authors attempting to relegate their own voices out of produced texts and in doing so they transformed themselves from a "producer of new knowledge to that of the mediator of preexisting knowledge." What Yurchak labelled a "hypernormalization" of text could be found throughout the Soviet Union and was especially evident in the writing and editing process for the war's official history.²

Initiating the Production of the War's Official History

Since Khrushchev was convinced that a lack of knowledge about the war would do more harm than good to the Soviet state, in 1957 the Institute of Marxism-Leninism was given the assignment of authoring the war's history in an official capacity. In looking at the records of the meetings held by commission members – many of whom were veterans of the war – it becomes apparent that the atmosphere created in the wake of Stalin's death and Khrushchev's assumption of power was one of frankness and sincerity. Yet it is also evident that individuals sought to understand what could and should be said

² Yurchak, 13-14, 46-47, 75; Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin*, 239.

and who or what needed to be avoided or lauded. The ambiguous nature of the ideological direction emanating from the leadership meant that while there was a surprising level of openness to be found in many publications, there was also, unfortunately, consistent contradiction.³ Limits on what could be written were dictated by the dearth of publications on the war and historical works, especially those dealing with the war period, which still had to toe the “party line” and be aware of state and military secrets in regards to what could be included in an official history.⁴

Compared to Stalin, there were differences in how history, especially the history of the Great Patriotic War, was written and presented under Khrushchev, but more often than not its foundations, including terminology and rhetoric, matched the Stalin period.⁵ On 12 September 1957 the presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union passed a resolution to create the war’s official history, entitled “The History of the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union, 1941-1945.”⁶ The press initially promised all the volumes would be published by 1961; as it turned out, the final volume

³ Jane P. Shapiro, “The Soviet Press and the Problem of Stalin,” *Studies in Comparative Communism* 4, no. 3 (1971): 209.

⁴ The Civil War also suffered from a lack of literature. Textbooks on the civil war were missing until the 1935 publication of Gorky’s *History of the Civil War in the USSR*. Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis*, 132.

⁵ As Bialer explained: “...the Stalin and post-Stalin periods differ in three principal respects which affect both the quantity and the quality of writing on the Second World War. They differ with regard to the interpretations by their respective leaders of the system’s ideological and political needs and, therefore, of the purposes for which history is used. They differ in the extent to which they are willing to ignore the harmful effects of a lack of free inquiry on the expertise, the professionalism of their managerial groups. They differ in their willingness and ability to regulate the appearance, the substance, and the form of historical writing. In all three respects, the situation in the post-Stalin period has been more conducive to historical research and to the emergence of memoir literature than it was in the preceding period.” Bialer, 17.

⁶ Boltin, 109.

appeared in 1965.⁷ At least twenty-four meetings were held to discuss the creation of the war's official history by the Institute of Marxism-Leninism. Records of the meetings usually recorded either full names or last names of participants with rare instances when "unnamed voices" were listed.

Members of the editorial staff included some who were previously part of the commission created during the Second World War to document its history, including Isaak Mints and Petr Pospelov.⁸ Editors and authors of the commission set up under Khrushchev included representatives from a broad spectrum of institutions and public organizations and all had participated in the war effort in one capacity or another. Most carried a rank of either colonel or general. Pospelov headed the project, he was previously head editor of *Pravda*, directed the second edition of Stalin's *Short Biography*, and was assigned by Khrushchev to head a commission focusing on "violations of socialist legality."⁹ The more vocal participants among the commission members were Major-General Evgenii Boltin, an author and veteran of the war and former head editor of *Krasnaia zvezda*, Major-General N. Fokin, who previously authored two texts on Red Army offensive actions in December of 1942 and January of 1945, and Boris Tel'pukhovskii, who wrote his dissertation on the Stalingrad counteroffensive (without

⁷ "Istoriia Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny Sovetskogo Soiuz 1941-1945 gg." *Pravda*, July 31, 1959, 2.

⁸ The commission created during the war included: E. M. Iaroslavskii, P. N. Pospelov, G. F. Aleksandrov, I. V. Shikin, I. V. Rogov, I. I. Mints, P. K Ponomarenko, A. I. Makhanov, M. B. Mitin, and N. A. Mikhailov. At least four members went on to author texts on the war, either during the war itself or in the immediate postwar period. G. F. Aleksandrov, *Velikaia Otechestvennaia voina sovetskogo naroda* (Moscow, 1942); E. Iaroslavskii, *Velikaia Otechestvennaia voina sovetskogo naroda protiv gitlerovskoi Germanii* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1942); M. Mitin, *Velikaia Otechestvennaia voina protiv nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1942); I. I. Mints, *Velikaia Otechestvennaia voina Sovetskogo Soiuz*. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 125, d. 204, l. 1-2.

⁹ Taubman, 279.

having access to the original plans) and was the author and editor of numerous works on the Second World War.¹⁰ Dozens of veterans and specialists on the military and military history were among those chosen to participate on the creation of an official narrative of the war's history, while additional experts included historians of Japan and the Far East, Germany, America and Poland.¹¹

The work was organized under the aegis of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism, where the department on the History of the Great Patriotic War was headed by Boltin. This section was to undertake the work of collecting the needed documentation and material, including from government, institutional and party archives, and organizing the work of authors and editors.¹² Source material was to be provided from a variety of institutions, scholars, and participants of the war. The Soviet public was to play an “important role” in authoring the war's history, including organizations such as the Union of Soviet Writers, the Union of Journalists, and the War Veterans Committee. Similarly,

¹⁰ For further information on Boltin, see Vitalii Moroz, “Khvatit slavit' narkoma,” *Krasnaia zvezda*, June 27, 2013, accessed May 2, 2016, <http://www.redstar.ru/index.php/syria/item/9923-khvatit-slavit-narkoma-takoj-verdikt-redaktor-uslyshal-nakanune-vojny>.

¹¹ Historians included Andrei Kuchkin and Isaak Mints, while military historians were represented by Pavel Zhilin, V. Zhelanov (Colonel), Evgenii Bogush (participated in the battles of Stalingrad and Kursk), Vasiliï Moskovskii (Major General) and Musheg Minasian (Major General). Evgenii Zhukov and Arkadii Sidorov (director of the Institute of History) were both professors and authors of texts and lectures, the former on Japan and the Far East and the latter on the Russo-Japanese War. Lev Leshchinskii (lieutenant colonel), a candidate of historical science, was an author of military histories, including on the German military and Guriï Zastavenko (colonel) was an author of publications on the United States and Poland.

¹² Some of the archives that were listed as being utilized included *Arkhiv vneshnei politiki SSSR*, *Tsentral'nyi arkhiv Vsesoiuznogo Tsentral'nogo Soveta profsoiuzov*, *Arkhiv Istoricheskogo otdeleniia Glavnogo Shtaba Voenno-Morskogo Flota*, *Arkhiv Ministerstva oborony SSSR*, *Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii i sotsialisticheskogo stroitel'stva Leningradskoi oblasti*, *Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Voenno-Morskogo Flota SSSR*, *Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii i sotsialisticheskogo stroitel'stva SSSR*, *Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv RSFSR*, *Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Sovetskoi Armii*, *Tsentral'nyi partiinyi arkhiv Instituta marksizma-leninizma pri TsK KPSS*, and *Tsentral'noe statisticheskoe upravlenie pri Sovete Ministrov SSSR*. N. A. Fokin et al., *Istoriia Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny Sovetskogo Soiuzna, 1941-1945*, Vol. 2 (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo Ministerstva Oborony Soiuzna SSR, 1961), 679.

the “personal memories” of the war’s “direct participants” would “serve as valuable material for the [war’s] history.”¹³ Editors had no qualms about writing to institutions to request material, as in one instance the head editor of the second volume wrote to the head of the Museum of the Heroic Defense of Brest Fortress asking for illustrations, orders, letters, and memoirs of participants and eye-witnesses of the fortress’s defense.¹⁴

The press also mentioned the progress of the documentation of the war’s history and in turn letters were received with veterans hoping to add their experiences to the collective memory of the war. For instance, after seeing an article in *Pravda* on 22 June 1958, a veteran who served in a special detachment of the NKVD sent a letter to the institute of Marxism-Leninism commenting on how he would like the fighting for the city of Odessa to be highlighted, which he participated in. Although he could provide commentary on what he witnessed he feared his letter was written too late to be included.¹⁵ *Pravda*, keeping the public up-to-date, contained at least a dozen articles specifically mentioning the progress of the official history of the war, from 1957–1963.¹⁶

¹³ “Vazhnaia zadacha sovetskikh istorikov,” *Pravda*, September 29, 1957, 2; Boltin, 110, 111.

¹⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 395, l. 16. Letter by N. Fokin to the head of the “Heroic Defense of Brest Fortress” Museum, Major Krupennikov. Dated January 22, 1960.

¹⁵ “Kak idet podgotovka k izdaniiu istorii velikoi otechestvennoi voiny,” *Pravda*, June 22, 1958, 4; RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 395, l. 37-38. The letter, written by D. F. Dupenko, was addressed to the editorial commission at the Institute of Marxism and Leninism and sent on July 6, 1958.

¹⁶ For instance, see “Vazhnaia zadacha sovetskikh istorikov,” *Pravda*, September 29, 1957, 2; “Kak idet podgotovka k izdaniiu istorii velikoi otechestvennoi voiny,” *Pravda*, June 22, 1958, 4; “Istoriia Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny Sovetskogo Soiuz 1941-1945 gg.,” *Pravda*, July 31, 1959, 2; “Uroki istorii: K vykhodu v svet pervogo toma ‘Istoriia Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny Sovetskogo Soiuz,’” *Pravda*, July 24, 1960, 2; “Vtoroi tom ‘Istoriia Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny Sovetskogo Soiuz 1941-1945 g.g.’,” *Pravda*, June 17, 1961, 4; “Letopis’ geroizma i stoikosti sovetskogo naroda: K vykhodu v svet vtorogo toma ‘Istoriia Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny Sovetskogo Soiuz 1941-1945 g.g.’,” *Pravda*, June 21, 1961, 3-4; “Tretii tom ‘Istoriia Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny Sovetskogo Soiuz 1941-1945 gg.’,” *Pravda*, October 8, 1961, 2; “Letopis’ geroicheskikh pobed: Chetvertyi tom ‘Istoriia Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny Sovetskogo Soiuz 1941-1945 gg.’,” *Pravda*, August 29, 1962, 3; “Nesokrushimoe mogushchestvo strany sotsializma: (K vykhodu v svet chetvertogo toma ‘Istoriia Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny Sovetskogo

Boltin, the head of the “drafting committee,” recalled in February 1963 how it was with the “greatest happiness” that work was started on the “creation of ‘The History of the Great Patriotic War.’”¹⁷ Although this was an official history, it was not meant to devalue other publications but rather served as encouragement for future research since the history of the Second World War encompassed such a wide variety of topics. More monographs and studies released on the war meant an increase in articles written and documentary collections published, which in turn would make the task set forth by the Central Committee for the Institute of Marxism-Leninism that much easier. Meetings were convened at the end of 1957 and throughout the next two years to discuss the war’s periodization, its “nature,” and a variety of other topics. By 1959 initial conclusions were already reached and an article in the journal *Voенно-istoricheskii zhurnal*, written by Boltin, outlined the progress of the multi-volume history.¹⁸

In reading the stenographic records of the meetings of the draft commission, there was something of an urgency to publish a history of the war even if “the first edition will not be perfect.” After all, a second can be just as quickly prepared, and in the end there might even be an option to publish a few editions. There was a general admission that Soviet publications provided “too little factual material on the events of the Second

Soiuz 1941-1945’),” *Pravda*, October 5, 1962, 3-4; “Triumfal’nye pobedy: (K vykhodu v svet piatogo toma ‘Istoriia Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny Sovetskogo Soiuz 1941-1945gg.’),” *Pravda*, September 19, 1963, 4.

¹⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, l. 20.

¹⁸ E. Boltin, “O khode raboti po sozdaniiu ‘Istorii Velikoi Otechestvennoi voini.’”

World War, outside the limits of the Soviet-German front.”¹⁹ Available Soviet publications were described as having a “cut and dry pattern.”²⁰ The larger issue was the tendency for readers to clamor for translations of foreign books, which were considered “often of little value and always very tendentious” due to the dearth of material on the Second World War published by Soviet historians. The end result was a “Soviet reader who may not always properly assess the events of the Second World War, [and] sees these events in a distorted mirror.” Therefore, it was thought expedient that a history of the Second World War be written as a way for “bourgeois historiography” to be “countered by our interpretation of the events and lessons of the last war.”²¹

Additionally, there was a need to share the history of the war with “our brotherly parties” in the Eastern bloc, undoubtedly to justify the Soviet presence, especially in light of what happened in Poland and Hungary in 1956.²² This multi-volume history was intended for a wide “audience” and to be a work for the “mass reader,” a “popular” history, written at an academic level, but devoid of academic language, and with a literary style to reach as many of the Soviet and international community as possible.

¹⁹ As an example, the “Great Soviet Encyclopedia” was used. While it contained two-and-a-half pages on the subject of the “Second World War,” its British equivalent devoted 74 pages and the American, 212. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 11, l. 35.

²⁰ The same accusations were soon to be leveled at the official history itself as it was consistently accused of presenting a “dry” history that lacked any “vivid” character for reader interest. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 60, l. 10. This folder contained a meeting with the authors of the second volume, dated 24 April 1958.

²¹ That interpretation, however, did not need to fully omit foreign publications. Arguments were made for utilizing the available diaries of German generals as they were “extremely vivid” in their descriptions of, among other things, heroic actions by Soviet soldiers. Franz Halder (Chief of the German Army General Staff) and Paul Ludwig Ewald von Kleist (German Field Marshal) were mentioned. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 11, l. 35, 36; d. 75, l. 11. The latter folder contained a discussion of the first chapter of the second volume from 16 February 1959.

²² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 12, l. 40. At one point Khrushchev yelled at the Polish party leadership, “We spilled blood for the liberation of this country and you want to give it to the Americans, but you will not succeed!” Hopf, 199-211, 214.

The war's official history needed to be "impactful not only on the mind but also on the feelings of readers..."²³ And, importantly, this multi-volume set was to be written by a large team as a collective that had to cooperatively approve the basic foundational ideas behind the war's history and the content of each volume.

In the midst of arguments about what to include in each volume, one member of the commission suggested that readers may not want, or be able, to read all the volumes. One idea was for the final volume to "include the political, military, economic and ideological results of the war and show the world the historical significance of the victory of the Soviet people and the superiority of Soviet military art. The final volume should focus on the lessons of the Great Patriotic War because this history is not only meant for us to look toward the past." "Concrete examples" were to be provided of the "heroic struggle of the party" which "managed to overcome difficulties" and sustain the Soviet war effort. The history of the war was to serve a didactic purpose and be treated as "an instructive work that should awaken the minds of our Party, state, government, and military personnel, it should educate [them]."²⁴ Others argued that readers would not make it past the first volume of such a large and sweeping work and thus the prewar period, which the first volume would outline and discuss, needed to contain an all-

²³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 27, l. 18; d. 28, l. 8. These two folders, from 14 May 1958 and 27 May 1959, respectively, contain the records of meetings of the editorial commission to discuss the creation of the official history's second volume.

²⁴ These thoughts were expressed by E. S. Chalik. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 12, l. 38. Looking at the contents of the final volume, readers would be overburdened with information as the first section included seven chapters outlining the significance of the Soviet victory in the war, including the socio-political and economic aspects of the Soviet state that made victory, on the frontlines and in the German rear, possible. The final two chapters discuss the significance and origins of the opposition to German occupation in Western and Central Europe and the role of the Communist Party in the Soviet victory. Further aspects of the "education" that was sought by speakers like Chalik could be found in the second section, which discussed a short historiography of the Second World War, including histories from former allies and former enemies.

encompassing argument that included the economic, political and ideological aspects of the prewar period; those who only read the first volume when it was published would be left with an impression of western treachery, German imperialism, and Soviet altruism. It was also admitted, however, that such a tome would be difficult to create as it would need “to present our preparations for the defense of the country, especially the military mistakes which led to serious consequences.”²⁵ Thus, in some respects, the history of the war came to be front-and-end heavy in the territory it would cover, although the most controversial, and seemingly the most important, volume turned out to be the second, which covered the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 and the German advance on Stalingrad in the spring of 1942.

The war’s history was intended to give a Marxist analysis of the economic, social and political development of the country, and the foreign policy of the Soviet Union on the eve of and during the war. The Soviet people, in studying the history and experiences of the war, owed a thanks to the wise Leninist politics of the Communist Party, which brought about such “beneficent results.” The victory in the war was a culmination of “all the activities of the Party and the people in the prewar years and their hard work during the war.” Topics to be covered included the preparations for a war of aggression against the Soviet Union by Fascist Germany and “other imperialist powers,” a description of the heroic Soviet war effort on the frontlines and in the rear, as well as the major operations undertaken by the Soviet Army and Fleet which showcased Soviet military art.²⁶ The

²⁵ Ibid., 40. The first volume began with an initial section looking at the prewar conditions in Germany and Japan, including the influence of capitalist states, and moved on to their aggressive behavior on the international arena, which also focused on the failed “attempt” to create a united anti-Soviet bloc.

²⁶ Boltin, 109-110.

“most important task” was to answer the question of “how did the Soviet population under the leadership of the Communist Party, in incredibly difficult circumstances, achieve a historic victory over” the “powerful enemy” that was Nazi Germany.²⁷ Additionally, a new official publication needed to “clear up the history of the war from the obvious layers of lies, from the direct praising of Stalin, [and] to revise those provisions of the history which were affected by Stalin’s cult of personality.”²⁸

A further topic that needed to be addressed was the portrayal of the Soviet-German war in the West. It was believed that in the United States, England and France there were “two schools,” one “progressive” and the other “reactionary.” The progressive school offered an assessment of events that was considered “more or less” correct, including the role played by the Soviet Union as well as the place of the Great Patriotic War within the Second World War, while the reactionary eagerly sought “to diminish and falsify” Soviet efforts. As a result, the history of the war needed to “clearly answer the question – how in this very difficult war did the Soviet Union come out the victor, what is the source of the unbreakable strength of the Soviet Union, and its armed forces.” The volumes could not simply be military essays discussing strategy “but must be multi-sided and show events in all their diversity, [while] at the same time the work should clearly denounce and correct falsifiers of bourgeois historiography, who belittle the role of the Soviet Union in the victory over Fascism and essentially justify the Fascist clique during the Second World War.”²⁹ In correcting these “falsifiers” the history

²⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 75, l. 7.

²⁸ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, l. 20.

²⁹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 60, l. 5.

needed to “illuminate what impact the course and outcome of the Great Patriotic War had on the military operations of other theaters in the Second World War” so as to preserve the appearance of the primary role played by the Soviet Union in the allied coalition.³⁰

Debates around the Periodization of the War and the Initial Period of the War

The official history of the war was to be imbued with ideas expressed not only at the 20th Party Congress but also by Khrushchev at the III Writer’s Congress, held in May 1959. It was to be written “in the spirit of socialist realism, bearing in mind that the darker parts should not overshadow the colossal” accomplishments of the Soviet Union, and they were continuously referred to and emphasized. Participants were eager to “truthfully and vividly convey” the “complexity and diversity of the historical conditions” in which the war began. Despite numerous “shortcomings and errors...which were unavoidable in the circumstances” the narrative needed to describe “the decisive force” of the Soviet people in the war against Germany while portraying the Communist Party as the “inspirer and organizer” of the struggle. As a result of the Party’s organizational abilities, the Soviet population was mobilized and with all its strength was able to resist the German advance while undergoing great “sacrifices and hardships for the sake of the happiness of the Motherland, firmly believing in victory.”³¹

With these ideas in mind, early meetings led to detailed discussions and debates about the periodization of the Second World War and the Great Patriotic War and what

³⁰ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 96, l. 6. This meeting was held to discuss the historiography of the war on 2 November 1959.

³¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 28, l. 7, 8.

“character” the war carried. The periodization needed to accurately portray the Soviet Union’s role in defeating fascism and present the USSR as “the major factor in the defeat of the fascist aggressors.” Coordinating the breakdown by periods of the Second World War and the Great Patriotic War was viewed “as a positive trend in our historiography” since it allowed for clearly showing “the decisive role of the Soviet Union and its armed forces in the destruction of the entire fascist coalition [and] to illustrate the advantages of Soviet military art.” In effect, this discussion gave authors and editors an excuse to make the Soviet participation in the war the primary vehicle for altering the war’s “character,” both politically (from “imperialist” to “just”) and militarily (from a defensive orientation to an offensive one). Furthermore, the “basis” of the entire work was to be served by the “axiom” that the war waged by the Red Army was an all-people’s war which was defined by its “liberating nature.” If this characterization of the war as “justifiable” was not developed from the very beginning, there were fears the entire “thesis” would “lose its guiding ideological character.”³²

Discussions about what to include in the first volume emphasized the “imperialist” nature of the western allies who “armed Hitler’s Germany” and highlighted “the prerequisites...for Fascist Germany’s attack on the Soviet Union, because history repeats itself.” Principled questions, such as the background of the war, needed to be explained, including the lead up to Hitler’s attack on the Soviet Union. Discussing the conditions on the eve of 1939 was a necessity as Soviet historians, utilizing Stalinist terminology, were looking “to repel the falsifications that have been presented on the subject.” Among these “falsifications” were the “widespread...statements in the west

³² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 11, l. 7, 9, 35.

that the Soviet Union was preparing to strike Germany” thus justifying Hitler’s invasion as a “preventative war.” Not only was it believed that this idea was “impressed onto public opinion” through various Western publications, but it was also assumed to have formed “the modern strategy of NATO.” As such, exposing the true nature of the events was “absolutely necessary.”³³ Therefore, when outlining the first period of the Second World War, which began with the German invasion of Poland through 21 June 1941, there was no question that the emphasis was on Germany’s aggressive character as the driving force behind both the start of the Second World War and the Great Patriotic War.

Previous uncertainty over how best to define and portray the war’s character was likely the result of Stalin’s description of the western powers as having a similar imperialistic nature to that of Germany. Thus, the question of when the war’s character was “finally defined and fixed” remained open but all discussants agreed that the Red Army fought a “just war of liberation.” Deborin, editor of the first volume, argued that a socialist state by its very nature could not wage an unjust war. Consequently, events after 22 June 1941 could only be characterized as part of a “just war” for the Red Army. In effect, it was being argued that previous to Germany’s invasion of the USSR, the history of the Second World War was one of Germany invading and enslaving European states and their populations, but by invading the Soviet Union, the war was finally able to definitively take on a “liberating” character thanks to the primary role played by the Red Army and Soviet state.³⁴

³³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 12, l. 40, 54; d. 27, l. 81.

³⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 12, l. 16.

Speakers trying to understand the intricacies of the “imperialist” aspects of the Second World War leaned on Marx and Lenin. Members were beseeched to “remember Lenin’s analysis of the First World War,” and although he wrote a great deal on the role war plays, he did not pay much attention to the purely military side of its development. Greater attention also needed to be paid to “Marxist thought in clarifying the nature of the war.”³⁵ There was an effort to lean on a speech from the Fortieth Anniversary of the October Revolution, which sought to “deepen our understanding of the nature of the Second World War in the spirit of Lenin’s work and guidance, for Lenin taught that in every World War there are imperialist and liberating elements.” Therefore, each period of the war needed to be approached individually while keeping in mind the role the USSR played by merely being involved.³⁶

Fokin, the head editor of the second volume, agreed that the war began as imperialist, which represented the nature of both Germany and the Western Allies, the latter of whom continued to exercise imperialist policies and even tried “to use the conflict between Germany and the Soviet Union for their own interests.” However, he also argued that the thesis presented at the Fortieth Anniversary of the October Revolution, was simultaneously “misleading [to] historians” as while it said “that the war began as an imperialist war,” and then turned into an anti-fascist and liberating experience, it never specified from which moment the war’s nature was altered.³⁷ The persistent concentration on the “liberating” nature of the war allowed arguments to be

³⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 11, l. 9.

³⁶ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 12, l. 15.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

employed for a change to the criteria of the war's periodization, which continued to lean on Voroshilov's text and focused on the military aspects of the war.

The war's periodization, it was reasoned, "should take into account not only the changing methods of how the war was waged, but the role of the masses at the front and in the rear." Otherwise, the "function" of "liberator" was only mentioned in reference to the activities of the Red Army in 1944, when the Red Army began to physically cross the old Soviet border. This was an integral aspect of the war against Germany since an emphasis on the liberating nature of the war against the axis in every period would further highlight the creation of the "anti-Hitler" coalition which was "headed by the Soviet Union."³⁸ The continued stress on "anti-Hitler" was once again a recycling of Stalinist era terminology. The significance of "anti-Hitler" pointed to Stalin's mistrust of the allies, as he believed that if Hitler ever disappeared, so would the "coalition" that was working against him, leaving the Soviets to face the Wehrmacht alone.³⁹

The Soviet role in the allied coalition also meant references to the allies and the allied war effort, both positive and negative, were regularly encountered in commission discussions. For instance, clarity was needed with regard to Lend Lease. There was a need to alter the "much distorted" view of the aid provided by the allies that had become entrenched "in the international press on the historiography of the Second World War." Simultaneously, however, it was "wrong...to discount the help and close our eyes to it." This was an opportunity to put Lend Lease into needed context and show what proportion of allied aid made up the Soviet war effort. Reference was made to a statement by

³⁸ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 11, l. 9, 10.

³⁹ Haslam, 120.

General Eisenhower at the end of the war that loans in the form of \$10.8 billion were provided to the Soviet Union, which made up around 2.25% of the “financing of the Great Patriotic War.”⁴⁰ In the near future, a reviewer agreed that “we should mention what our allies brought us” but he believed it should also be pointed out “that it was very little.”⁴¹

Although giving credit to allied support, speakers also wanted the war’s history to devote “special attention...to the exposure of the selfish, anti-Soviet military and political objectives and activities of the Anglo-American allies.” Allied “treachery...against the Soviet Union” would be stressed, as well as their “tendency to inflate their military successes and downplay the victories of the Soviet Army.” All the while readers would keep in mind that the “unpopular actions of the [capitalist] authorities” were not supported by the “democratic forces” of the masses living in future “liberated territories” throughout Europe. Furthermore, in order to contextualize the military success of the Soviet Union, a detailed comparison was to be undertaken of the struggle on the Soviet-German front and that of the allies. The end result would showcase “the decisive character” of the Eastern Front throughout the entirety of the Second World War as well as “during individual periods and campaigns.” Furthermore, Soviet military science,

⁴⁰ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 51, l. 33-34. This folder contained the records of a meeting from 14 February 1958 on the structure of the second, third, and fourth volumes. To date there are few notable studies of the allied Lend Lease program, including its impact on the Red Army, Soviet economy and war effort, making it difficult to ascertain the actual impact of Lend Lease support on the war on the Eastern Front. Those interested on the topic can consult Mark Harrison, *Accounting for War: Soviet production, employment, and the defence burden, 1940-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Hubert P. van Tuyll *Feeding the Bear: American Aid to the Soviet Union, 1941-1945* (London: Greenwood Press, 1989).

⁴¹ The reviewer was Vice-admiral Nesterov, who participated in a reader’s conference at Sevastopol on October 25, 1962, which discussed the second and third volumes. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 586, l. 222.

throughout the war, “and its influence on the development of the art of war of other warring countries” would be highlighted.⁴²

It was necessary to showcase fighting taking place in other theaters in the second period of the Great Patriotic War (or the third period of the Second World War – November 1942 – December 1943), as this period’s foundation was reliant on the “thwarting” of the German Blitzkrieg campaign the world over. This was a time when the Soviet Union’s wartime allies (now labeled “former allies”) “on all secondary [fronts]” were able to repel “the attacks of the aggressor.” The third period of the Great Patriotic War (January 1944 – May 1945) “the period of decisive victories,” coincided almost completely with the “fourth period” of the Second World War. These “decisive victories” included the allied landings in Normandy, France. Yet, it was contended that the battles during the first half of 1944 on the Eastern Front were essential for creating “favorable conditions for the invasion of Anglo-American troops into Normandy and as a result this operation became for them decisive, realistic and successful.” Thus, the first “decisive” battle undertaken by the allies was only a success thanks to the actions of the Red Army on the Eastern Front – another relic of the Stalinist narrative.⁴³

While there was agreement in general, Sidorov, director of the Institute of History, argued against the proposed periodization and claimed it was too heavily reliant on the chronology of the military actions that took place. As such, the war’s history relied on a “military character” and its periodization was defined by and concentrated on major battles and their alterations of the overall “methods of warfare” (defensive and

⁴² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 11, l. 36.

⁴³ Ibid., 24.

offensive actions). Solely focusing on military aspects, it was argued, would fail to showcase the internal developments of the Soviet economy and armed forces, including how the anti-Hitler coalition was developed and how well the masses resisted the invasion, including “their creative” work in the rear.⁴⁴

These arguments point to a divergent view of the first period (1 September 1939 - 21 June 1941) of the Second World War. It was considered invalid if the “criterion for the division” of periods was “the nature of warfare, determined by economic, social and political factors.” That the transition from the first into the second period was the invasion of the Soviet Union did not follow “logically” nor did it serve the underlining purpose of continually emphasizing the decisive role of the Soviet Union throughout the entirety of the Second World War. The invasion of the Soviet Union, it was noted, did not modify the “compositions of the parties at war” nor did it alter the initial progression of the greater Second World War. The strategic-military character of the war did not change until the Red Army’s counteroffensive at Stalingrad in November 1942, since up until that point the axis powers waged an armed struggle that consisted mainly of a “strategically offensive character” while the allies continued to wage a war that was defined by a “strategically defensive character.” While the “scale” of the conflict transformed with the entry of the Soviet Union, it also altered with the entry of the United States, as well as that of Japan, yet “we are not inclined to say that in December 1941 a new stage of the Second World War began, as the nature of the armed struggle remained the same.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 37, 38.

Therefore, it was suggested to emphasize the “offensive” and “defense” nature of the armed conflict, the change of which the Soviet Union helped facilitate.

“Methodologically,” it was contended, without the Soviet entry into the war its character would not have been transformed, moving from a strategically defensive orientation to a strategically offensive one. That change only took place after “the heroic struggle of the Soviet Armed forces during one and a half years.” Therefore, the argument was presented that if speakers wanted the USSR to continuously play the most important role in the entire Second World War, which was the “only correct point of view,” then there could not be any distinct periods that did not include the Soviet war effort. Thus, the initial period of the Second World War needed to begin on 1 September 1939 and range through 18 November 1942, with the end of Soviet defensive actions at Stalingrad.⁴⁶

In summarizing some of the conclusions around the periodization question, Boltin endorsed the idea that the Great Patriotic War “was the main determining event throughout the entirety of the Second World War.” Making such a statement automatically negated the idea that the entry of the Soviet Union into the war did not alter its periodization, thus leaving the commission to conclude that the Soviet entry did merit consideration for the beginning of a new period.⁴⁷ Accordingly, the periodization of the war hinged on the activities of the Eastern Front.

Boltin characterized how the Soviet Union during 1941-1945 waged a “just” and “liberating” war that carried a “progressive significance for both the Soviet Union and for

⁴⁶ Ibid., 38. Reinforcing the role played by the Soviet Union in the Second World War was a subsection of the first chapter in the sixth volume entitled “Main role of the USSR in the defeat of Fascist Germany and her allies.”

⁴⁷ Ibid., 52.

all of humanity” while the war waged by the axis powers carried an “imperialistic character.” He then separated the “ruling circles” of western powers from the people of their nations and claimed that while governments continued to pursue their imperialist aims, the people of those nations fought a “liberating” and “just” war as did the Soviet state – the only country where the goals of the people and government in power aligned. However, it was only with the Soviet entry into the war that the ongoing Second World War could be characterized as “liberating” and “just.” Boltin seemingly separated the individual conflicts against the Germans by various nations and resistance movements from the entirety of the Second World War. This meant the numerous individual campaigns waged against German occupations could be classified as “just” but it was only with the Soviet Union’s entrance into the war, assuming the role of “head” of the anti-Hitler coalition, that a shift in the nature of the *entire* Second World War occurred and it could in its entirety be classified as “just” and “liberating.”⁴⁸

In the end, the Second World War was broken down into four separate periods while the Great Patriotic War consisted of three. The defeat of Japanese forces in the Far East would be considered part of the final period of the Second World War and included as “a special phase of our war of liberation against Fascist aggressors.” It would not be part of the war against Germany but “of course, it will be considered part of the Great Patriotic War.” Musheg Minasian, from the Frunze Academy, a veteran and doctor of historical sciences, disagreed, arguing such a view was “unnatural.” He further commented: “Why do the people, [and] the party call this war the Great Patriotic War? Because it was a question of the fate of the country – will it continue to exist or not. So

⁴⁸ Boltin, 110, 111.

who can convince [us] that [in] the war with Japan, a minor part of the larger war, there was any discussion here about the fate of our country?”⁴⁹ Nonetheless, the majority accepted all of the above proposals. When published, some one hundred pages covered the war against Japan in the fifth volume. Whether consciously or subconsciously, the endorsed periodization outline lined up correspondingly to that which Voroshilov described in his 1949 text.⁵⁰

Initial Feedback within the Commission

By the time the next meeting took place, 28 December 1957, feedback already arrived with respect to previous discussions about the war’s periodization, among other topics. Khrushchev’s emphasis on the importance of the Party and people, rather than Stalin, had filtered down through the system and its institutions so that criticism included a desire for there to be “greater detail...about the leading role of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and more specifically to emphasize strongly the decisive role of the masses in the war.”⁵¹ Commission members agreed, pointing out the correctness of the suggestions and the need for more “detail and depth” to be presented when discussing the role played by the Communist Party, the Central Committee, as well as local party organizations.⁵² Agreement in general was not long in coming as the “decisive role of the

⁴⁹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 11, l. 22, 54.

⁵⁰ Voroshilov, 6-8.

⁵¹ Among those making these requests were Moscow State University and the editors of the Journal *Voprosy istorii KPSS*. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 12, l. 8.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 41-42.

people, the masses” was argued to be “the task of the entire publication, all the volumes on the history of the Great Patriotic War.”⁵³

When it came to the “masses” speakers were conscious of the fact that it was not only the Soviet masses who had to be portrayed with agency. Fokin emphasized that “if we gloss over the fact that the peoples of Europe – Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland, France, etc., fought against fascism when Hitler’s troops attacked them, then we will offend the national feelings of these people.” However, the “ruling circles” needed to be separated from the “masses” as Fokin argued that “the whole strategic line of behavior of the Anglo-American command throughout the war was determined by” imperialist aims and ambitions from beginning to end. The masses, however, fought for “limited bourgeois freedoms” in their “struggle for national liberation.”⁵⁴

In drawing attention to the populations of conquered territories, Fokin was inclined to disagree with those who argued that the war of “liberation” only began in the summer of 1941. Since those who opposed the Germans before the invasion of the USSR “by their struggle made a contribution to the fight against Hitlerism,” yet suggestions from commission members made it seem as if the history of the war was ignoring the contribution of other states while claiming “that the war became a war of liberation only with the entry of the Soviet Union.” Fokin was interested in having the history of the war “emphasize the idea that even before the German attack on the Soviet Union the peoples of Europe contributed to the struggle against fascism, even if relatively little.”⁵⁵

⁵³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 27, l. 16.

⁵⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 12, l. 25.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 26, 27.

Although an emphasis on the contributions of others was stressed, Soviet involvement needed to be expanded. Speakers reiterated the need to highlight more of the Party and the internal developments in the Soviet state. Marshal of the Soviet Union, Vasilii Sokolovskii, emphasized the need to cover not only military events when discussing the first period of the war but also conditions in the Soviet Union.⁵⁶ Since there was a need to explain the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, Sokolovskii wanted to “highlight the political and economic situation” inside the state and the efforts on behalf of the Communist Party and Soviet government, “which aimed at the strengthening of the defensive capabilities of the USSR and the prevention of war...” Pospelov immediately stepped in to justify Soviet actions in signing the pact by stating that the decision was correct as otherwise it would have led to a “single bloc” of capitalist states oriented against the Soviet Union. Pospelov ultimately wanted the war’s unfolding to “proceed from statements” made by Stalin. He supported a narrative that depicted Germany as being armed by the Western Allies in order “to equip a reliable guard of Europe against the communist threat.” Since Germany proved unable to fulfill such a role, the line pursued by Soviet diplomacy on the eve of the war was correct. By depicting Germany as able and willing to organize a “united front of all capitalist states” against the USSR, Stalin’s actions in the summer of 1939 were portrayed as robbing Germany of its ability

⁵⁶ Vasilii Sokolovskii, born in 1897 and a member of the Red Army since 1918, participated in the Civil War in various command positions from that of a company commander to the assistant chief of staff of the 39th Rifle Division. In the inter-war period Sokolovskii served in various capacities rising to become chief of staff of the Ural Military District and the Moscow Military District. During the Second World War he was chief of staff of the Western Front and eventually commanded the Western Front, and was then assigned to the position of chief of staff of the 1st Ukrainian Front, finishing the war as deputy commander of the 1st Belorussian Front, which participated in the storming of Berlin. V. A. Zolotarev, ed., *Velikaia Otechestvennaia voina 1941-1945 gg.: Deistvuiushchaia armia* (Moscow: Kuchkovo pole, 2005), 351-352.

to wage an all-out war with Western support against the Soviet state.⁵⁷ Consequently, the signing of the pact with Germany allowed the Soviet government to prevent an immediate invasion. Others agreed that the pact was “not Stalin’s mistake” and it was part “of the fundamental pillars of our foreign policy after the October Revolution...to utilize the [inherent] contradictions of the imperialists” to oppose them.⁵⁸ Consequently, the presentation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact was highly reminiscent of the Stalinist period.

Stalin was once again present when the liberating character of the war was brought up for discussion. Moving away from Stalin’s old “formula,” which stated that the Soviet entry into the war did not initiate but rather “reinforced the character of a war of liberation,” would not be “entirely correct.”⁵⁹ Simultaneously, Pospelov noted that “comrade Stalin’s speech at the meeting of the electors of the city of Moscow...forcefully emphasized that the Second World War emerged as the inevitable result of the development of world economic and political forces on the basis of a modern monopoly of capitalism.” As opposed to the First World War, the beginning of the Second differed in that the Soviet Union, a socialist state, existed. The justifications for a socialist state going to war could not possibly mirror those of “imperialist” or “capitalist” states represented by the Western Allies and the Fascist bloc. Yet Pospelov would not

⁵⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 12, l. 13-14, 61. These themes were ultimately discussed in the first volume, which featured a section of the first chapter that dealt with the economic and political support Germany received from the future Western Allies and the fourth chapter which was entitled “Attempts to Create a United anti-Soviet Front and their Failure.”

⁵⁸ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 13, l. 29. This folder contained the records of a meeting from 15 January 1958 on questions about the Second World War’s political character and its periodization.

⁵⁹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 12, l. 49-50.

admit that the war had a “liberating” character from the beginning since he, as others, distinguished the “people” of those states forced to fight against German aggression from those in power – while the masses might yearn for liberation, their governments were seemingly bent on continuing their imperialist traditions.⁶⁰

Stalinist-era ideas and literature continued to influence the thinking of commission members. In order to understand the imperialist character of the war, the speakers Z. Osipov and Andrei Kuchkin leaned on Stalin’s thoughts and Stalin era reports from sessions of the Supreme Soviet. Osipov commented how a 1940 report mentioned that “the Soviet Union refused to become an accomplice of England and France in the conduct of an imperialist policy against Germany” at which point it was claimed that “the hostility of their [England and France] position with regard to the Soviet Union was intensified.” These arguments maintained the Soviet importance to the war effort as head of the anti-Hitler coalition since defining the Soviet position as “just” meant those following the Soviet lead waged a “just” war as well, while the independent actions of the Western Allies were consistently portrayed as “imperialist.” Thus, an argument was presented that the establishment of an anti-Hitler coalition was “only possible on the basis of a just war.” A war “directed against fascism and the defeat of fascism, toward the destruction of fascist ideas on the enslavement of the entire world and to create a fascist regime throughout the entire world” was “objectively...from the beginning a just war, a war of liberation.” However, Kuchkin went further and claimed that even if in 1939 there was no anti-Hitler coalition, by simply fighting against Hitler, no matter their

⁶⁰ Ibid., 59-60.

“imperialist ambitions,” the Western Allies were waging a just war.⁶¹ This notion was supported by pointing out how “patriots” inside states attacked by Germany, including Poland, Norway and France, led by communist movements, “bravely resisted” the German invasion and how in France, among other states, “communists created a specific program for a war of liberation and to free enslaved nations.” While it might “sound seditious,” Kuchkin stood “behind Stalin’s assessment” of the war’s nature based on Stalin’s speech from 9 February 1946.⁶² Even though England, France, and America sought “imperialist, expansionist objectives,” the very fact that they fought against German Fascism and attempted to destroy it, meant that from the very beginning the war was a just war and of a liberating nature. “Objectively,” it was argued, the western powers fought against fascism and helped to defend socialism in the Soviet Union, even if “subjectively” they wanted to expand their “imperialist” ambitions. As a result, Stalin’s postwar evaluation of the nature of the conflict was treated as “deeply principled” and “well thought out.”⁶³

Debate, however, continued over the correct “formula” of the war with Evgenii Zhukov claiming that “with respect to the first stage we all agree, that the war was

⁶¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 13, l. 7, 23.

⁶² Stalin’s speech was quoted to support this position: “Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin said that ‘the Second World War significantly differed from the first by its very nature.’ He said further: ‘it should be kept in mind that the major fascist states – Germany, Japan, Italy – before attacking allied countries, destroyed within themselves the last remnants of bourgeois-democratic freedoms, installing [in their place] a brutal regime of terror, trampled on the principle of sovereignty and the free development of small states, announced a policy of annexation and publicly proclaimed that they were seeking world domination and the spread of a fascist regime throughout the entire world.’ And he further states: ‘Because of this the Second World War against the axis [powers], in contrast to the First World War, was at the outset by its very nature an anti-fascist war, a just war, one of whose objectives it was to restore democratic freedoms.’” Ibid., 24, 25-26.

⁶³ Ibid., 26, 27.

imperialistic on both sides.” Once again Stalin was referred to in that his “formula that two imperialist groups went against each other – is correct.” Pospelov immediately retorted that such a statement was “contrary to the formula, which says that it was a war of liberation from the very beginning.” The arguments continued to lean on two Stalinist positions that opposed each other. In order to break the stalemate Lenin was once more inducted into the debate. “Lenin said of wars: on the one hand, war was liberating, on the other – aggressive. We need to identify the nature of the war to draw a clear line from the beginning to the end. The war became a war of liberation from the side of the anti-fascist coalition.” No true conclusion was reached at the end of the meeting, which took place on 15 January 1958, aside from the fact that an amendment was needed on the formulation of the war’s nature.⁶⁴ A black and white binary of the war’s nature appeared the preference. The next meeting held on the 7 February 1958 only reasserted that there was “confusion” surrounding the characterization of the war, especially in regards to the year 1940. It was argued that if the commission accepted the idea that the war carried a “liberating character” from the very beginning, then the question arose of how did the Europe of 1940, practically fully under German control, need to be portrayed. In such a scenario it appeared that England, as the only viable opponent against German aggression, waged a war of liberation all on its own. Furthermore, “if we recognize that the war from the very beginning was a war of liberation, then it means we have to reject

⁶⁴ Ibid., 31.

numerous decisions of other communist parties...since these parties admitted that the war carried an imperialistic character.”⁶⁵ Once more, no definitive conclusion was reached.

Although speakers routinely rallied behind the Stalinist narrative, there were some exceptions. One of the more objective discussants was Musheg Minasian, who previously authored a book on Operation Bagration – the Red Army’s offensive in June 1944 that destroyed Germany’s Army Group Center.⁶⁶ Minasian was conscious of the changes taking place in the Second World War’s historiography. He wanted authors to include an explanation for the various changes readers would encounter throughout the war’s official history rather than simply having “declarations” made. “It should be explained why for ten years our propaganda claimed one [thing], and now all of a sudden makes a 180-degree turn.” While professional historians could hazard a guess as to where the changes in the historiography of the war were coming from, others needed clarification. There were already those who opposed the “new interpretation of the character of the Second World War” that was being proposed by the commission.⁶⁷ Thus, Minasian was conscious of not only the changes the war’s historiography was experiencing under Khrushchev’s administration, but the impact it would undoubtedly have on the general reader who would soon be presented with a new version of events than what they were used to as a result of over a decade of propaganda.

With the conclusion of the first few meetings, it was evident that commission members consistently leaned on Stalin’s speeches, quotes and ideas in order to

⁶⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 14, l. 1. This folder contained the records of a meeting held on 7 February 1958 to continue discussions on the war’s political character and its periodization.

⁶⁶ Minasian, *Pobeda v Belorussii. Piatyi stalinskii udar*.

⁶⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 12, l. 19.

understand how motivations, subjects and events needed to be portrayed and analyzed. Without the hand of Stalin to lead them, many members eagerly grasped onto aspects of the Stalinist narrative that was crafted during his time in power, but the often ambiguous or at times contradictory nature of the Stalinist narrative meant no decisions could be reached to the satisfaction of all parties involved, not even when Lenin was called on to offer a guiding hand. The absence of an external voice meant no real conclusion could be agreed on as previous positions were repeated ad nauseam. By 1959, in his article, Boltin claimed the war's character was clear and did not "require further discussion."⁶⁸

Discussions about the Content of the Second Volume

The second volume was described as carrying a "great significance for the present generation and for future generations, as well as people of other countries." The general reader wanted answers to key questions and issues and as such "a more truthful coverage" of the war needed to be presented. Many considered this volume "undoubtedly the most difficult and complex" as it needed to explain "the most difficult issue" – the state and army's failures throughout the first period of the war.⁶⁹ A "distinct picture" would be outlined throughout the chapters to explain the "complicated" position the Soviet Union found itself in while concentrating on the Party's reaction to developing events.⁷⁰ The authors and editors needed to showcase "the crucial role of the people in overcoming the immense difficulties of the first period of the war," both at the front and

⁶⁸ Boltin, 110, 111.

⁶⁹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 27, l. 8-9, 17, 78.

⁷⁰ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 75, l. 1.

in the rear, while discussing political and military mistakes. The volume needed to “show that the [entity] which organized the people to overcome these difficulties, to repel the aggressor, the inspiring and guiding force of the people in all areas – in the rear, front and rear of the enemy – was the Communist Party.” As such, this work was considered a “political document” and authors and editors needed to understand that “the evaluations that will be developed...will be considered by readers as the party line rather than the individual opinions of this or that author.”⁷¹

The official history needed to explain how the country withstood the German invasion, including who was to blame for initial failures, and how the Red Army was able to alter the situation at the end of 1941.⁷² Putting themselves in the place of the general reader, commission members understood that the public needed someone to blame for the initial defeats and clarification for why those guilty were not put on trial. The rhetorical question was posed: “When for reading [German propaganda] leaflets they gave 10 years [in prison], why not judge [someone] for such outrages and crimes?” Precision was required so that when Stalin was listed as one of the reasons for “strategically wrong decisions,” a demand was made for greater clarity in regards to which “decisions” were under scrutiny, “otherwise the reader will not have any idea.”⁷³

Although Stalin would receive much of the blame for how the initial period of the war unfolded, he was also, in some respects, the inspiration behind the admission that mistakes were made in the first place. It was Stalin’s 1945 speech that mentioned how

⁷¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 27, l. 1, 6.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 83.

⁷³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 67a, l. 10. This folder contained a meeting from 8 December 1958 on the first version of the second volume.

the government made “not a few errors” which seemed to have paved the way for the authors and editors to label and debate these issues as “mistakes” in the first place. Although there were still limits on what could be said or admitted as they needed to approach the question of what happened in 1941 in a “deliberate” and “proper” manner. But, simply put, since “Stalin...said that mistakes were made. We need to show where mistakes were made.”⁷⁴

Large issues that were previously ignored, never emphasized, “covered in a one-sided manner or often distorted” were to be given the utmost consideration. “Acute problems” needed to be discussed “without prejudice” but members were also conscious of the fact that significant issues had to be expressed so that “they can address political expediency.” All the while those working on the volume needed to keep in mind that they had to “meet” Lenin’s “political outlines” and consider which groups would benefit from the disclosures the official history of the war would make. Such thinking meant that limits were already in place on what could be revealed to readers. Pospelov argued that not all “figures” should be published or analyzed. Only “a few select battles” needed to be portrayed or some general figures given to showcase “what material damage the fascists caused us.”⁷⁵ This lack of information would become one of the biggest criticisms for official reviewers and the reading public.

Even with limits in place, there was a general reliance on the truth and substance of archival information and documentary evidence, which would eventually lead to “deep

⁷⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 30, l. 49.

⁷⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 27, l. 17, 79.

insights into fundamental questions.”⁷⁶ Some, however, considered all documents to be tainted by Stalin’s cult while others claimed there was plenty of documentation that “aimed to overcome the consequences of the personality cult.” There was, however, some hesitation in publishing all relevant documents with the caveat that “their use needs to be restricted.”⁷⁷ Speakers leaned on the need for discussions and debates to resolve contested issues, “falsifications,” specifically those revolving around the prewar period and the initial period of the war, and to finally reach correct conclusions.⁷⁸

Discussions revolving around the situation in 1941 needed to not only address Red Army miscalculations, as that would mean ignoring how simultaneously the Soviet Union and its armed forces were able to endure and overcome German aggression. Portraying the successes enjoyed by Soviet forces in 1941 was needed “for our friends” and would serve as a “warning for our enemies” that in spite of enormous difficulties the Red Army was able to resist an attack that “no other system could have withstood” when considering how much territory was lost and the numerous “sacrifices” sustained in the process. However, this idea was challenged by Sokolovskii, in a September 1959 review discussing the third volume, when he stated that “It is incorrectly asserted that for the last century no European state knew the type of losses on their territory and their economic production. It is known that during the First World War (not to mention the Napoleonic wars) a number of European countries (Belgium, France, and others) fully or to a large

⁷⁶ Ibid., 58.

⁷⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, l. 32-33.

⁷⁸ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 27, l. 58.

degree lost their territory.”⁷⁹ Nonetheless, the idea that the Soviet system withstood an invasion and occupation that no other state could have survived has continued to define the ability of the Soviet state to endure and eventually triumph over Germany.

No matter to what degree the initial period of the war was dissected, Stalinist ideas continued to shadow most discussions. The question of what created the groundwork for the eventual victory in the war had to touch on the foundational aspects of the Soviet system, including the “collective farm system,” which “created the conditions necessary in order to withstand a severe test [of our system]” as a result of which “our country was ready for a large war.” Industrialization prepared the state “for the long and difficult ordeals of war,” as the creation of the “second metallurgical base in the Urals...created during the Five-Year Plans” allowed for an eventual ability to lose as much land as the Soviet Union did and still triumph over Germany. As a result, the Soviet population’s culture “rose” to such an extent that Soviet farmer-tractor workers were able to “quickly” master captured enemy tanks and used them against the Germans.⁸⁰ Thus, the Stalinist narrative, which highlighted the necessity of industrialization, collectivization, the Five-Year Plans in general, and Soviet ingenuity, was once more leaned on to find reasons for Soviet success and victory.

Stalin himself, however, was presented in a less than a glorious light, by speakers, when it came to Soviet foreign policy. It was due to Stalin’s underestimation of the “advancing threat of war” and an “incorrect assessment of the military-political situation” that neither the economy nor the army were put in a state of combat readiness. Even if

⁷⁹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 27, l. 78; d. 585, l. 3.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 59, 83.

the Soviet state contained the necessary material infrastructure to defeat Germany, thanks to Stalin, it was also thanks to him that the international situation was incorrectly interpreted and the opportunities open to the USSR and Red Army were not utilized “in a timely manner” which led to needless losses that could have been avoided.⁸¹

Some, however, took a middle ground when it came to Stalin and the lead up to the war. Fokin accused recent studies by historians, although did not mention any specific names or titles, of holding “Stalin guilty of everything, they put everything on Stalin’s shoulders, all other difficulties and mistakes, committed in other instances by other hands, are in some ways swept away.” Such a “one-sided” analysis “undermines the authority of our Party.” Fokin claimed that previous publications “completely lost sight of the tremendously positive work, which was done by our Party in the period when our country was preparing for war, in particular the training of the armed forces and the great work done by Stalin and other members of the Politburo, and the Central Committee as a whole, I mean the preparation of the country itself and [our] industry and the training of the armed forces...all of these things are overlooked and what is emphasized is that our country appeared unprepared for war, the armed forces were not deployed because they were forbidden from being deployed.”⁸²

Others were of a similar mindset as an unnamed speaker argued that the second volume needed to show “that the Party and government, given the threat of a war brewing, did significant work to prepare the country and the armed forces to repel the

⁸¹ Ibid., 60.

⁸² No doubt such accusations against Stalin were readily a result of Khrushchev’s secret speech. But accusations against Stalin by Khrushchev raised additional questions. For example, Fokin referred to how Khrushchev stated that “from the beginning of the war Stalin took the leadership in his hands” yet “how exactly he took control into his hands” lacked an explanation. Ibid., 6, 7, 11.

imperialist aggression against the USSR.” Stalin was described among the leadership of the Party and state as “correctly assess[ing] the imperialist nature of German fascism and [he] had no illusions regarding the temporary nature of the Soviet-German agreement and the likelihood of the outbreak of a war by Germany against the USSR. Stalin’s errors, as head of the Party and government, consisted of the fact that he held the party line as much as possible trying to delay the timing of an armed conflict between the USSR and Germany, he overestimated the deterrent effect of political and diplomatic factors and underestimated the political adventurism and treachery of the leadership of Fascist Germany.” As a result, Stalin failed to “properly assess” Germany’s preparations on the border of the Soviet Union and make the “necessary conclusions about the immediate danger threatening the USSR. From this followed the organizational mistakes which predetermined the belated transfer of the national economy to expand production of military equipment and weapons, and a delayed alerting of the armed forces.”⁸³

Additionally, Fokin commented that earlier histories spoke of “the massive heroism of the workers, soldiers, and individual commanders and show[ed] the names of these people, their deeds, but we somehow completely omitted showing the leadership of our Party.” Since Stalinist publications continually praised Stalin, Fokin argued that “we had Stalin, he solved all our issues, [and] thanks to him everything was done.” But as a result of Khrushchev’s secret speech “we decided to repudiate this line [of thinking].” Taking Stalin’s place would be the Party Central Committee and members of the Politburo; but another issue arose in that some of the former members of the Politburo were “discredited themselves politically and we are now trying to keep silent about

⁸³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 392, l. 243.

them.”⁸⁴ Although repudiating the idea that Stalin “solved all our issues,” such a frank admission of attempting to “keep silent” about discredited Politburo members once more displayed relics of the Stalinist period where personalities were omitted, forgotten, or simply written out of histories due to their past transgressions.⁸⁵ But unlike during the Stalinist period, Fokin had reservations about pursuing such a policy in that he was unsure of how accurately the war’s initial period would be described if the volume was to “remain silent in regards to these names and will not disclose how the Central Committee distributed forces, who received what, who led which industry, in order to more completely show the management of the Central Committee of the Party.”⁸⁶

With Fokin wanting others to share in the blame for the disastrous start to the war, he indicted the People’s Commissariat of Defense and the General Staff, whose decisions “were often not consistent with the situation” the Red Army and country found itself facing. For instance, when troops were forced to retreat directives were issued from the high command about initiating operations against enemy territory and to encircle enemy forces, disregarding the situation Red Army forces found themselves in on the ground. These orders resulted in a “counterproductive” outcome, as was evidenced with the encirclement of the South-Western Front around Kiev in the fall of 1941, which featured one of the largest encirclements of Soviet forces. Here, Fokin admitted, “major mistakes were made.” Similar miscalculations were evident in the winter campaign during 1941-1942, when “as a result of misallocation and misuse of forces,” instead of concentrating

⁸⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 27, l. 10.

⁸⁵ See David King, *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin’s Russia* (New York: Henry Hold And Company, 1997).

⁸⁶ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 27, l. 10.

Red Army forces against just Army Group Center, “strategic reserves” went over to the offensive against all three German army groups resulting in a dispersed effort, which “resulted in unaccomplished operations in multiple directions.”⁸⁷ Comparable mistakes were responsible for the retreats in the spring of 1942, which eventually led to the battle for Stalingrad.

In concentrating on these major issues Fokin wanted to “properly assess” them and “draw...correct conclusions” as well as show how Soviet forces were able to overcome the circumstances they found themselves facing. Instead of “denigrating our Soviet command” he wanted to explain “that our lack of experience led to the fact that we allowed a number of mistakes and gradually in the course of the war, through an accumulation of experience, we became strategically wiser, operationally competent, and then were able to solve problems more correctly, which led to success and eventually to victory.”⁸⁸ Thus, the second volume, with Fokin as head editor, was supposed to describe the evolution of Soviet military art, progressing positively from initial mistakes, due to inexperience and unrealistic orders from above, to eventual victory thanks to lessons learned on the field of battle – in part a reiteration of the Stalinist narrative that portrayed the Red Army as a force that learned from 1941 and 1942, became a “cadre army,” and went on to defeat the Wehrmacht.

In detailing how the Party’s leadership led the army into turning the character of the war from being defense-dominated into offense-minded allowed the war’s history to emphasize the “decisive” role played by the Soviet Union as this became “one of the

⁸⁷ Ibid., 8-9.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 9-10.

most important tasks of the entire...work.” Inside this narrative, the Western Allies were allowed a place with respect to their contribution to the victory over Nazi Germany. The Great Patriotic War could not be presented in a vacuum, thus the allied war effort had to be outlined and juxtaposed against Soviet importance. In order to show the significant role played by the Soviet Union “critical issues of the inter-allied relationship” needed to be included in chapters detailing the war’s progress. “International policy” was subordinated to military strategy so that chapters dealing with major military operations by the allies would also feature Soviet relations with the allies as they unfolded – thus keeping a Soviet voice in all chapters, even if they dealt solely with the Western Allies.⁸⁹

The second volume’s concentration on the military progression of events, from the beginning of the invasion of the Soviet Union through the Red Army counteroffensive around Stalingrad, was to be encapsulated by two defining features: the initial “failure of Blitzkrieg” and “the creation of the conditions [needed] for a radical change in the course of the Great Patriotic War.”⁹⁰ Both represented victorious Soviet achievements and concentrating on them helped conceal mistakes and defeats. In

⁸⁹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 55, l. 74, 77-78. This folder contained a discussion from a 19 March 1958 meeting on the prospectus of the second volume. When it came to the second volume, other theaters of operation were allocated some twenty pages in a single chapter, the fourteenth, which covered actions in Northern Africa, the Atlantic Ocean, as well as in Asia and the Pacific Ocean. In the third volume, chapter eleven was entitled “The Impact of the Red Army’s Victories on the International Situation,” covered in some fifty-five pages was the role played by the USSR in the anti-Fascist coalition, the Moscow and Tehran conferences and the rise of “national-liberation movements in occupied countries.” The fourth volume once more featured a single chapter on the struggle of the Soviet Union’s allies, chapter seventeen, which covered in seventy pages the allied invasion and liberation of Italy, Western European nationalist struggles for liberation, the landings in Normandy in June 1944 and the eventual struggle through France, the German offensive during the Battle of the Bulge, and some twelve pages were devoted to the war in the Pacific and China.

⁹⁰ Both of these “features” needed to continually emphasize the role of the people and the Party, which led the population against an aggressor whose attacks previous to the invasion of the Soviet Union “not one people in history was able to repel” and simultaneously “create conditions for a radical change” in the course and outcome of the war. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 27, l. 2-3, 17.

examining the reasons presented for the Red Army's failures in 1941, it becomes evident that they mirrored those offered by Stalin during the war itself. Fokin claimed that "when analyzing all the documents related to the state of the Soviet armed forces, we must recognize that our army at the beginning of the war in terms of technical equipment" was "inferior to the German army" and lacked motorization. While the Wehrmacht was able to "quickly maneuver" Soviet forces "very slowly carried out regroupings, slowly massed troops on decisive directions and, as a result, although having superior forces, had a difficult time against attacks by weaker German groups." Even with their "fighting ability" being "hindered" by the state of their equipment, Fokin still praised Soviet force for "significant successes...during the Battle of Smolensk" and Moscow, which forced "the German army...over to the defensive."⁹¹

Speakers claimed that after initial retreats and withdrawals of Red Army forces, Soviet military art was developed enough in these first months of the war to find a "correct solution to tactical problems both in defense and offense." Thanks to the Party's leadership and the people's sacrifice and struggle, by the end of 1941 conditions existed for a major defeat of Germany's Blitzkrieg campaign.⁹² The Battle of Moscow would serve as both the point where Soviet defensive power stopped the Germans before the capital and the Red Army's offensive abilities were on display in the hundreds of kilometers German forces were pushed away from Moscow with the winter counter-offensive, passing the "initiative" to the Red Army.⁹³

⁹¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 31, l. 15-16, 17. This folder contained the records of a meeting from 20 March 1961 discussing the preparations of the publication of the second volume.

⁹² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 27, l. 2-3.

⁹³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 60, l. 10.

Although the above encapsulated a victorious image of Red Army actions throughout 1941, attempts to address fundamental questions related to the reasons for the Red Army's initial defeats proved inadequate. Fokin explained how at a previous meeting "there were mentions that we had no plans for war, so everything was done without a plan. But plans for covering [the border] were developed, and if they had been promptly put into place, they would have changed the nature of the war and as a result the situation on the front would have developed differently."⁹⁴ It quickly became evident that as a result of the limited publications available on the war, including continued limits placed on archival access, there were more questions than answers when it came to the Second World War, even fundamentally simple questions such as the existence of wartime plans were contested and debated.

When the topic of war plans was brought up again it was in the context of attempting to disprove that the German attack on the Soviet Union was part of a "preventive war."⁹⁵ Sokolovskii suggested that "maybe we can say that there were no defensive plans for the Soviet state." He was rebuffed by Army General Vladimir Kurasov, who stated that "we had a plan for the defense of the country's borders" and Sokolovskii immediately countered with "we had nothing." No real conclusion was reached aside from a "voice" calling out that "to say that we did not have a defensive

⁹⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 27, l. 7-8.

⁹⁵ This theme received a renewed emphasis with the publication of Viktor Suvorov, *Icebreaker: Who Started the Second World War?* trans. Thomas B. Beattie (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1990).

plan is akin to having proof that we were not at all prepare for war” which “is historically inaccurate.”⁹⁶

To offset this deficiency in knowledge, Fokin proposed utilizing the experience of competent military leaders like Zhukov, Vasilevskii, Timoshenko, or a “host of other comrades who were directly connected” to the events in question so as to provide a deeper analysis in order to discover and disclose the causes of the Red Army’s failure and “to correctly present them politically and highlight [them] in our work.” Similar questions remained to be resolved around Stalin’s role in the initial period of the war, which Fokin hoped the committee could help solve “so that we can get back on the right track.”⁹⁷

In a future meeting the issue of strategic plans was taken up by Pospelov as he and other speakers attempted to figure out how to discuss Soviet prewar planning without giving credence to prewar German propaganda that emphasized a need for a preventive war against the USSR. Pospelov shifted attention and blame onto the shoulders of Voroshilov, who proclaimed in speeches, before the start of the war, that the Soviet Union would “not allow the enemy to enter our homeland but we will beat him there, from whence he came.” These “ideas” became the cornerstone of “the Soviet state’s military-political documents, in accordance with which we built our military-economic and strategic plans.” As a result, Pospelov said, “it turns out that we had a strategic plan of attack against the territory of the potential enemy.” However, if such an idea were

⁹⁶ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 27, l. 81-82. Vladimir Kurasov served as chief of staff and then commander of the 4th Shock Army in 1941 and 1942, and in 1943 he was chief of staff of the Kalinin Front (army group), which was renamed the 1st Baltic Front. M. G. Vozhakin, ed., *Velikaia Otechestvennaia: Komandarmy. Voennyi biograficheskii slovar'* (Moscow: Kuchkovo Pole, 2005), 122.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8, 11.

allowed to permeate the pages of the war's official history, "then the entire world press would begin to attack us, claiming that Hitler was, well, to some extent he was correct when he spoke about a preventive war."⁹⁸ The above simply could not be allowed to enter the canon of Soviet history when it came to the Second World War – and it never did as the first volume, when published in 1960, omitted any references to a preventative war with respect to the Soviet Union. Pospelov sided with Sokolovskii who claimed that a "strategic plan to take the war to the enemy's territory before the war did not exist." Soviet historians did not have to prove a negative but they did want support from a non-Soviet source. Pospelov proposed utilizing "a fascist historian" to show that whatever plans the Soviet Union had were "late" in implementation and "imperfectly developed."⁹⁹ To support such a notion he suggested utilizing *History of the Second World War* by Kurt von Tippelskirch, whose translated book appeared in Russian in 1956. Tippelskirch, as a source, would appear in every volume of the official history.

Explanations for Soviet defeats also relied on the factor of "surprise," which became an important topic for the commission. Fokin argued that "today the [question of] surprise has many different points of view. There is a point of view that there was without a doubt surprise, and that surprise for the border troops was a sudden attack by the German-Fascist army against our country."¹⁰⁰ However, there was also enough information showing that commanders of fronts, armies, corps, and even divisions

⁹⁸ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 30, l. 46.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 47-48; Kurt von Tippelskirch, *Geschichte des Zweiten Weltkrieges* (Bonn: Athenäum-Verlag Junker und Dünhaupt, 1951); Kurt Tappel'skirkh, *Istoriia vtoroi mirovoi voiny* (Moscow: Inostr. Lit., 1956).

¹⁰⁰ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 27, l. 12.

located in the border districts “clearly saw the situation as it was developing...they clearly knew” German forces were being arrayed against the Soviet border. Furthermore, when these commanders requested to place their troops on combat alert they were rejected by the General Staff and People’s Commissar of Defense. Why this rejection was authorized Fokin could not explain. He could only point to existing documents that showed “Stalin did not allow troops to be brought to full readiness in accordance with existing plans,” which meant “at the moment of attack the troops were taken by surprise, although the leadership of the armed forces” knew about a coming invasion.¹⁰¹ Soviet intelligence had already supplied detailed information to the General Staff and Stalin, enough to give a clear idea of the strength of German forces, their locations and their groupings. The multi-sided nature of this issue meant this was another topic in need of discussion and resolution by the commission before any type of decision could be made in regards to how much of a surprise the invasion was and for whom.

An additional complication in understanding how much of a “surprise” the invasion was dealt with the fact that although officially rumors of war were denied, the fleet issued an alert for battle readiness on 19 June. This alert was in response to continued German violations of Soviet airspace and since the navy was relatively independent and lacked the importance of Soviet land forces, they was able to get away with this alert. Sokolovskii, however, continued to argue that “in general the army did not know that there was an invasion being prepared nor did the fleet...the country did not know about this. There was, of course, information, but in general no one knew.” Reference was made to the TASS announcement from 14 June, which “resulted in a

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 13.

psychological calm” that disarmed the country mentally when “Stalin said that the Germans would not go to war...”¹⁰² Consequently, it was claimed that the country was lulled into a false sense of security, not only by believing that war was not on the horizon but also by having faith in the prewar propaganda that claimed future battles would be won with little blood lost and mainly take place on the enemy’s territory.¹⁰³

When the war did begin, in spite of Stalin’s mistakes, it was “the organizational role of our party” that picked up where Stalin failed; “notwithstanding that we found ourselves in a hostile environment, the will of the Party, the will of the Soviet people was able to radically alter the situation, and our material capabilities were set in motion.” This version of events was argued to be “evident from the documents which we have familiarized [ourselves with].”¹⁰⁴

Sokolovskii sided with Fokin with respect to discussions of “surprise,” a deeper and more nuanced analysis was required. Because previous publications regularly lauded Red Army training and preparation, Sokolovskii contended it was easy enough to present “positive results” achieved in the field but the reasons for Red Army failures merited attention. Simply blaming the failures of 1941 “on suddenness of a treacherous attack – will result in nothing...we will be laughed at” as the reading public will “say the commission has not seriously come to address such an important issue.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Ibid., 55-56, 81; d. 30, l. 45.

¹⁰³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 391, l. 383-384. This folder contained reviews to sections of the second volume.

¹⁰⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 27, l. 61.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 51, 52.

In an attempt to dig further into the reasons for the failure of 1941, Sokolovskii found a scapegoat in the introduction of commissars into the Red Army, both in 1937 and 1941. He viewed the doing away of one-man command soon after the German invasion as a sign of distrust toward the command personnel of the Red Army “in a difficult moment. A hard month has passed and we introduce commissars.” Furthermore, the “desired results” with the introduction of commissars was never realized and soon one-man command was reintroduced.¹⁰⁶

One of the authors, Boris Tel’pukhovskii, disagreed as he believed that the introduction of “military commissars in connection with the outbreak of war was entirely correct. This was necessitated by the situation which prevailed at the front.” More so, he questioned whether it was a correct decision to “abolish military commissars on the eve of the Great Patriotic War.” Tel’pukhovskii believed the introduction of commissars corresponded to the outbreak of war in general, rather than a response to initial Red Army failures. This argument also supported the idea that Stalin had no clue war was coming nor was he preparing an invasion of Germany since if he did not trust the Red Army high command then he would never have done away with dual command on the eve of the war.¹⁰⁷

In response, Sokolovskii brought Lenin into the debate stating: “Lenin spoke of one-man command in the army, when there are two people – there is no unity of command.” Of course, this was not exactly accurate on Lenin’s position on commissars

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ “Because if there was a different assessment of the military-political situation by I. V. Stalin about the inevitability in the near future of a war, then it is unlikely that military commissars would have been abolished.” Ibid., 62-62a.

and dual command during the Civil War. Tel'pukhovskii seemed hesitant to oppose a Leninist position and responded that "with the help of the Central Committee we will find the correct solution." However, he further commented that "it seems to me, as all of us here and myself passed through the war, that if we develop this thesis, why was it needed to introduce military commissars, it must be said that a number of officers at the beginning of the war...were not on top of the situation. It was necessary to help commanders...so that they could master the art of war...and gain the necessary authority so that during the war our cadres could mature." And after their "maturation" the system of military commissars was abolished once more.¹⁰⁸ Tel'pukhovskii received support from the historian N. Shatagin, who insisted that "there is no doubt that the introduction of the institution of military commissars in July 1941 was an absolutely correct, necessary, and appropriate measure, which played a crucial role in strengthening the Red Army and enhanced its fighting abilities in the first, most difficult and crucial period of the Great Patriotic War." When initially the Red Army "wavered" and its commanding officers were "lost" it was deemed necessary "to raise the authority of commanders...with the help of party representatives in the form of commissars" – thus another reason was presented for how and why the Party managed the initial period of the war, rather than Stalin, and helped the Red Army alter the situation at the front.¹⁰⁹ The second volume, when published, presented the introduction of military commissars as

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 65, 66. N. Shatagin the author of *Partiia v period velikoi otechestvennoi voiny* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1959).

just one of the measures taken by the Central Committee to “strengthen the Party’s influence in the Armed Forces.”¹¹⁰

While some topics proved contested territory, others were considered simply incorrect or wholly missing. Analyzing some of the military operations from the initial period of the war, Sokolovskii commented on the “incorrect portrayal” of the Battle of Smolensk, which was depicted as if the Wehrmacht was defeated by the Red Army. The Germans, he argued, “were delayed during the battle for Smolensk and suffered heavy losses. They were detained for a period of about two months, but they did not suffer a defeat.”¹¹¹ Sokolovskii’s stance was rather objective. Although the Battle of Smolensk could be argued to have been a pyrrhic victory for the Germans, it was still a Red Army defeat.¹¹² The analysis of battles and events in 1941 seemed skewed and committee members were conscious of how readers might misinterpret what was being emphasized and why.

Smolensk was a well-known operation, so hiding an analysis of one of the most important German encirclements would have been a difficult prospect. Yet somehow, commented V. Zhelanov, there was no discussion of the Red Army’s general retreat, including the German occupation of numerous parts of the Soviet Union, and the Soviet failure to hold on to the Crimea. “There is nothing said about the leaving of the Baltics, Belorussia, Moldovia, the Northern Caucasus, Ukraine. Even in chapter 15... ‘The

¹¹⁰ Fokin et al., 54-55.

¹¹¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 27, l. 57.

¹¹² For a recent discussion of the battle, see D. E. Komarov, “Neizvestnoe Smolenskoe srazhenie,” in *Tragediia 1941: Prichiny katastrofy*, ed. Mikhail Mel’tiukhov et al. (Moscow: Iauza Eksmo, 2008); I. B. Moshchanskii, *U sten Smolenska* (Moscow: Veche, 2011).

Heroic Defense of Stalingrad and the Caucasus’ it states: ‘The failure of the German-fascist commander’s plans to capture the Caucasus’.” It appeared as if the German advances resulted in achievements and progress but according to the war’s history they “reached failure.” Without mentioning the territory the Red Army retreated from it would make it that much more difficult to later describe which territory Soviet forces were able to liberate.¹¹³

The exclusion of critical topics for discussion combined with selective language continued to create problems. The second volume listed the fourth chapter as covering the “Strategic Defense (July – September)” and the tenth discussed “The Offensive outside Moscow (December 1941)” but several months were missing and there needed to be “compliance” of the events being covered. Questions were raised about the creation of a “periodization” within the first period of the war to cover 21 June – 9 July, labeling it “The Initial Period of War,” then listing 10 July – September as a period of “Strategic Defense.” However, the Moscow Counter-Offensive only began in December, thus at least a two month gap needed to be addressed. The suggestion for labeling the gap “The Failure of the German-Fascist Offensive” was proposed and accepted and authors were encouraged to utilize it in the volume.¹¹⁴ The chosen title glossed over the Red Army’s

¹¹³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 51, l. 22. When published, the majority of the concentration in the second volume, with respect to Germany’s military campaign in 1941, could be found in chapters two and five, respectively entitled “Strategic Defenses of Soviet Armed Forces in the Summer of 1941” and “Failure of the General Offensive of Nazi-Fascist Troops against Moscow. Collapse of the ‘Lightning War’ Strategy.” Thus, the fall campaign was overlooked and the only major engagements concentrated on were the Battle of Smolensk, a subsection of chapter two that encompassed fourteen pages, a twenty-three page subsection on the Battle for Ukraine, including the Defense of Odessa, the Defense of Leningrad was allocated nine pages and the Red Army’s strategic defense of the Donbass and Crimea, as well as the counterattack by Soviet forces, which retook Rostov, was covered in nine pages in the fifth chapter, the final section of which discussed the defense of Moscow in forty-two pages.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21, 32-33. This would in part become the title of the fifth chapter, “Failure of the General Offensive of Nazi-Fascist Troops against Moscow. Collapse of the ‘Lightning War’ Strategy.” The

failure to contain the German advance until December but utilized Stalinist rhetoric to portray the German push toward Moscow as the culmination of failed offensive operations while Soviet defensive operations were successful in halting the German advance.

Deliberations over the Battle of Moscow were also of a controversial nature. There was general agreement that the decisiveness of the battle which ended Germany's Blitzkrieg needed greater attention. The defensive and offensive phases signaled the first time the Germans were defeated, contrary to the successes they enjoyed against France, Norway and the Balkans where "in one to two months" they were victorious conquerors. Sokolovskii claimed that the Germans issued orders for withdrawal a day before the beginning of the counteroffensive on 6 December. Such an assertion gave credence to the idea that Soviet operations throughout 1941, before the Moscow Counter-Offensive, were enough to exhaust the Wehrmacht to the point of giving up its offensive but simultaneously he was aware that such a claim might "belittle the worth of our counteroffensive outside Moscow." More so, if the "high command" had not ordered a counteroffensive along the entirety of the Eastern Front, the exhausted condition of German forces on the Moscow direction might have resulted in a further drive by the Red Army to the west and caused a greater defeat to Fedor von Bock's Army Group Center.¹¹⁵

Tied in with the counteroffensive, Sokolovskii wanted the inaccurate notion of "general winter" playing a "decisive role outside Moscow" to be done away with and

mentioned fourth and tenth chapters were most likely reorganized and became the previously mentioned second chapter "Strategic Defenses of Soviet Armed Forces in the Summer of 1941" and the sixth chapter, entitled "Red Army's Winter Counteroffensive 1941/1942. The Destruction of the German-Fascist Forces outside Moscow," when the volume was published.

¹¹⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 27, l. 53-54, 55.

considered it “nonsense.” He explained that, “If we look at the winter, there were [the following] conditions – deep snow, huge frosts, it was easier to defend than attack. Thus this statement is totally incorrect. Furthermore, the counteroffensive shows to what extent our army was united and capable and general ‘winter’ had absolutely nothing to do with it.” Mentioning winter as a factor “in passing” was fine, but it should in no way be concentrated on or portrayed as “decisive.”¹¹⁶

Although the Soviet point of view with respect to the war’s initial period dominated commission deliberations, there was some interest in discussing the German side. Pospelov wanted an analysis of the German Armed Forces to be incorporated into the war’s history. But his desire for their inclusion relied on Stalinist era arguments in describing how large German tank formations “made it possible for [the Germans] to achieve deep penetrations” as well as “the presence of a large air force, which led to the loss of a significant part of our air force on the first day of the war.” Finally, he argued that the demobilized state of Soviet forces, compared to Germany who had “the economic potential” of her “occupied countries,” and Hitler’s army, “which had all the equipment of Europe,” spelled success for the Wehrmacht and retreats for the Red Army.¹¹⁷

As German forces occupied Soviet territory, arguments were made for a portrayal of the Soviet population as un intimidated by German atrocities against the locals, which in effect meant support for Soviet socialism; this line of thought would create problems when it came time to analyze the partisan war in the German rear since it meant omitting

¹¹⁶ He insisted that the Battle of Kursk should be mentioned at the same time as the victory there was achieved in summer, yet there was no argument about “general ‘heat’” helping the Red Army. Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 80, 85.

German occupation policies, which were a large part of the propaganda effort during the war itself. While the Germans “managed to break the will of the people in other countries” those in the Soviet Union “knowing what socialism is, knowing what opportunities and prospects socialism opens for them, defended the socialist system.” Thus the “invincible force” of the Soviet system was “inextricably linked with the people, the people’s support for the party, faith in the party, right and justice of the party.” Without such support, it was argued, the Red Army would have been unable to achieve victory outside Moscow and during the Battle for Stalingrad.¹¹⁸

The official history needed to emphasize both the population’s support and the continued strengthening of the Red Army resistance “with the greatest pathos,” even while conditions at the front continued to deteriorate, so as to serve as a warning to anyone in the west “who think that they will be able to intimidate the Soviet people, that they will arrange a surprise attack.” The history of the war needed to counter western propaganda and highlight how the Soviet Union, while only producing 8 million tons of steel, was able to sustain “something unprecedented in the history of war.” More so, in the midst of the Cold War the Soviet Union was now producing “54 million tons of steel,” its armed forces were equipped with ballistic missiles and socialism proved its scientific sophistication with the launching of satellites, thus the USSR “cannot be broken by any treacherous attack, [or] any provocations.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 83-84, 85.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 84-85. This might have been in reference to secret TASS documents that stated in 1952, thanks to Soviet steel production, “Eisenhower decided against a preventive war.” Hopf, 185.

The First Two Volumes in Print

By the time the first two volumes were published, the first in 1960 and the second in 1961 with a print run of 125,000 and 180,000, respectively, the periodization debate of the Great Patriotic War was over. The first period covered 22 June 1941 to November 1942 (the encirclement of the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad). The second ranged from 19 November 1942 until the end of 1943 and included the destruction of the German Army at Stalingrad as well as the failed German offensive around Kursk in the summer of 1943. The second period saw the Red Army win and retain the “strategic initiative” for the remainder of the war. Finally, the third period extended from December 1943 until the end of the war, when the “Armed Forces of the Soviet Union moved from offensives in separate directions to a general offensive on the entire strategic front.” This periodization fit well enough into the greater Second World War. The three periods of the Great Patriotic War were sandwiched by an initial period from 1 September 1939 until the entry of the Soviet Union into the war and were concluded by the war in the Far East against Japan, making a total of five periods.

The periodization of the war also catered to the breakdown of the six-volume set and what was included in each volume. The first covered the initial period of the Second World War (1 September 1939 until the invasion of the Soviet Union, 22 June 1941), the second and third volumes covered the next two periods of the war while the fourth, ranging from 1944-1945, consisted of enough topics to consume the next two volumes,

with the final tome covering the lessons of the Great Patriotic War and the Second World War in its entirety.¹²⁰

All volumes contained a list of editors and authors who contributed to its publication, but no individual was ever listed as author for specific chapters or subsections. Multiple-authored works meant authors were somewhat anonymous and no one could be individually blamed or praised by the public for a specific chapter or subsection in such a collective effort.

The first volume encompassed the interwar period, covering the rise of Nazism in Germany and discussing the “support” Germany received from the “ruling circles” in the United States, England, and France as well as the obstacles Fascist Germany encountered on its way to unleashing a Second World War. Chapters on the Soviet Union analyzed its growing strength, both internally and on the international arena, the failure of the creation of an anti-Soviet bloc, as well as the unleashing of “fascist aggression” by Italy and Germany during the period of 1935-1938. Chapters were then devoted to the beginning of the Second World War with Germany’s invasion of Poland, where England and France were portrayed as betraying the Polish people and no mention was made of the Soviet invasion of Poland on 17 September 1939. A later five page subsection discussed the “liberation of Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia” and claimed that only after the destruction of Poland’s government did Soviet forces receive orders to enter Eastern

¹²⁰ In addition, a six-volume set of documents was to be published as well, entitled *Dokumenty Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny Sovetskogo Soiuzza 1941-1945 gg.* Boltin, 111-112.

Poland in order to safeguard the population.¹²¹ The annexation of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia was portrayed as a “victory” of socialist revolutions in the three Baltic States.

Discussions outlining the “strange war” in Western Europe and the numerous German invasions that soon followed throughout Europe were juxtaposed with Soviet attempts to “strengthen” her border areas with respect to both her eastern and western borders. The final chapters dealt with German preparations for an attack against the Soviet Union, the internal politics of the Soviet state, the military-economic potential of the Soviet state and the Red Army’s standing – technological and theoretical – and border forces on the eve of the war. Looking at mentioned personalities, the major concentration was directed on Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev, Hitler, Mussolini, Petain, and other major political figures on the international arena.

The second volume was broken down into three parts, the first discussed in five chapters the “perfidious” invasion of the Soviet Union by Germany and her “satellites,” including the “breakdown” of Germany’s Blitzkrieg campaign. The “Forced Retreat of the Red Army,” following the invasion, was covered in twenty-two pages. Further retreats were portrayed as part of a “strategic defense” during the summer campaign, including the initial development of the partisan movement in the enemy’s rear, masking the chaos that the frontline was engulfed in and offering a minor discussion of the defense of Smolensk, the fighting toward Leningrad and in Ukraine, especially the “heroic defense of Odessa.” The concentration here reflects a view of the war that focused on events that could be presented as victories, even if in the end they turned out

¹²¹ G. A. Deborin et al., *Istoriia Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny Sovetskogo Soiuza, 1941-1945*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo Ministerstva Oborony Soiuza SSR, 1960), 247.

to be defeats. Smolensk was seen as a “pyrrhic” victory for German forces since the encirclement was never complete and tens of thousands of Soviet troops escaped, while Leningrad was besieged and made for an eventual tale of endurance and courage in the face of Germany’s genocidal campaign, and finally Odessa was never outright conquered but rather evacuated due to circumstances along other sectors of the Eastern Front that made its defense no longer tenable. The volume was practically silent with respect to prisoners of war. Soviet POWs merited a minor mention in the aftermath of the Smolensk encirclement when the authors admitted that it was mainly soldiers and officers from the 16th and 20th armies that fell into German hands as prisoners, but no figures were provided for readers.¹²²

The next two chapters of the second volume discussed the economic mobilization initiated in the wake of the invasion and the creation of the anti-Fascist coalition, as well as the resistance German forces encountered to their rule throughout occupied territories in Europe. The fifth chapter once more focused on the war on the Eastern Front and discussed the “Heroic Defense of Moscow” that finally stopped the German advance in the East in 1941. Seemingly omitted was any discussion of the beginning phases of the Holocaust, the millions of prisoners of war the German army took, or the numerous encirclements (aside from Smolensk) that the Red Army suffered through on the way to a successful defense outside Moscow. Defeats were omitted or portrayed in the best possible light to focus attention on Soviet endurance and bravery in the face of Germany’s “perfidious” invasion.

¹²² Fokin et al., 76-77.

The second part of the second volume continued with the Red Army's winter counteroffensive, highlighting German weaknesses and defeats and masking previous Red Army failures as stubborn defensive operations while the entire nation's opposition, including the partisan movement, to the German invasion was strengthened. The final parts of the second volume looked at the beginning of the German advance on Stalingrad, thus putting the Red Army once more on the defensive as the German army regained the strategic initiative. The evacuation of the Crimea was allocated seven pages while the Kharkov operation that ended in defeat and another encirclement was discussed in six. The chapter on "The Heroic Defense of Stalingrad" stood in contrast to the simpler "Defense of the Caucasus," a chapter that also encompassed battles along the Western and North-Western directions of the Eastern Front as well as the enemy rear. The final chapters discussed continued economic alterations within the Soviet economy, everyday life and culture of the Soviet people, military actions in other theaters of operations and the lessons developed from the first period of the Great Patriotic War. Once more, political figures were concentrated on more than others, including Lenin, Khrushchev, Stalin, Hitler, Churchill, and Roosevelt. Simultaneously, there was mention of major military commanders, both Soviet and German, as well as partisans. Andrei Vlasov was merited a minor mention, being described as a cowardly commander who betrayed his country and went over to the Nazis and as a result of whose actions operations by the 2nd Shock Army, which he commanded at the time, resulted in an "unfavorable outcome."¹²³

¹²³ Fokin et al., 470.

Stalin's death began to alter the memory and history of the Second World War and the culmination of those changes was most evident in Khrushchev's speech at the 20th Congress and the eventual decision to undertake an official investigation and publication of the war's history. In as much as the authors and editors wanted to create a new, in-depth, analytical and truthful look at the Soviet experience in the Second World War, by default, the end result was the realization that the war's history was still tainted by Stalin's cult. Consequently, this publication aimed to do something more while admitting to being the mouthpiece of the "party line" as it described how the Communist Party was the organizer of the all-people's struggle with the enemy, highlighting "its multifaceted activities in directing fronts, the partisan struggle in the rear of the enemy, [and the] economic and political life of the country."¹²⁴ Although collective authorship allowed for some debates to take place, the contested nature of the war's history was not visible on the pages of the final product. Undoing over a decade of propaganda and creating a new foundation for the history of the war with access to previously unavailable archival evidence was the initial goal, but few, if any, realized that the new history they were crafting was being built on the same tainted foundation created under Stalin. Some commission members might have truly believed in Stalin's analysis of the duplicitous nature and motivations of the Western Allies and the need for the non-aggression pact, undoing years of work by the likes of Litvinov who attempted to create a system of collective security. Perhaps this was the correct Marxist-Leninist position that explained the motivations behind and unfolding of a new conflict against the imperialist forces of the axis powers. Unfortunately, we cannot know for sure whether the repetition of ideas

¹²⁴ Boltin, 109-110.

and terminology from the Stalinist narrative was done consciously or subconsciously or was more so the result of the fact that so little literature existed on a topic that was full of hosannas to Stalin and his military and political genius.

Although readers were constantly considered by the members of the commission, they were sent mixed signals about Stalin, Soviet motivations, the war's nature and course. From deliberations on the war's periodization, which mirrored Voroshilov's, to the "nature" of the Second World War and the Soviet Union's "liberating" character, all discussions leaned and relied on Stalin's ideas and narrative in one form or another. Commission members included true believers in Marxism and in Stalinism. Debates continually referred to Stalin's speeches, quotes, opinions and even admissions of mistakes as the foundation for further considerations and conclusions. These initial meetings encapsulated the dominant voice of Marxist thinking and beliefs. Stalin was an aberration who attempted to hijack the Soviet experiment and his poor performance in the war showed his inability to truly lead the nation, while when the party took over the Red Army eventually triumphed as Stalin took all the credit for the victory. The Soviet system endured and outlived Stalin. Yet Stalin's presence throughout the war could not be avoided.

Consequently, this initial attempt to write an "objective" history of the war can be shown to have been a failure. Left unsaid was if an "objective" history was even a possibility, although it was assumed that the end result needed to be an honest and objective account of the Soviet war experience. Internal discussions show a flexibility when it came to some contested issues, yet the overwhelming evidence points to the fact that the arguments utilized and the issues and events omitted point to a memory of the

war years that reflected Stalinist thinking more than any type of “Thaw.” Furthermore, much about the war remained unknown and archival access, although initially promised, remained limited and was often obtained through state security organs who obscured the original source(s). Whatever literature was available was lacking and it appears that a framework for how to write and what to write about the war was missing unless Stalin’s thoughts were involved.

Often, as was evidenced, memories and ideas about the war clashed with the Stalinist narrative and current leadership’s needs. Only a narrative deemed compatible with the current regime’s framework of socialist progress could proceed to publication, leaving the majority unhappy with the final product. For all the honorable intentions the authors, editors, and specialists who gathered for these meetings had when it came to working on an official history of the Great Patriotic War, many realized the final product was continually marred by political expediency and Party needs. Authors and editors were left to work with an established set of clichés, platitudes and accusations in their descriptions of events and personalities. In the history of the war a simplistic and binary view of Stalin translated into exculpation of mistakes committed before and during the war or blame for them all.

Therefore, although during the debates outlined above major problems that needed to be addressed, clarified and analyzed were mentioned, without Stalin’s intervention no consensus was reached. At a meeting on 13 April 1966, Fokin, the editor of the second volume, claimed the achievements of the Communist Party, the armed forces and the population in general were “not adequately covered.” The text lacked in its analysis of Soviet military art and ultimately failed to emphasize the decisiveness of

the Great Patriotic War within the progression of the Second World War. For unmentioned reasons, materials that were promised to the commission never made it into their hands and “as a result we were not able to fully reveal the activities of the Politburo’s leadership policies, [and] the Central Committee of the Party. We were unable to fully disclose the activities of the National Defense Committee, STAVKA, [and] the General Staff.”¹²⁵

The creation of the war’s first official history was done during a new period of anti-Stalinism, which all too easily witnessed blame directed at a dead man who could hardly defend himself or his actions. Authors and editors wanted to highlight the errors, mistakes, and failures of the Red Army during the war’s initial period but could not begin investigating the real reasons for fear of making it seem that the Leninist system that won the war failed the people and did not prepare them well enough for their confrontation with Germany. Placing the blame on Stalin allowed select members of the Politburo and commanding officers in Khrushchev’s ruling circle to be excused from blame. However, without an overarching figure like Stalin, whom Khrushchev proved unable to replace, there continued to be more questions and arguments than solutions to the problems speakers encountered for debate. Therefore, Khrushchev’s antagonism toward Stalin, and his administration’s reliance on Stalinist ideas and arguments about the causes and course of the war, was reflected in the direction commission members steered the war’s history. Khrushchev could not deviate from the general narrative of the war’s origins and course created under Stalin, he could only assign blame to Stalin for well-known defeats

¹²⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 117, l. 2, 3-4. Meeting held on 13 April 1966 to discuss preparations for the second edition of the second volume.

and miscalculations. Without someone taking up Stalin's external voice, commission members continued to steer along a familiar course. Simultaneously, however, the contested nature of the subject exposes the ability of high ranking officials to engage with arguments and voice opinions that could not always be expressed in a public setting. It also shows the collapse of a simplistic binary in that, since they suffered through the war themselves and continuously had the general reader in mind, they hoped for a way to appease and represent all parties involved, state, Party, institutions, and society. Unfortunately, the indoctrination they all suffered through under Stalin meant limits were already in place and obstacles continuously encountered as they proved unable to move beyond a deeply entrenched and readily recalled Stalinist narrative.

CHAPTER 4

CRITIQUES DURING THE WRITING OF THE VOLUMES

The manuscript of the second volume detailed a partisan action in the village Ugodskii zavod (Угодский Завод) where “allegedly on the night of 23 or 24 November 1941 partisans from the Moscow region destroyed...the headquarters of a German military corps.” Although documentation when it came to the partisan war was difficult to come by, due to the fact that it was an underground war, this episode was “accepted as fact.” On behalf of the veteran’s commission, Lev Leshchinskii, a historian and member of the commission, was sent to the village to investigate the event, although he offered no reason(s) for why an investigation was needed in the first place. After three visits, interviewing the locals and analyzing the location where the destruction of a German corps headquarters supposedly occurred, he could only conclude that while “something was burned there [and] someone was attacked” no evidence could be found for the original assertion. German reports themselves, it was claimed, listed no such attack on any corps headquarters and the street and structures within the village could not support the losses reported by the partisans (some 600 officers and 103 automobiles were claimed disabled). Further clarification was needed in regards to what actually happened.¹

This episode was just one of the “falsifications” and “exaggerations” detectable within the war’s history as during the publication process dozens of internal reviewers, including army, air force, and navy military commanders, historians, and commission members themselves, were asked for their thoughts on early manuscripts. Many offered

¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 76, l. 5-7. This folder contained the stenographic record of the “Meeting to Discuss Material on the Partisan War in the ‘History of the Great Patriotic War’” held on February 23, 1959. This event was not included in the second volume when it was published.

praise, but numerous others voiced concerns. Reactions varied and much of the feedback received showed that even after Stalin's death and his denunciation at the 20th Party Congress, a population that was used to following the party line, no matter how contradictory, was hesitant in deciding what to believe. In seeing the reverence that was reserved for the history of the war period the question arises as to why so many continued to rely on a version of the war that was crafted under Stalin even though criticism of Stalin himself was expected and even advocated by many.

This chapter aims to provide a lens through which to view additional issues that became contested territory for internal reviewers and the authors and editors themselves. Many of the detailed complaints originated from those who themselves took part in the meetings during the publication process, thus providing evidence that the exchange of ideas and the production of the war's history was neither solely a top-down or bottom-up project but one that consisted of constantly fluid concepts and ideas in the wake of Stalin's death and Khrushchev's admissions. More so, it shows that while attempting to broach a subject full of neglect and omissions some allowances were made even for ideas that many were still unsure could be endorsed. The open discussions among speakers serves as a valuable look at what topics elicited praise and where corrections were thought needed. The atmosphere created by Khrushchev's Thaw offers an excellent example of the crossroads many found themselves facing when deciding how best to present the war's official history.

Restating Objectives and the Political Atmosphere

As early as May 1959 internal reviews based on manuscripts began to arrive with numerous criticisms, many based on the treatment of the war's initial period. Recommendations were previously made to the authors and editors and although some were incorporated others were ignored. A general critique claimed the war's history carried "a significant number of factual inaccuracies and incorrect conclusions, which reduce" the research value of the work.² The second volume, covering the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, received a vast amount of attention as it continued to present an "important task" for the editors. The arguments employed were reminiscent of the "circular" voice that Yurchak pointed to in his study of the Soviet Union. Instead of concentrating on how to improve discussions of issues that were deemed unsatisfactory, the best commission members could do was continuously reiterate what they had already proclaimed in previous meetings.

In a 19 March 1958 meeting, it was once more voiced that the job of the volume was to create an "objective" look at the war's initial period, "the most difficult period." Colonel Efim Chalik, an author of military studies on the air force, claimed it was the responsibility of the authors and editors to showcase how "the Soviet people under the leadership of the Communist Party, sustaining an unprecedented blow" from Hitler's army, and without bending to pressure from the German invasion, how Soviet leaders were able to harness their forces and create conditions "for a radical change [in the war]." This was a task that eclipsed the complexity and difficulties of the next two volumes. Authors and editors needed to "show no fear" when discussing "those major mistakes

² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 391, l. 351-352.

that we made in the beginning of the war.” On the contrary, events needed to be presented along the “party line” so as to deprive “our enemies of the ability to gloat, showing not only the difficult events but...how in this complex, difficult situation the Party and the Soviet people eliminated these problems.”³ There was renewed emphasis on “facts”, including “their truthful interpretation,” and keeping in mind what readers were interested in. They not only wanted “answers to questions” and an explanation of “how events took place” but also an understanding of “why exactly they occurred.” The war’s beginning needed to be clearly elucidated but already it was mentioned that the reasons for the initial defeats were not given a sufficiently viable explanation. They were left “scattered throughout” when they needed to be focused and clearly presented in an “extensive and compelling” way rather than mentioned in passing.⁴

Although much of the above was a repetition of what commission members said previously, there were additional extenuating circumstances that came to light in these follow up meetings. It became apparent that there were limits in place as to what could be divulged. Authors were reminded that they should not to get carried away with discussions and corrections over “minor details” building them up into “sensational” discoveries. Instead, they were to reveal “deficiencies...because the creation of this type of a history of the war consists of showing a continuing process of growth, improvements and the rise of Soviet [military] art...”⁵ Miscalculations were thus supposed to be treated

³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 55, l. 70-70a.

⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 29, l. 25; d. 391, l. 497. The former folder contained discussions about the manuscript of the second volume, dated 12 June 1959.

⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 73, l. 49, 50. This folder contained a discussion on the chapters of the second volume, dated 29 January 1959.

as part of a learning process rather than a reflection of systemic inadequacies. The reasons presented for the disastrous beginning of the war usually revolved around Stalin in one form or another, but it was assumed that readers would want deeply detailed answers for what caused such “serious violations of elementary basics” when it came to “military theory and practice.” Justifications needed to go “deeper” than simple admissions that there were “shortcomings” in equipment or combat education and training. Readers would want to know the truth so that “mistakes will not be repeated in the future” but that would only be possible if the conditions that created the chaos of 1941 are identified and eliminated.⁶

One of the best indicators of the time at which this volume was being written was the suggestion to portray the clash between Germany and the Soviet Union not as “fascism” fighting against “socialism” but as “capitalism” opposing “socialism.”⁷ Commission members wanted to “accentuate” that the Western Allies, although fighting to defeat Germany, did not join the “coalition” to protect “communism.” They intended after the destruction of “Hitlerism,” to “destroy” the Soviet Union. The emphasis on class warfare undoubtedly reflected the leadership’s framing of the international situation at the time. Pospelov signaled that the “respected” heads of capitalist nations were considering a “repeat of history” and they were thinking that “Adenauer [chancellor of West Germany] will only fight against communism. They seek to dominate the world, the enslavement of Europe.” Thus not only was the portrayal of German intentions to be reflective of present needs and circumstances, but the arguments put forward quite

⁶ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 391, l. 310-311.

⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 75, l. 41.

blatantly resembled Soviet fears and rhetoric from the Stalinist period, leaning on ideas of “imperialism” and the “enslavement of Europe.”⁸

Continued suspicions of the west coincided with a fear among commission members about the “bourgeois falsification” of the Second World War in western publications. In a 2 November 1959 meeting to discuss historiographical questions, Colonel Gurii Zastavenko, a historian, stated that “West German bourgeois historians have advanced as their main purpose the rehabilitation of Hitler’s Wehrmacht and the German General Staff...the works of bourgeois historians and publicists are advancing revanchist goals, appealing to the experiences of the Second World War for the preparation and the unleashing of a Third World War.” In response, Soviet historical publications needed to “take a leading role” in “exposing the bourgeois falsifiers of the history of the Second World War.”⁹

As a result, the initial period of the war needed to showcase the superiority of the “Soviet state and the socialist system” and to expose “all the falsifiers” who “mocked our army and our state.” The first six months of the war gave proof of the “advantages” of the Soviet Union as it withstood attacks that “no other state could.” Vasilii Moskovskii, a major-general and one of the official history’s editors, emphasized that while there were “many declarations made about the advantages” the Soviet state enjoyed, it appeared they were not “disclosed,” thus robbing readers of the knowledge and ability to understand

⁸ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 29, l. 27, 28.

⁹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 96, l. 12.

how the Soviet Union, her army and people were able to withstand the German invasion.¹⁰

Considering how at this time fears were common about a hot war breaking out in the midst of a cold one, commission members attempted to come to terms with the contradiction of how the west could be downplaying the Soviet Union and Red Army's capabilities in its "falsifications" of the war while simultaneously trying to learn from that same war effort in order to prepare for a future conflict. To make sense of this inconsistency some believed that in the west only popular literature was falsified while "serious literature has no falsifications."¹¹ Within that serious, or scholarly, literature, it was claimed, were studies that were more favorable to and representative of the Soviet Union's war experience.

Comments on Weaknesses within the Multi-Volume History

Reading through manuscripts, reviewers noticed additional contradictions in the representation of the prewar period, which commentators claimed retained the presence of a "duality" when discussing the situation the Soviet Union found itself facing. The commission concluded from available documentation that "attempts by diplomatic means to attain a peaceful respite" before the German invasion "were wrong." Information was received from various intelligence sources – military attaches, diplomats, and spies – correctly predicting war, but diplomatic actions continued trying to avoid war. Although preliminary steps were taken in case war broke out involving military measures to assure

¹⁰ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 29, l. 21, 22.

¹¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 96, l. 25.

a certain amount of readiness among the troops, the Party and government were portrayed as more concerned with winning time for military preparations to assume a significant character and in the process failing to predict the invasion. The volume's authors seemed unable to decide how to present the "assessment of the military-political activity of the Soviet government" as initially it was described as "positive," but further in the text "a completely different characteristic" of the government's activities was presented.¹²

Further inconsistencies and contradictions concerned Soviet defensive plans, German intentions, and the invasion itself. It was pointed out that one page described how up to two-thirds of forces in military districts in the border regions were "included in the composition of covering armies," specifically intended for defense in case of war, yet "after three pages, we read that for the purposes of defense...no grouping of forces was created."¹³ Descriptions of the "scope and nature of the events that unfolded on 22 June" proved contradictory as well. Initially the invasion was portrayed as "unexpected" for Stalin and the military leadership, while two dozen pages later the opposite was claimed. The inconsistency between the Soviet leadership, including Stalin, knowing that at some point in the future Nazi Germany would invade and the unexpectedness of the invasion contributing to the initial surprise and defeat of Soviet forces, needed to be addressed.¹⁴

The contested nature of the war's beginning was reflected in that the most "popular" question to arise from the comments received was in regards to the "causes of our failures in the initial period of the war." Readers wanted to know "who was guilty,

¹² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 28, l. 14, 43.

¹³ Ibid., 51.

¹⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 75, l. 38-39, 40.

why did it happen [as it did]...why were our troops not combat ready in time and who is to blame for this, [and] what was the government's position on this matter."¹⁵ The answers provided in the manuscript were unsatisfactory and many found them "contradictory." Kuchkin commented on the initial descriptions of Soviet military art as being superior yet the start of the war saw numerous accounts of errors and blunders. The conclusion reached was a type of cognitive dissonance in that somehow Soviet military theory was superior yet an utter failure in the face of a German invasion.¹⁶ Such poor analysis needed to be amended and the "historical truth" preserved.¹⁷ Speakers were not interested in a quick "fix" to the shortcomings but preferred an explanation for the achievements and disadvantages the Red Army experienced and overcame, including not only Stalin's failures, but also that of military commanders, such as Timoshenko and Zhukov.¹⁸

With 1941 taking up a central position during discussions, more attention was needed to the causes for severe setbacks and "the element of surprise." Concerns were raised over the "wording" used to describe the apparent lack of surprise when the Germans invaded. Those familiar with the "material" were "amazed" to see written that "there was neither political nor strategic surprise, while the documents and information tell a different story." Others, however, argued that there was no "state surprise" when it

¹⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 28, l. 14.

¹⁶ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 391, l. 383.

¹⁷ Further topics that needed to be addressed included the Red Army's "unsatisfactory mobilization, the poor readiness of the armed forces for repelling a surprise attack by the German-Fascist hordes" and a host of other issues. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 30, l. 45.

¹⁸ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 73, l. 39; d. 75, l. 45.

came to the invasion as “already in January 1941” enemy concentrations on the Soviet border were being reported.¹⁹

The idea that even after the signing of the non-aggression pact the Soviet Union still suspected that a future invasion by the Wehrmacht was imminent was reinforced by a 1948 publication, which stated: “the Soviet government never for a moment forgot that sooner or later Hitler’s Germany would attack us.”²⁰ Without outright discrediting this text, the nature of the surprise that Germany achieved could not be addressed. Another argument was made that the “surprise” achieved by Germany could be labeled as being of a “tactical character.” As such, the government “knew that Hitler sooner or later would attack” but mistakes were made in attempting to determine “the time of this invasion.”²¹ Unfortunately, no matter what form “surprise” would take, that the initial period of war contained few “offensives against the Fascist aggressors” due to inadequate preparations meant there were few opportunities to champion Red Army actions.²²

While Soviet activities were at the heart of the second volume, German actions, including an explanation for the attack against the Soviet state, were also discussed. Objections were raised. The history of the war should not limit Germany’s actions to one reason when discussing the invasion. Initially the manuscript stated that the “main goal of the Nazi invaders...was to capture the infinite riches of the Soviet Union.” Simultaneously, however, it was mentioned that “the main goal was the destruction of the

¹⁹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 28, l. 15; d. 586, l. 220-221.

²⁰ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 75, l. 39; *Falsifiers of History (An Historical Note)* (Moscow: Soviet Information Bureau, 1948), 43.

²¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 75, l. 40.

²² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 30, l. 45.

Red Army and the acquisition of Soviet territory.” Pavel Zhilin, who would author a text on German preparations for an attack on the Soviet Union in 1965, agreed that Germany’s “political goals” – the “elimination” of the Soviet Union – “should be pushed to the forefront.” Leaning on Khrushchev’s thoughts in regards to the matter, it was suggested that Hitler’s goal was a “class war” and the destruction of “the world’s first socialist state,” with Hitler playing the “role of executioner.”²³

In conjunction with a focus on German intentions, German advantages needed to be highlighted before attention was drawn to Soviet military or political mistakes and miscalculations. Only after presenting Germany’s preparations, “treachery” and the surprise the Wehrmacht was able to achieve, could arguments be introduced for “incorrect” Soviet political assessments and further errors committed as a result.

Additionally, the reasons behind the actions of Germany’s “satellites” – Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Finland – during the invasion were missing. The goals of each satellite needed to be presented and an explanation offered with respect to what they achieved in declaring war on the Soviet Union.²⁴ It was necessary to show these states with some agency rather than simply as puppets and fulfillers of Germany’s needs.²⁵

General Aleksei Antonov, Deputy Chief of the General Staff during the war, aimed to provide a somewhat objective explanation for the war’s disastrous beginning,

²³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 29, l. 26-27. Pavel Andreevich Zhilin, *Kak fashistskaia Germaniia gotovila napadenie na Sovetskii Soiuz* (Moscow: Mysl’, 1965).

²⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 75, l. 35-36, 59.

²⁵ When published, the second volume treated Italy, Romania, Hungary and Finland as German allies and vassals along with whom Germany utilized the technical and economic abilities of occupied Europe to attack the Soviet Union. Fokin et al., 9.

yet one encased in Stalinist thinking.²⁶ Speaking at a 12 June 1959 meeting, Antonov commented that the manuscript described how on the eve of the war the government “had developed a political-military plan for the defense of the Soviet state. At the heart of this plan was the idea of active defense, it was meant to conduct an offensive war by waging it on the territory of the enemy.” The recycling of “active defense” was not emphasized by Antonov, who moved on to state that in his opinion it might be “better to say that there was a military-political doctrine, not a plan, but that on the basis of this doctrine the General Staff worked out how to concentrate and deploy our armed forces in the initial period of the war.” Since this “doctrine” was presented by the army to the government in the autumn of 1940, there was a limited amount of time for all ideas to be implemented. It could then be argued that troops within border districts were only able to occupy positions according to defensive plans when fighting had already flared up on the border. Consequently, the unfolding of the German invasion and the events that followed meant that any “covering plan was foiled, while the concentration and deployment of troops, coming from the depths of the country, was not carried out according to plan, but subordinated to a rapidly changing and escalating situation and was carried out through administrative procedures.”²⁷ As such, the Red Army’s poor deployment in the border

²⁶ Aleksei Innokent’evich Antonov joined the Red Army in April 1919, participating in battles in the South as chief of staff of a brigade. After the Civil War he continued to serve in various staff positions, finishing the Frunze Military Academy in 1931 and the Military General Staff Academy in 1937, working in the Frunze academy the following three years. During the German invasion Antonov was working as deputy chief of staff of the Kiev Special Military District and by August 1941 he was the chief of staff of the Southern Front. He served in similar capacities on other fronts throughout 1941 and 1942 and in December 1942 was appointed first deputy Chief of the General Staff, he assumed the position of Chief of the General Staff in 1945-1946. A. O. Chubar’ian, ed., *Velikaia Otechestvennaia voina. 1941-1945. Illiustrirovannaia entsiklopediia* (Moscow: Olma-Press Obrazovanie, 2005), 33-34.

²⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 29, l. 3-4; d. 586, l. 221.

districts benefited the Germans and needed to be assessed and presented in the official history. While Antonov did not outright dismiss mistakes made by the General Staff, he was cognizant of the fact that the ever-changing situation at the front meant that there was little the General Staff could do to reverse the situation facing the Red Army.

“Active defense” as a description of the Red Army’s actions in 1941 was criticized by Filipp Tamonov, one of the authors of the first and second volumes. He complained about the “high tone” and “pathos” of some speakers when it came to descriptions of the Red Army’s defensive operations. Tamonov commented that when “teachers of higher military educational institutions” covered the period of 1941 as one of “active defense” they were strongly opposed by their students and “pinned...to the wall.” Questions were raised, such as: “You speak of active defense, then why did they leave major cities and advanced to Stalingrad, up to the banks of the Volga?” Tamonov considered the “remark...entirely just” and noted the “decision of the 20th Party Congress and the speech of comrade Khrushchev,” which “firmly corrected us: Comrades, we were forced to retreat under the blows of the enemy. Our subjective desire to show the heroism of [our] defense and the heroism of our troops, our soldiers, and the heroism of our workers rising to overcome difficulties – this is understandable, but at the same time it seems to me that we do not in any way have a right to forget about the huge crisis of defense, which we faced in the summer of 41 and 42.”²⁸

This line of thinking meant omitting “minor details” while continuing to describe the “significant errors and shortcomings, which affected the entire strategic situation”

²⁸ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 55, l. 59.

throughout 1941 and Germany's continued offensives in 1942.²⁹ When in October 1941 there were some thirteen armies defending the Moscow direction, their front was "broken through in three days and many formations of these armies found themselves surrounded!" While Red Army troops fought "fiercely and with pathos" they also retreated with many becoming prisoners of war. Tamonov exclaimed, "We cannot not write about this." A similar situation developed in the summer of 1942 with nine armies of the Southern and Southwestern fronts pushed to Stalingrad with numerous encirclements of Soviet troops taking place. While some members wanted to showcase the retreats during the first two years of war in a "better light," Tamonov argued that "thirteen years after the war ended" the "difficulties" of the time needed to be shown "in the form that they actually took."³⁰ That meant an additional discussion of the unrealistic missions assigned to Red Army forces by the "command staff" during the Moscow Counter-Offensive that underestimated the German Army's defensive capabilities and overestimated the Red Army offensive abilities, leading to "large errors" as a result of a "lack of skills."³¹

The greater hurdle for Soviet forces, argued Petr Gorem'kin, Major-General of engineering and artillery and consultant for the institute of Marxism-Leninism from 1958-1960, was the mobilization of German troops and equipment, which located "favorable" points for "breaking through our defenses while we had a ban imposed, if the enemy opened fire, started to bomb our troops, airfields, cities – do not respond until

²⁹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 73, l. 49.

³⁰ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 55, l. 60.

³¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 73, l. 49-50.

‘special instructions’” were issued.³² Thus, the advantage the Germans enjoyed was the ability to mobilize their forces before the Red Army, and pick which weak points to break through while the Red Army was deprived of its strengths due to enemy surprise and the limits Stalin and the General Staff placed on their actions as a response to perceived German “provocation.” In connection with these discussions, a comment by the former partisan, Iliia Starinov, emphasized how the chapters devoted to the initial period of the war “bypass the General Staff and the People’s Commissariat of Defense, who carried much guilt” for the failures of the Red Army. “This was clear to everyone,” said Starinov, “especially those who were caught at the front...the General Staff had power, even without reporting to Stalin to undertake a number of measures. This was not done, and you cannot avoid this mistake.”³³ Likewise, Rodion Malinovskii placed blame on the Deputy People’s Commissar of Defense, Efim Shchadenko, accusing him of mismanaging the selection of critical staff appointments whom he did not think needed to have higher operational training.³⁴

Mentioned causes for Red Army failures in 1941 required contextualization and explanations, while attention also needed to be devoted to what variables ensured the

³² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 29, l. 41-42.

³³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 67a, l. 35.

³⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 391, l. 314. Rodion Iakovlevich Malinovskii, a Marshal of the Soviet Union and Minister of Defense (appointed in October 1957), joined the Russian army in 1914 as a private and served in the Russian Expeditionary Corps in France during the First World War. He joined the Red Army in 1919 and graduated from the Frunze Military Academy in 1930. He participated in the Spanish Civil War and taught at the Frunze Military Academy from 1939-1941. In March 1941 he was appointed commander of the 48th Rifle Corps. In August 1941 Malinovskii was assigned command of the 6th Army and from December 1941 until July 1942 commanded the Southern Front. He would continue to command various armies and army groups and finish the war as commander of the 2nd Ukrainian Front. He also participated in the war against Japan in the summer of 1945 as commander of the Transbaikalian Front. Vozhakin, 139-141.

Soviet state's survival. Otherwise, readers will remain "in the dark about all of our losses at the front" while discussions mainly addressed "the Party and government."³⁵

Generalizations were abundant while facts were missing, like the names of army commanders or important personalities that helped ensure the running of state institutions.³⁶ The evacuation of industry that followed the German invasion was an undertaking where officials needed to ensure factories, materials, workers, managers and their families were safely evacuated into the depths of the country. Often it appeared that these "comrades" who "were engaging with large questions particularly in the intense period" of 1941 and 1942 "when troops were withdrawing, and we had to deal with evacuations" did not merit any mention, similar to the lack of names and recognition that could be found in Stalin era texts on the war period.³⁷ Previously, Stalin seemingly dictated all aspects of the war effort, now it became a difficult task to separate and delineate what responsibility major Party, government and military figures carried.

A topic that received almost no attention but merited a mention in a letter by a commission member, historian Andrei Kuchkin, in a review of the second volume's manuscript, was women during the war. At the end of his November 1960 letter, Kuchkin commented that the war's history needed to discuss the role of women in the

³⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 75, l. 33.

³⁶ Generalizations could be found in reference to Stalin, other high ranking party members, who were never mentioned by name, and general descriptions of government "activities," which omitted detailed analysis. It appeared that aside from Stalin, and a few select personalities, the rest of the men and women involved in the war effort were mentioned in general and operated somewhere in the background avoiding any type of responsibility for their actions. Considering the controversial questions the second volume needed to address, such a treatment of these fundamental issues could not stand. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 28, l. 43.

³⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 74, l. 74, 75. This folder contained a discussion on the chapters of the second volume, dated 5 February 1959.

Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany,” a role that was seemingly “forgotten.” A discussion of their participation needed to be mentioned in all volumes (all volumes was underlined). Whether serving on the front lines or in the rear (in industry and on collective farms) their contribution to the war effort needed to be “strongly emphasized.”³⁸

Omissions, combined with contradictions, continued to devalue the work of the authors and editors, especially regarding inconsistencies with how the Germans were portrayed before the Red Army’s counteroffensive outside Moscow in the winter of 1941. Initially the Wehrmacht was described as “exhausted, bled white, powerless to carry out maneuvers” – undoubtedly this description played up the defensive capabilities of the Red Army. Yet, before the Red Army’s counteroffensive, German forces had a “one-and-a-half times superiority in manpower, more than twice as many artillery and mortars and a superiority in tanks as well.” The described exhaustion of the Wehrmacht did not line up with a superiority of its forces over those of the Red Army. “Diminishing the enemy’s strength and his combat capabilities before our counteroffensive” cheapened the Soviet victory. While the Red Army “inflicted great losses on the enemy” to “belittle the power of the enemy and his combat capabilities before our counterattack is wrong, this is not beneficial, since it reduces the significance of the enemy’s defeat...”³⁹ Both ideas played off Stalinist positions; one championed the idea of an “active defense” exhausting

³⁸ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 391, l. 385. Unfortunately, not one chapter or subsection was devoted to women, who played a significant role in the war, in the war in any of the published volumes. For a discussion of women’s contribution to the Soviet war effort, see Pennington, *Wings, Women, & War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat*; Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front*.

³⁹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 28, l. 57-58.

the Wehrmacht throughout their 1941 campaign while the other portrayed a Red Army counteroffensive outside Moscow devastating Germany's Operation *Typhoon*.

Unfortunately, one claim negated the other and the contradiction was readily apparently to some internal reviewers. Antonov reiterated the usual party line and claimed that victory was achieved thanks to the "organizing activity of our Party, which, despite the extremely difficult situation and the severe consequences of the initial period of the war, was able to overcome all difficulties and to organize a defeat of the enemy." Mints echoed this sentiment and seemed eager to criticize the manuscript while insisting that the portrayal of the counteroffensive outside Moscow seemed the "result of a miracle, and not the result of military art and the organizational activities of our Party."⁴⁰

While concentration on the Party might have been lacking, Stalin continued to have a dominant presence throughout the war's history. Speakers believed the supremacy of Stalin's cult was responsible for the weak representation of the role of the Party, Council of Ministers, and State Planning Commission, among other state organizations. This required immediate amendment. But not all criticism relied on a negative view of Stalin. Some believed that Stalin's role as leader was offered "one-sided coverage...with a main emphasis on the negative aspects and errors of his activities, especially" on the eve and throughout the opening phases of the war.⁴¹ Thus the presence of Stalin's cult was noticed by some but so was the new shift under Khrushchev, where Stalin was continually on the receiving end of accusations when it came to Red Army mistakes.

⁴⁰ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 29, l. 6, 10.

⁴¹ RGASPI, f. 72, op. 22, d. 916, l. 28, 40, 44.

Veteran Military Representatives Speak Out

Veteran Red Army commanders were also present in these meetings and voiced their thoughts about the importance and limits of the war's official history. The limited publications on the war by Soviet historians and authors was a problem for Admiral Sergei Gorshkov, a member of the drafting commission and a reviewer, who commented that "before the publication of this work, our book market was flooded by translated historical literature, which in every possible way distorted the history of the war, the role of the Soviet people, [and] the role of the armed forces. Our military publishing house very easily and widely published these translated materials." The appearance of the multi-volume history marked a major contribution "to the education and solidarity of views in the learning process of our people." This work was of "great importance" and was supposed to serve as a tool for the education of the youth, the General Staff and the officer corps in general.⁴² In fact, Pavel Rotmistrov, the famous commander of the 5th Guards Tank Army at Kursk, wanted military institutions to switch over to this history of the war for future studies.⁴³

⁴² Ibid., 41, 43; d. 586, l. 224. Admiral Sergei Georgievich Gorshkov, twice Hero of the Soviet Union, entered service the Soviet Navy in 1932, after finishing course work at the M. V. Frunze Military Naval School. In June 1940 he commanded a brigade of cruisers in the Black Sea and in October 1941 he was named commander of the Azov Military Flotilla. He served in various capacities throughout the war and ended the war as a squadron commander in the Black Sea Fleet, in August 1951 he was commander of the entire Black Sea Fleet and from January 1956 he was Deputy Minister of Defense of the USSR. Chubar'ian, 204-205.

⁴³ RGASPI, f. 72, op. 22, d. 916, l. 42-43. Pavel Alekseevich Rotmistrov entered the ranks of the Red Army in 1919. During the Civil War he participated in the campaign against Admiral A. Kolchak's forces in the Far East and the Soviet-Polish War in 1920. He finished numerous military schools and academies, including the M. V. Frunze Military Academy in 1931. In December 1940 was appointed the deputy commander of the 5th Tank Division and in May 1941 the chief of staff of the 3rd Mechanized Corps. He took part in the Moscow Counter-Offensive, the Battle of Stalingrad, and participated in the Battle of Kursk and Operation Bagration as the commander of the 5th Guards Tank Army. In August 1944 he was appointed Deputy Commander in Chief of Soviet Tank and Mechanized Forces. Vozhakin, 293-294.

While some saw immediate worth in the war's official history, others, like Sokolovskii, believed decisive military operations were portrayed weakly. There was general dissatisfaction in how the Red Army's victory was being portrayed. It was as if Germany's defeat was accomplished "without a rudder or sails," lacking any concrete descriptions of leadership, and such a portrayal was deemed "unnatural" and needed to be corrected.⁴⁴ Sokolovskii insisted that the second volume "contains a large number of significant deficiencies, both factual and editorial, reducing the informative research value of [this] labor."⁴⁵ Simultaneously, Gorshkov claimed that while this was a "major, good, [and] useful work" it still somehow "downplayed" the "importance" of the war "for the country, its prestige, for our people, [and the] training of military personnel and civilians." There was a distinct lack of development when it came to "a number of operational and strategic issues" and a reinforcement of these subjects with "essential" illustrations from the war was needed. Examples were also lacking when it came to failed operations. One speaker mentioned that "it is always necessary to show what our mistakes were. Did we at least take apart one operation that was unfavorable to us?" Often Red Army commanders and soldiers developed military knowledge in the "midst of battles" and "it is necessary to show this, so that from bitter experience this will become a learning [experience] for youth, and for ourselves." Addressing such inadequacies "will be how we train our personnel, especially our young cadres." Unfortunately, this reflective suggestion was followed up with the comment that authors "should not exaggerate the flaws. Of course, this work does not avoid shortcomings, but

⁴⁴ Ibid., 41.

⁴⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 391, l. 371.

one should not exaggerate them, we should not belittle the scholarly value of this labor.”⁴⁶ Consequently, the final product in the form of the six-volume history of the war continued to regularly omit or mask defeats as “heroic” defensive operations.

Not only did failed operations need to be mentioned and highlighted but so did the officers who were responsible and needlessly wasted their soldier’s lives. Generals Pavel Batov, Dmitrii Kozlov and STAVKA representative Lev Mekhlis escaped any criticism for their roles in the many casualties sustained during the loss of Kerch, the evacuation of which was described as “being carried out without losses.”⁴⁷ There was general agreement that descriptions and presentations of both high ranking and lower level commanders was lacking. It was argued that “we are often left with an outline that is separated from the people.” The result was a featureless mass, which “must not be faceless,” rather than a Red Army full of heroic commanders. To offset this deficiency, the commission wanted to include “literary portraits of marshals, to show their creative signature” throughout the history of the war.⁴⁸ However, some commanders, like Malinovskii, received what appeared to be preferential treatment from the editorial board as his mistakes were omitted, undoubtedly due to his relationship with Khrushchev and position as Commissar of Defense in the 1960s.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ RGASPI, f. 72, op. 22, d. 916, l. 40, 43, 44, 49.

⁴⁷ Batov specifically was criticized for suffering many casualties at Kerch. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 586, l. 220-221; d. 391, l. 351-352. The published second volume did not mention that the evacuation of Kerch was carried out without losses. Fokin et al., 226.

⁴⁸ RGASPI, f. 72, op. 22, d. 916, l. 28, 40.

⁴⁹ The author of the letter that mentioned Malinovskii’s preferential treatment was Shapranov, a Guards Lieutenant Colonel, and, writing in February 1963, also wanted Beria’s role in the defense of the Caucasus to be highlighted, as he recalled that during Beria’s indictment one of the accusations was his interference in the command and control of troops in the Caucasus. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 396, l. 24.

Similar to Malinovskii, other personalities, like Zhukov, appeared to stand out. At one point Boltin needed to defend authors and editors against accusations that they were diminishing Zhukov's contributions. The controversy centered on Zhukov's role in the defense of Leningrad in 1941 and the offensive around Stalingrad in 1942. Stalin ordered Zhukov to take over for Voroshilov in Leningrad in September 1941. But Zhukov's presence in Leningrad was limited and the authors believed that meant he could not have played a "crucial role" in the defense of the city, while others opposed this conclusion. Opposition to a more objective look at Zhukov's career could have been influenced by wartime propaganda and Zhukov's glorification during the war or possibly a backlash against Khrushchev's sidelining of Zhukov after he was no longer useful to the new premier – or a combination of both. Zhukov's role was also diminished when it came to the operations around Stalingrad as Zhukov was not directly responsible for the supervision of the fighting in and around the city but only served as a STAVKA representative. Here Boltin could be seen fighting against the narrative that was crafted during the war itself and ingrained in Soviet minds in regards to the role played by Zhukov. Boltin went as far as to claim that Zhukov's role in the war was being exaggerated, rather than objectively analyzed, and vehemently denied any type of "silence" where Zhukov was concerned.⁵⁰ Consequently, the commission was attempting to walk a fine line that illustrated the greatness of the Red Army, including its soldiers, political officers, and commanding generals, while trying to ascertain to what degree the lessons developed attempting to achieve victory could be described – which meant dealing with failed battles and campaigns.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 123-124. Letter by E. Boltin to Fedor Anisimov, dated 20 October 1961.

Combined with the above limitations there was a continued lack of attention and figures when it came to Red Army losses, which greatly undermined the final product. Without adequate discussions of casualties, Soviet officers had to rely on Western sources which were considered “falsified,” thus creating what commission members believed was a skewed view of the war’s history and Red Army progress.⁵¹ While enemy losses were provided, Red Army casualties were often missing or rarely offered, which “could undermine the reader’s trust in the contents of the volume” as well as subvert the true nature of the war and the heroic descriptions of the Soviet war effort. As an example, it was purported that the Germans lost more than two thousand planes and 463 tanks in the battle for Stalingrad, yet losses for the Red Army went untallied. Similarly, the manuscript claimed that the summer campaign in 1942 cost the Germans over one million casualties among soldiers and officers, yet no equivalent information was offered for the Red Army. Although some might have wanted to avoid raising questions about the losses suffered by Soviet forces, others argued that the world should know the “huge losses the Soviet people suffered, which were not comparable to the casualties of the allies and yet our people persevered and defeated the enemy.”⁵² If under Stalin casualties were kept a national secret, under Khrushchev general numbers were utilized as a reason for the Soviet presence in Eastern Europe and a propaganda tool to warn future enemies of what the Party, army and population were able to overcome.⁵³

⁵¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 586, l. 221, 224.

⁵² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 391, l. 382.

⁵³ Hopf, 199-211, 214.

Minosian feared the general reader would think they were being taken for a “fool” when presented with statements such as “killed in battle, wounded, encircled and then captured, we lost several times more than the German army.” No concrete figures were offered for the Soviet side while “absolute” numbers were presented for German casualties. The same applied to recorded casualties throughout all the volumes as mention was made of German losses but comparable Soviet data was absent. Fokin responded that this was done “as ordered,” although on whose orders was never specified. Minosian wanted to reach a certain “point of view” that the reader could agree or disagree with on their own, but in order to reach that point figures and statistics were required. Western European military literature was used as an example. It was “replete with dozens of figures” when it came to the Second World War, without similar statistics provided by Soviet sources to either confirm or deny Western publications, questions would continue to plague Soviet assertions. With silence and omission, the default conclusion would be that Western European figures were recognized and not denied. Minosian wanted to avoid putting the reader in a position where they were required to “guess” what the correct version of the war was. Western figures were “clearly falsified” since they provided “astronomical” numbers when it came to Soviet military casualties. More genuine numbers needed to be offered. When looking at Soviet figures “they convey a strong impression but they are several times fewer than those presented by German falsifiers of history. Here we need to think about how to present these losses, otherwise we will not be able to explain to our people why after 1 July 1941 the balance of power changed in the German favor.”⁵⁴

⁵⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 75, l. 19-20, 45.

A lack of casualty figures meant a vital explanation for poor Red Army performances during specific counteroffensives was missing. Without mentioning Soviet losses as a result of retreats and encirclements, including failed counterattacks, the weakened condition of units was omitted from analysis thus contributing to an incomplete understanding of why Soviet formations at times performed so poorly. Even a successful counteroffensive, like that outside Moscow, needed to be described with the “serious shortcomings” that Soviet forces experienced in order to fully understand “the reasons for why the assignment to defeat the main forces of Army Group ‘Center’ were not fully achieved and the operation was not completed.”⁵⁵

Furthermore, authors were taken to task for “exaggerating the merits of the enemy” which only led to the “denial or denigration” of the Red Army’s “strength and efforts” throughout the war. Where information was presented about the arrival of new units on the field of battle there was no mentioning of “their actual order of battle, armaments, material provisions...the timing and the process of concentrating,” or the often unfavorable conditions these units encountered when entering combat.⁵⁶ In some respects it could be argued that simply listing the number of divisions and armies transferred to the front was a reliance on the abilities of the Stalinist state to create large numbers of units through its organizational abilities and, in theory, be able to equip them thanks to Stalin’s industrialization policies. But simply mentioning the transfer of units left out much of the context of how quickly they were created and trained, in what

⁵⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 392, l. 11.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

condition they arrived, to what extent they were equipped, against whom they were employed, and what results were achieved.

The Navy and Air Force Critique

Some of the most vehement criticism toward the war's history came from representatives of the navy and air force, who accused authors and editors of being unable to clearly explain how the navy, air force and air defense forces contributed to the country's victory.⁵⁷ The majority of the Red Army was composed of land forces, and the war's history clearly reflected that fact. Numerous commission members spoke up about this lack of attention to other branches, culminating in the comment that the lack of information on the air force "is very upsetting on behalf of our pilots."⁵⁸ Similarly, the actions of the navy were "underestimated." Aside from a general lack of analysis when it came to the navy, there were "a lot of errors" and a need to clearly present the results and "outcome of the fighting the navy participated in."⁵⁹ There were entire chapters devoted to both the navy and air force when the volumes were finally published, but they were hardly adequate.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 51, l. 38; d. 67a, l. 18; d. 585, l. 18-19.

⁵⁸ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 69, l. 7, 69-70. This folder contained a meeting from 23 December 1958 on the first draft of the second volume.

⁵⁹ A Vice-Admiral argued that while the Black Sea Fleet was "adequately highlighted," "the Northern and Baltic fleets were not highlighted at all" and others observed that defensive operations around the Volga and the Caspian Sea were missing. RGASPI, f. 72, op. 22, d. 28, l. 25; d. 916, l. 43; d. 586, l. 222, 224.

⁶⁰ For instance, the third volume featured a twenty-three page chapter entitled "The Struggle for Aerial Supremacy" and was followed up by a chapter on naval actions, twenty-two pages in length, entitled "Military Actions of the Soviet Navy." Two additional chapters on naval operations could be found in the fourth volume and fifth volumes, they were fourteen and twenty-five pages long, respectively. Thus the air force was heavily underrepresented throughout the official history of the war.

The navy held a high opinion of its actions on the eve of the war thanks to the previously mentioned order, issued on 19 June, which increased the combat readiness of the fleet, resulting in a better overall performance compared to the army and air force. Unfortunately, there was no mention about the navy's participation in the defense of the Volga and little to nothing was mentioned about submarines and their impact on the war's course. Naval representatives further argued that the navy helped sustain the defense of Odessa and Sevastopol for as long as it lasted – one naval commander claimed that “it should be noted that the army units defending Sevastopol contained up to 60-70% sailors.” This could not be “ignored, because this will be the duty of the fleet in the future.”⁶¹ Similar to the arguments used by commanders of land forces – that battles in 1941 delayed the German advance on Moscow – so it was argued that the Black Sea Fleet's efforts at Odessa and Sevastopol ensured that the enemy was delayed in its attack on Sukhumi, which in turn meant that the Wehrmacht could “not develop his operations against the Northern Caucasus trying to breakthrough to the Caspian Sea.” In some respects the fleet represented the essence of what Stalin and Soviet commanders tried to instill into the Red Army in 1941 and 1942, which was to stand to the death. Since the fleet had “nowhere to go, it stayed to the death, it was its permanent course of action, at a time when other forces could maneuver.”⁶²

⁶¹ Additionally, the role of anti-aircraft artillery was not highlighted well enough, especially since not only were planes being brought down by their guns but some “70%...fought on the ground supporting the infantry” while fighting to the “last shell.” RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 586, l. 221, 222, 223.

⁶² Ibid., 220-221.

Admiral Filipp Oktiabr'skii touched on the inadequate and erroneous presentation of the defense and evacuation of Odessa.⁶³ Although he pointed to the inevitable situation the Red Army found itself in, Oktiabr'skii never said how futile the Red Army's actions were, cloaking his disappointment with the inability of STAVKA and the Odessa Fortified Region to see the reality of what was happening on the ground. Furthermore, in agreement with others, he argued that the navy played a leading role in defensive operations, exclaiming that “during the entire 8-month defense of the main naval base [Sevastopol] the fleet played the major role, while the army helped in the defense. The main strike force of the entire defense was the ship, shore, and anti-aircraft artillery and the fleet's aviation.”⁶⁴

The coverage of Odessa and Sevastopol was partly contested as some thought the latter did not receive enough attention. This could be explained by the fact that the defense of Odessa was emphasized as it was a city never truly defeated but given up by Soviet forces due to the progress of German troops along the rest of the front which left the city cutoff from other Red Army formations, while Sevastopol was eventually lost

⁶³ Filipp Sergeevich Oktiabr'skii joined the fleet in 1918, served in various capacities. He attended the Frunze Naval School in 1928. In 1938 he commanded the Amur flotilla and from March 1939 commanded the Black Sea Fleet. Most famously he participated in the defense of Odessa and Sevastopol in 1941 and 1942. Zolotarev, *Deistvuiushchaia armii*, 369-371. The second volume discussed how a “commission” decided on the need for an evacuation from the city, but the commission only fulfilled orders that were already assigned and was not the originator of any orders for the city's evacuation. When Oktiabr'skii requested to evacuate Odessa, he was twice denied by the Military Council of the Odessa Fortified Region nor did his requests to STAVKA result in a favorable response. Although the admiral claimed that the request for evacuation had nothing to do with the Red Army's inability to hold the city he also mentioned that there was the feeling that the Crimea could not be held, even with Odessa's garrison being evacuated to reinforce the forces holding Crimea and Sevastopol. The real reason he gave for wanting Odessa evacuated was because he, along with his staff, realized the danger of Odessa being permanently cut off from the “mainland” and wanted to avoid the loss of the entire Odessa garrison, which would have been the inevitable final outcome of continued resistance. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 391, l. 401-402.

⁶⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 391, l. 408.

with the majority of its garrison.⁶⁵ In the second volume, a chapter subsection was entitled “Battle for Ukraine. The Heroic Defense of Odessa” while Sevastopol was featured in broader discussions about defensive operations in the Crimea and Kerch. In general, the comments from naval representatives strongly attest to the fact that the navy was portrayed as playing a secondary role in the war and was continually treated as a subordinate character in the war’s history. Although the Red Army’s land forces did play the central role in the war effort against the Wehrmacht, from the above comments it is apparent that even when the navy did play a decisive role in specific battles, it was still secondary to the army. A similar situation developed when it came to the air force.

Hero of the Soviet Union and Marshal of Aviation, Sergei Rudenko, spoke on behalf of the air force.⁶⁶ He was critical of the lavish praise hoisted on the Luftwaffe to the detriment of the Soviet Air Force, which he viewed as the “main drawback of the second volume.” Specifically, “the unrestrained praise of German aircraft” reinforced a narrative that portrayed the Red Army’s unenviable position in the summer of 1941 as “mainly due to the actions of the German Air Force...the material itself leads to the conclusion” that the Luftwaffe “had total supremacy in the air, the German air force bombed everyone and everything. If not for this situation, front commanders would have fought perfectly and would not have given up to the enemy so much territory. Such an approach is not objective and does not correspond to the historical truth.” As it stood, the

⁶⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 586, l. 220-221.

⁶⁶ Sergei Ignatevich Rudenko joined the Red Army in 1923 and became a member of the Communist Party in 1928. He attended the Military Air Force Academy in 1932 and commanded various air formations until in 1941 he was given command of an air force division. During the war he commanded air force divisions and armies, he finished the war in command of the 16th Air Army, which he commanded from the Battle of Stalingrad until the Battle of Berlin. Chubar’ian, 475.

history of the war's initial period did little more than blame German aviation for Soviet mistakes while avoiding and masking the true reasons for the Red Army's failure. He insisted that the portrayal of German air superiority needed more concrete factual material as too often "it is simply stated: 'the German air force held sway throughout, constantly bombing,' but no data is provided on losses caused by our troops to the enemy air force." At the very least, insisted Rudenko, the war's history could discuss which raids German aviation carried out and point to the casualties sustained, human and material.⁶⁷

Rudenko highlighted the lack of specific figures offered for either German air supremacy, Soviet losses, or German losses in the air due to Soviet actions – all of which would have undoubtedly cast the Soviet Air Force and Red Army in a bad light. There was an overreliance on discussing advantages enjoyed by the Luftwaffe while writing off Soviet defeats and failures under the umbrella of German air superiority. Rudenko commented that some 3,000 aircraft operated along the entirety of the Eastern Front against land, sea, and air forces, and, considering the size of the frontline, it was difficult to imagine the Luftwaffe gaining aerial supremacy over every kilometer of the front. "And to say that...German aviation broke our army – this looks wrong and not by chance is the data not presented. If given, this data could debunk the artificial aura created around Fascist aviation, which in actuality was not that strong nor did it do so much." Rudenko pointed out that in the future "air strikes will be immeasurably stronger than in 1941, and it is necessary to speak freely about it in order to avoid the appearance of panic" and "fear of aviation," which he himself witnessed when two German

⁶⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 28, l. 27.

Messerschmitt appeared and forced an “entire division...to ground.”⁶⁸ If figures could not be provided for every operation, then they should be mentioned “for both sides at least on the most important directions.” Otherwise, discussions about the “superiority” of either side had no basis in reality. Showing how Soviet forces were outnumbered “will be to our advantage, and then we can say that in a certain period of time, in a certain location the Germans had so many airplanes fighting, and we had this many.”⁶⁹

Rudenko was also concerned with the “excited talk” of the enemy’s mistakes he found within the pages of the manuscript. He did not want attention drawn to such matters and thought they should be omitted from “our circle” as it “detracts from our successes and diminishes” Soviet opposition to the Wehrmacht. Descriptions of German tactical and strategic miscalculations, allowing Soviet forces to hold off enemy advances, did a disservice to Red Army accomplishments and to “promote” such a portrayal of events did not “benefit” the Soviet Union.⁷⁰

Rudenko accused the third volume of containing a large gap when it came to “specific characteristics of air operations” that would showcase “where, when and what specific assistance the air force provided to [ground] forces and how their aid affected the progress and results of individual battles, operations and in general the period of the war under observation.” Rather, the material that was included dealt with “platitudes” and

⁶⁸ Ibid., 28, 29.

⁶⁹ In general, figures presented were not nuanced enough since simply counting divisions or armies gave a skewed view as in the initial period of war Soviet forces, unlike German, were not mobilized to the same extent. Thus, a ratio of “arms and men” was preferred over that of saying a Soviet “army” was fighting against a German “division.” Otherwise it might appear that German and other western historians who portrayed the Red Army as outnumbering its opponents and still failing to achieve anything of worth were correct. Ibid., 33; d. 29, l. 21; d. 73, l. 10.

⁷⁰ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 28, l. 35.

“general non-descriptive phrases” such as “struck a powerful blow” and “successfully completed its air blockade.” Such a contribution to discussions of the role played by the air force was said to be a “product of the author’s low awareness of aviation matters,” which was a result of archival materials from the headquarters of all-arms armies containing limited information on the participation of the air force throughout the war. Consequently, “authors clearly show little interest” in analyzing and presenting a more in-depth and contextualized understanding of the role played by the air force.⁷¹

Others were in agreement and insisted that German claims of achieving air supremacy in 2-3 days by destroying the Soviet Air Force on the ground was purely an invention of “German propaganda,” which “penetrated” not only the Western European narrative of the war but could be found “on the pages of our press” as well. Soviet pilots, it was argued, retained a “wonderful,” “political-moral” factor even though Soviet aircraft were “four years older when compared to the Germans” thus putting them at a disadvantage – an argument that echoed the Stalinist narrative.⁷² The Soviet Air Force’s doctrine was challenged, somewhat objectively, and the Luftwaffe was claimed to have been “better led.” While Soviet air assets were spread out the Germans “acted with a fist... We separated our huge number of aircraft between multiple all arms armies” thus

⁷¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 585, l. 18-19.

⁷² A minor debate ensued around the general number of German planes utilized against the Soviet Union in 1941 and the reasons for the losses suffered by the Soviet Air Force. Lack of knowledge about the war, and the enemy, led some to find it hard to believe that only 3-4,000 German aircraft (a “dubious figure”) were utilized on the Eastern Front as the German production figures at the commission’s disposal showed that in 1940 10,250 combat aircraft were produced and in 1941, 12,000. Arguments were also evident over tank figures. A figure of 21,000 tanks for the Soviet Union was mentioned and immediately rebuffed as including tanks that were in need of major repairs, therefore not wholly representative of the Red Army’s tank park. From available information some 13,000 required one form or another of repair. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 29, l. 30, 33, 34.

precluding the ability to achieve air superiority where it was needed. German victories in the air were therefore the result of actions by concentrated numbers, while their opposition was taken apart piecemeal as it was sent to challenge German fliers in the skies with inadequate numbers or cover. “This is the reason,” it was argued, “for the military success of the Germans in the air. This success was not because the Germans had a numerical advantage and not because they destroyed thousands of our aircraft on the ground. The secret of their success was the centralized control of their aviation, at a time when the management of our aircraft was de-centralized.”⁷³

This assessment reiterated where the fault for the war effort could be found. If the “management” of the Soviet Air Force was centralized then those higher up the chain of command, the General Staff and Stalin, were at fault, yet in de-centralizing control over aircraft it was once again Stalin and the General Staff that were held responsible. Unfortunately, such a critical appraisal of the Soviet Union’s air force and abilities against the German Luftwaffe could not be presented in the same form on paper. Immediately after stating the above it was claimed that “we cannot write in this work that we had a badly managed air force compared to what the Germans had. We always said that our Soviet military knowledge was superior to the Germans, and yet suddenly in regards to such a crucial issue as the management of our aviation we state that we were greatly inferior to the Germans in this respect.”⁷⁴

Such a response, however, went against the objectivity and transparency Rudenko clamored for. For him, one of the most important outcomes of the war’s history was to

⁷³ Ibid., 35-36.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 36.

understand what issues might be encountered in a future war. He believed Red Army troops were not trained well enough in 1941 and wanted to offset that deficiency when it came to future conflicts. Consequently, he claimed that “substituting an evidence-based evaluation of the role of German-Fascist aviation are unfounded cries about her power [that] result in fear of aviation, which was one of the biggest vulnerabilities in the training of our troops in those days. To silence this is unacceptable not only from the point of view of objectivity, but also in terms of educating our troops and the population.”⁷⁵ It was evident that Rudenko understood the United States had a vast fleet it could put in the air, which would put to shame the Luftwaffe’s capabilities in 1941. Simultaneously, however, it could also be argued that Rudenko was trying to salvage the reputation of the Soviet Air Force as well as utilize a Stalinist narrative that never gave credit to the Luftwaffe for its accomplishments.

Finally, Rudenko was adamant that the achievements of the Soviet Air Force were being omitted from the history of the war. He wanted examples to be “shown of organized resistance to German aviation, the impact of such measures like camouflage, night operations, [and] the role of anti-aircraft defenses.” Submitted manuscripts, unfortunately, lacked any such illustrations. “In general, the second volume consists of an exaggerated assessment of the role of German-Fascist aviation which is not objective and politically harmful.” In contrast, there was nothing mentioned “about the actions of Soviet aviation against the enemy’s forces on the field of battle and its targets in the rear. Not one word is said about ground attack aircraft. If we describe the actions of enemy aviation and are silent about the actions of our own air force, then we can come to the

⁷⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 28, l. 29, 30.

conclusion that our aviation was not operational.” Here Rudenko circled back to his original argument, lacking adequate contextualization of the actions of the Soviet Air Force meant readers will inevitably come to the conclusion that “the air force is responsible for our miscalculations in 1941.”⁷⁶

The lack of lessons to be drawn from actions on the ground and in the air, especially in 1941, when admittedly Soviet “military art was not at a high level,” was a disservice to the Soviet state. All too often, however, authors were afraid of addressing the problem head-on or simply generalized as with the statement that “the huge losses [we sustained] were not worth the successes we achieved.” Such frank yet concise admissions, as it turned out, had no place in a work that was supposed to analyze and explain the situation faced by the Red Army. Worse, the failure to describe and examine failed operations continued to limit the lessons that were supposed to be derived from previous experiences.⁷⁷

Heroism in the War

While the navy and air force might have been upset about being overlooked, descriptions of the land forces also came in for criticisms, including discussions of frontline heroism. There was a lack of “facts about [the] heroism of communists at the front.” An incident from August of 1941 was presented, as an example, when “the Party Central Commission of Ukraine for the defense of Gomel allocated a battalion of communists from the Donbass to the 21st Army. This battalion on the outskirts of Gomel

⁷⁶ Ibid., 31, 32.

⁷⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 73, l. 20-21.

was able to delay the enemy for 8 days, fighting heroically. Almost all of them were killed and only withdrew when they were ordered by their commanders to leave this line [of defense].” Such selfless and heroic events needed to be “underlined” and once again pointed to the utilization of Stalinist era concepts and notions about what defined “heroism.”⁷⁸

Researchers at the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR were adamant that the heroism of soldiers, partisans and underground fighters in the enemy rear were insufficiently highlighted. Although authors provided entire lists of distinguished soldiers and officers, the “substance of their exploits” was missing, a weakness noticed by other reviewers as well. There was a “serious shortcoming” found in the chapters devoted to military actions, especially in the initial period of the war. In the section on the Red Army’s retreat in the summer of 1941, ground troops somehow merited “no examples of heroism,” only heroic acts by pilots in the Baltics and outside Leningrad were discussed.⁷⁹ Similarly, heroic feats were missing on the sections that dealt with the battles of Smolensk, Kiev and Odessa. There was no mention of the creation and implementation of the people’s militia units and destruction battalions although it was “known that they both made their contribution in the struggle against the enemy.”⁸⁰

⁷⁸ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 28, l. 41-42.

⁷⁹ Gastello merited mention, but overall there were too few examples utilized to support the idea of “massive heroism” that was continuously being purported. Fokin et al., 33; RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 69, l. 34-35.

⁸⁰ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 391, l. 340; d. 390, l. 187-188.

Authors and editors were reminded that the history of the war needed “to explain to the general reader who has not finished the Military Academy why things were done as they were and not otherwise.”⁸¹ Others concurred that the average reader “who is not familiar with the course of the events in that period, the summer of 1941, will have a hard time understanding the situation from this material.” After the war’s beginning, the Red Army was portrayed as enduring “enormous difficulties” in a “disastrous” situation while Soviet soldiers exhibited “amazing massive heroism” that was “not evident anywhere else.”⁸²

Heroic descriptions that were incorporated into the narrative appeared implausible to commission members. The exploits of the commander of the 85th Tank Regiment, Lt. Colonel Alabushev, were described: He “covered the retreat of his regiment with one tank, in which he was located by himself, for five hours” and supposedly “repulsed” some 20 enemy tanks. However, questions arose of what a regimental commander was doing acting as a rearguard for his unit, resisting enemy attacks for hours, and who assumed command of the regiment in his place. It was concluded that “it is not possible that he did this.” Another example was Senior Lieutenant Semiachko, who held back “a large enemy force” and “forced a column of 30 Fascist tanks to flee, destroying 8, while hooking one up with a cable and pulling it to his regiment.” The commission’s reaction was that “such cases did not happen” – when published, the official history of the war did not include either of these “heroic” actions. Instead, it was believed “that our work

⁸¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 68, l. 7. This folder contained a meeting from 18 December 1958 on the first version of the second volume.

⁸² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 69, l. 34-35.

would be enriched with a larger number of [examples] of modest heroism.” Examples, it was suggested, should include mention of the 28 Panfilovtsy, “this is mass heroism, on the approaches to Moscow – they alone defended our land and delayed a large number of the enemy.”⁸³ Accordingly, the commission would have substituted one fantastical tale with another dating from the Stalinist narrative of the war – a heroic feat already part of the collective memory of the war that most believed and would not question.

Interestingly, when published, the second volume admitted in a footnote that five of the 28 Panfilovtsy heroes remained alive. This admission was somewhat forced as it was linked to the testimony provided by one of the survivors which unsurprisingly continued to support the rest of the official myth, portraying the stance of Panfilov’s men as heroic with the destruction of eighteen German tanks and their inability to advance against staunch Red Army resistance to the death, although not for all, as it turned out.⁸⁴

Stories of heroism seemed to ignite regular debate among commission members, or at the very least gave them reasons for criticism. Pospelov was unhappy with the description offered of the heroic feat of Zoia Kosmodem’ianskaia, comparing it to a “protocol” with its “dry” description of events and people. Leaning on literature produced during the war, he advocated including “excerpts from documents published in *Pravda*. [Like] Lidov’s wonderful literary, political and artistic article ‘Tania’ with Strunnikov’s photo – Zoia Kosmodem’ianskaia with a rope around her neck as soon as

⁸³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 28, l. 54-55.

⁸⁴ Fokin et al., 261. The source quoted by the official history for the survival of five Panfilovtsy was *Semirechenskaia pravda*, May 9, 1959.

she was removed from the gallows.” For Pospelov, it was “necessary to remember these documents” as they “enrich[ed] the work” and he advocated for their inclusion.⁸⁵

Other commentators wanted an expansion of the list of heroes as the general reader was already familiar with figures like the Panfilovtsy, Mares’ev, and Kosmodem’ianskaia. “There are plenty of partisans who did even more than” Kosmodem’ianskaia – this was perhaps a criticism of the selective process used to highlight martyrs during the war’s initial period – and it was “necessary” to describe the numerous examples of heroism that were witnessed during the war as they were not “accidental” nor “isolated phenomenon.” The propaganda around Mares’ev concentrated not only on his struggle to get back to Soviet lines but also the fact that he received prosthetics and once more took up the fight with the enemy in the air. But, “did we only have one Mares’ev? The facts show that we did not have just one Mares’ev. We need to show more heroes, who performed no less than the well-known heroes, they should not be forgotten.” Similarly, there was more than one Matrosov, who threw his body on an enemy embrasure.⁸⁶ “It was repeated by Naderin before [Matrosov]. Even before on the Volkhov Front by Gerasimenko and many, many others.” Although the war’s history did not need to reveal all the circumstances behind each heroic achievement, as many

⁸⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 30, l. 43.

⁸⁶ Aleksandr Matrosov, a soldier who threw his body over a German machine gun embrasure to ensure the advance of his comrades, came to wide acclaim for his selfless action. Soldiers who performed the same feat as Matrosov were publicized in national or local newspapers and sometimes receive awards for their actions, but they only became local rather than national symbols. Units and soldiers had their own “Matrosov,” like Stakhanov and his imitators, an emulation inspired by the “originator” and his example. As attested to by veteran of the Red Army, Boris Gorbachevsky: “What does the current generation know about the 400 soldiers who repeated Aleksandr Matrosov’s sacrifice? Among them was Sergeant Ivan Alekseev of the 220th Rifle Division,” whom Gorbachevsky personally knew. Gorbachevsky, ix. As many as 83 men threw themselves on enemy embrasures before Matrosov, yet they have come under his shadow and are known under the term “Matrosovtsi.” In all, hundreds performed this feat, ranging from 212 to 470. Polianovskii, “Dva kapitana”; Seniavskaia, 86.

examples as possible needed to be mentioned since it was deemed necessary to show “new heroes” to reveal “new names” and “new feats.”⁸⁷

The heroic nature of the Soviet rear also came up for discussion. Publications that appeared in the USSR describing a Soviet worker who “did not leave his work bench for 48 hours, fulfilling the plan by 300 or 600 percent” were not enough. Fokin commented that, “This is how the entire working class acted...this is not an example of heroism.” Not even mentioning how soldiers sacrificed themselves by covering enemy embrasures with their bodies was enough anymore. Individual heroic deeds were the norm, they no longer evoked the same sense of achievement from the public. The bravery and patriotism of the masses, however, still needed to be addressed. They needed to come in all forms and sizes, including “not only rank and file heroes – peasants, soldiers, but also commanders, who organized the work on the front and in the rear.”⁸⁸ As it turned out, however, revelations about the gallant actions of soldiers within the war’s history were minimal, while the “courage” and “heroism shown by commanders of formations who undertook decisions during difficult battle conditions” were lost amid the fog of lists of operations, armies and divisions. Discussing the actions of courageous and competent commanders could create a tool to use against “bourgeois historiography” that would show “that we had intelligent command members, who in difficult conditions made smart decisions, correct decisions...”⁸⁹ Here it appeared that there was a move away from the

⁸⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 68, l. 8, 12; d. 69, l. 34-35.

⁸⁸ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 60, l. 10, 11.

⁸⁹ “Bourgeois historiography” undoubtedly referred to Western descriptions of the Red Army’s performance on the Eastern Front, but more than likely they rested first and foremost with German accounts as that was what most “Western” accounts relied on for decades after the war. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 69, l. 54.

self-sacrificial narrative of the war years to a desire to showcase the knowledge, intelligence, and ingenuity of lower-level officers in how they waged war as an example for future military cadres. There were plenty of examples of heroic soldiers and pilots, but the men who wielded them as a weapon were shadowy figures on a bloody canvas.

Thoroughly highlighting the heroic actions of Soviet citizens and soldiers meant, aside from putting the Party at the forefront, a discussion of “shortcomings...as well as mistakes and errors.” The Party needed to be shown as the force behind the mobilization and organization of all Soviet people, helping to “successfully overcome difficulties and mistakes.” The history of the war needed to have this “idea of the superiority of our Soviet governing system” permeated throughout and through this superiority would be showcased the unity of the front and rear, the Party and the people, as well as the ethnic unity to be found among the peoples of the Soviet state. For Fokin, “These are big questions of principle that must be reflected in each section, whether it is a section on the front or rear of the country. Within our work should be displayed the inclusivity of Soviet patriotism in all its forms.”⁹⁰ Describing the heroism of the Soviet war effort, and showcasing the unity achieved among the various nationalities, in effect served the purpose of drawing more attention to the Party and its leadership, which provided needed guidance and offered examples of heroism to be emulated by the population.

By the time of publication, the second volume regularly touted the heroic nature of Soviet resistance, usually in a general sense, as the official history commented that during the summer of 1941 there were “thousands of examples of mass heroism” among Red Army troops during the border battles. More specific mentions might include the

⁹⁰ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 60, l. 11.

defense of or battle over cities, like Odessa and Rostov, but usually naval or infantry units would be mentioned rather than soldiers or commanders.⁹¹ Even Zoia Kosmodem'ianskaia merited limited attention as the author's simply described her as fulfilling a "sacred oath" to her "homeland to fight against the invaders to the last breath, and she carried this oath, like a banner, to her heroic death."⁹²

Style, Language, Citation, and Analysis

Accounts of heroic achievements were not the only parts of the war's narrative that were described as "dry." A general critique of the writing style mentioned that the language used throughout the text was "dry, unemotional, not vivid," which was a "disadvantage for our publications" as the subject was of great interest to the reading public.⁹³ Descriptions of the battle for Stalingrad lacked examples of "heroic deeds of commanders and Red Army men" while the text was considered too bland to describe an event of "great importance...it should be spoken of more vividly, colorfully."⁹⁴ Lack of memoir literature was partly blamed for the narrative's blandness. Leshchinskii, a historian, considered it "a great sin for our discipline" that "memoir literature" was not being cultivated.⁹⁵ Unlike their German counterparts, the likes of Zhukov and Eremenko

⁹¹ Fokin et al., 46, 94, 116, 224.

⁹² Ibid., 121-122.

⁹³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 68, l. 5; d. 69, l. 69-70.

⁹⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 585, l. 39.

⁹⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 69, l. 69-70; d. 76, l. 5-7.

had yet to publish their memoirs, thus it was believed it was “easier” for the Germans to write their histories of the war.⁹⁶

Reviewers also believed the “terminology” was “muddled” and commented that, with respect to the tone of the published volumes, it was “better to solidly argue principled positions and [make] less declarations.”⁹⁷ Additionally, there were numerous “insufficiently critical” and “poor” phrases used throughout the text, including those that led to direct contradictions. For instance, the enemy was described as “exhausted,” “bled white,” or “fully depleted” and later in the volume they are once more advancing and achieving victories.⁹⁸ Another contradiction was found when “an excerpt is presented that... ‘our attacking infantry almost standing straight and without any losses was able to break through the enemy’s defenses’ ...and...after indicating that all of the enemy’s defenses were breached on all three fronts, all of a sudden it is claimed that... ‘all subsequent battles were of a no less fierce character’?!”⁹⁹ The contradictory nature of a “fierce battle” that sustained no losses was not lost on at least some readers.

⁹⁶ Unfortunately, while publications like memoirs would increase the source base with which to create a more in-depth narrative with vivid descriptions, Marshals, like Andrei Eremenko, published accounts that served their own interests first and foremost. Thus in one instance when the former commander of the 422nd Rifle Division, General I. Morozov, was asked to send comments on Eremenko’s memoirs, *Stalingrad* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1961), Morozov highlighted how Eremenko lauded some commanding generals while omitting the value and achievements of others (like Marshal of the Soviet Union Fedor Tolbukhin). He recommended Eremenko “show the truthful role of each army and division” and “show the fighting qualities of commanders and their formations” based on the victories they were able to achieve. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 396, l. 1, 16, 17.

⁹⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 586, l. 221, 222, 224. These were comments from a readers’ conference held at Sevastopol on October 25, 1962, dedicated to the second and third volumes.

⁹⁸ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 392, l. 9; d. 391, l. 383.

⁹⁹ Iu. P. Petrov et al., *Istoriia Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny Sovetskogo Soiuz, 1941-1945*, Vol. 3 (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel’stvo Ministerstva Oborony Soiuz, 1961), 103; RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 586, l. 205. Comments submitted by Lieutenant General Shtromberg on July 19, 1962 based on the published third volume. The letter’s author might be Al’bert Ivanovich Shtromberg, who served as chief of staff of the 6th Guards Tank Army during 1944-1945.

Fokin defended the work as one of “quality” but argued that the “dryness” encountered throughout was due to the authors being military historians and it was “our misfortune, that our military authors have often dealt with purely military books, with books on the art of war and these authors were interested in questions and problems within the art of war.” The multivolume history, however, was of a “different character” that military historians had yet to adjust to and this remained an inherent problem the commission needed to address. Given to a general reader in its present form the war’s history “will strain his thoughts, and he will be left with the impression that this is a military book, but we need to affect people’s minds and hearts.” Emotions needed to be inserted into these pages so as to leave a lasting impression. “That is our main goal and our challenge...we need to correctly squeeze out all that is possible, not only in the content but in the form of presentation, so that it is vivid, intelligible material, maybe even so that at times tears will appear, because these events are full of drama, because tens, hundreds of thousands of people died, often as a result of errors, and often deliberately sacrificing themselves so as to defend this or that boundary...I appeal to you...when you work on this material, think, so that the material is dripping blood, blood that was shed, then our goal will be achieved.”¹⁰⁰

Aside from content and style, the “scholarly” character of some volumes was further affected by the omission of needed citations.¹⁰¹ Others, however, were overburdened by footnotes and references, but they often led to secondary source material with the vast majority leaning on “Documents and Materials of the History of

¹⁰⁰ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 69, l. 71-72.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

the Great Patriotic War Department” – a general citation for any documentation that was at the commission’s disposal. This reference, it was argued, “does not disclose the origin, nature and location of the original storage of documentation” that was being utilized.¹⁰² Lack of evidence was regularly encountered throughout the volumes. While directives were mentioned and reproduced, the source material was not cited and this was “a weakness of all of our military chapters.” Even force correlations, when they were present, sometimes went without citations. Finally, even if citations were provided there was still a question in regards to the original source being listed since some information remained “secret” and its “nature” remained questionable.¹⁰³

Skurikhin, a commentator who was only listed by his last name, argued that the volume of general facts and figures that were presented – although seemingly never enough when it came to casualties sustained – often seemed to overpower the analytical voice of the authors themselves. Throughout several chapters “the author succumbs to the facts of the events which he has to write about, under the weight of fronts, armies, divisions, etc. As a result of the author being unable to cope with so much material he embarks on a path of simple descriptiveness, stringing together facts one after another without adequate generalizations, analysis, and conclusions.” Boltin even pointed out that one section was written as if it was “from the point of view of a newspaper pamphlet from today” as the author utilized the phrases “now, today” forgoing any disconnect between the war and the present. The figures and statistics that were provided presented an additional complication as they simply offered facts without adequate analysis. Thus

¹⁰² RGASPI, f. 71; op. 22; d. 391, l. 340, 341, 344.

¹⁰³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 74, l. 3, 72, 74.

authors acted as “informers” of details while no real conclusions were drawn from the information.¹⁰⁴ The manuscript lacked “depth” when it came to the balance of forces or the battle actions themselves. Authors were unable to showcase the real nature of the war. Rather, readers were presented with flashes of “divisional numbers, armies and that’s it.” It was “sad” that a history of the war featured “no war.”¹⁰⁵ Once more, without a guiding voice to direct where attention and concentration was needed, the only thing authors were capable of was to list units and figures, detailing the war through simple dates and facts that linked one event to another without any analysis or scrutiny.

Descriptions of orders issued were provided in support of the above, as when, for instance, a new defensive boundary was described as ordered to be built, no follow up or analysis was offered.¹⁰⁶ At times, there was no indication that defensive works were even built; “Maybe they only existed on paper, but in reality they did not start construction.”¹⁰⁷ Another complaint was directed at the descriptions of engagements. After an initial discussion of “the strengthening and building of defensive lines in the rear of active troops” an analysis of the ensuing fighting was offered with the end result that previously mentioned “boundaries” were lost but “not one word is said about...what state they were in, how were they used and whether they played a role” in defensive operations or were

¹⁰⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 68, l. 2-3, 12; d. 69, l. 15.

¹⁰⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 69, l. 39.

¹⁰⁶ There was no investigation for whether there was a need for said defensive boundaries to be built at a specific time and place, considering the conditions of the moment, or if their creation helped to slow down the German advance.

¹⁰⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 68, l. 3.

simply never utilized.¹⁰⁸ Similar deficiencies were found when discussing orders and directives – there was no examination regarding whether they were “correct or not.” The consequences of these orders needed to be revealed, followed by an evaluation, so that there was an “organic connection” between the chain of command and the results on the ground.¹⁰⁹ Otherwise, there was a continued lack of understanding whether the Red Army was functioning decisively and correctly and if orders that were issued and fulfilled should have been assigned in the first place, including what goals were achieved as opposed to what was expected.

There was a consistent disconnect between the information that was presented and an analysis that should have followed. In one instance a plan was presented as approved by Stalin, a citation to an archival source was included, but nothing more was ever said about the plan nor did the author “return to this plan again, [he] even forgot about it.” But the question arose, “why did they need such a plan?” Such a lack of analysis was deemed unworthy of an official publication. “This way of presenting material cannot be called scientific...Our publication should be scientific and popular by the character of its presentation and its substance must be based on strict conclusions and built on iron logic.”¹¹⁰ STAVKA orders were presented but some objectives proved unrealistic, yet no explanation was offered for why STAVKA assigned unreachable goals. “What was this – a mistake? And if this objective was actually assigned by STAVKA, we need to say on what basis was this assignment given.” Similar issues were evident with other state

¹⁰⁸ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 74, l. 74.

¹⁰⁹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 69, l. 54.

¹¹⁰ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 68, l. 4.

organizations, but specifics about how decisions were made or carried out were continually missing.¹¹¹

Presentations of Battles

A missing analysis of orders and battles translated into continued problems with descriptions and examinations of individual battles as “the implementation of operations was not shown.” Previously army headquarters could not disclose such information, but with the war more than a decade removed the opportunity to present such material was now available. It was purported that “we can more fully, historically and truthfully focus on strategic goals and expand the display of operational and strategic solutions to problems.”¹¹² “Articulating” the specific “features” of each battle gave the reader a needed context to understand why a battle was won or lost and helped in understanding the “negative” aspects of each confrontation with the enemy on its own merits. But such in-depth analysis was absent, especially from battles in 1941. Another limit was the predilection of authors to concentrate on polemical attacks. Too much attention was “being paid to bourgeois historians...instead of assessing the situation” as it developed in the summer and autumn of 1941.¹¹³ An objective assessment of the German invasion would have helped in attacking “bourgeois historiography,” as information indicating the

¹¹¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 73, l. 11.

¹¹² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 68, l. 6.

¹¹³ After a summation of the summer and autumn retreats the authors followed up with a discussion of the counteroffensive and again engaged with “bourgeois” literature that sought to portray the German defeat outside Moscow as a result of weather conditions. *Ibid.*, 9.

Red Army's unpreparedness on the eve of the war served as proof against the idea of a "preventive" war on the part of Soviet forces.¹¹⁴

Discussions centered on the "course of military operations" contained "no names, no heroics, [and] no people." Attention was drawn to the evacuation of Crimea, which listed "six names."¹¹⁵ In the end it was "unclear" who actually fought in the Crimea against the Germans. Providing the names of a German commander along with a few Soviet snipers and drivers made it "clear that the description is one-sided" and uninteresting for the general reader. "Narrative descriptions" needed to be "reduced" so that the heroic actions of "specific people" could shine through. "Positive" aspects, even of failed campaigns, needed to be presented as the "negative" could not stand as the sole representation of an entire operation – something positive needed to come out of each distinct campaign.¹¹⁶

Descriptions of the 1941 campaign were missing defining characteristics, nor was there pride in Red Army achievements. Absent was the first use of the Katiusha rocket system that came to epitomize the Soviet war effort and powerful artillery forces in propaganda reels.¹¹⁷ The presentation on the Battle of Smolensk, considered an important turning point in 1941, proved a disappointment. Although the chapter in question was entitled "The Battle of Smolensk" the actual city of Smolensk was

¹¹⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 75, l. 64-66.

¹¹⁵ Among them were the German commander Erich von Manstein, the famed female sniper, Liudmila Pavlichenko, and a driver, Kalt'penko.

¹¹⁶ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 74, l. 71, 72.

¹¹⁷ This was addressed and the published second volume discussed the "remarkable weapon" that was the Katiusha rocket system. Fokin et al., 66-67.

“somehow missing” in the midst of the coverage of the actions along the Smolensk direction. The city “disappeared during the many listed right, left flanks, the characteristics of the front’s fighting, etc.”¹¹⁸ Battles needed to be “approached from the point of view of a disclosure of its characteristics,” since every confrontation with the enemy was guided by particular circumstances and “occurs under certain conditions.” In this case, descriptions of heroic actions by individual soldiers and units were present but an “operational picture of the struggle for Smolensk is not given” – the heroism portrayed was certainly included to take attention away from the fact that an operational narrative was missing. The battle needed “to be shown clearly, convincingly, vividly, in all its developmental dramatic beauty.” Yet, when going through the material readers did “not feel the dynamic quality of the battle and there is not even a clearly expressed plan of battle.” Soon after, “the reader encounters conclusions.”¹¹⁹

In conjunction with Smolensk, which was turned into a pyrrhic victory for the Wehrmacht, additional Soviet operations during 1941 went either missing or were lacking in descriptions and analysis. Soviet advances around Dukhovshchina and El’nia were missing. Both were considered some of the first noteworthy rebuffs to the German advance in 1941. They might have achieved little in the long run, but as a morale boost they were undoubtedly significant. If the Battle of Smolensk was poorly presented, the defense of Odessa in Ukraine, one of the few successful defensive actions by the Red

¹¹⁸ This comment speaks to the ignorance of many about the actual events of the war since the Battle of Smolensk mainly took place outside of the city. Any type of propaganda discussing the formidable defense of Smolensk and heroic deeds in actuality served as a smokescreen for the inadequate activities of the Soviet administration and army command, which led to mass panic, disregard for personal responsibility, and resulted in the fall of Smolensk into German hands all too easily. Komarov, 167.

¹¹⁹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 68, l. 4; d. 69, l. 4.

Army against both Romanian and German forces, was absent with nothing “said about this heroic defense.” This criticism might have in part been addressed by the fact that the second volume, when published, had a chapter subsection devoted to actions in and around Odessa.¹²⁰ Another major Red Army victory, the retaking of Rostov, was “dryly described.” The first large population center to be liberated from the Germans by the Red Army lacked any context regarding the events surrounding its defense or the counteroffensive that led to its liberation. There was no description of how the Germans behaved themselves, what the population lived through, what Soviet soldiers found when the city was liberated or “what resonance was there within our country and abroad” after the retaking of Rostov. This was one of the first substantial defeats suffered by the Wehrmacht and Boltin pleaded with the commission that “we need to turn these facts into a living historical narrative, rather than description of protocols.”¹²¹

Covering one of the most significant events, the chapter entitled “Counteroffensive outside Moscow,” concentrated on the entirety of the Eastern Front, listing armies on both sides, describing their advances and defensive actions, while seemingly neglecting the situation outside Moscow itself. The Moscow counteroffensive consisted of numerous operations that were interconnected but it was pointed out that operations were covered individually and lacked any type of interaction or coherence in regards to the greater strategy or objective(s) that needed to be achieved, including cooperation between armies and fronts. Portrayals of the fighting not only obstructed the

¹²⁰ See Fokin et al., 96-118.

¹²¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 69, l. 5, 12, 13.

reader's understanding of the situation, but failed to accurately portray the progress made by Red Army forces outside Moscow.¹²²

This was one of the most “fundamental” questions in need of investigation as “to this day historians do not have documentation, which could sufficiently disclose and prove what constituted the idea behind the counteroffensive outside Moscow in December 1941, when and by whom was it planned, was there even a plan for a counteroffensive or did it develop of its own accord.” This claim could not stand as it was “impossible to depict the battle of Moscow as a result of accidental circumstances.”¹²³ Although directives existed, including notes, reference maps, and plans for “counteroffensive” operations by forces before Moscow, there was a continued lack of documentation.¹²⁴ Due to the lack of archival information and literature, there was no consensus on whether this counteroffensive was a result of local battles against the Germans transforming into a greater offensive due to events on the ground or whether the counteroffensive was pre-planned and carried out with pre-designated targets in mind.

In the earlier mentioned General Staff study of the Battle of Moscow, Stalin's abilities were emphasized first and foremost. They were stressed as being the reason why the German offensive was worn down before the gates of the capital, which, as a result of Stalin's ability to gather resources and reserves at needed point(s), led to an eventual counteroffensive at a decisive moment and resulted in a German defeat. Nowhere in the study were there references to initial plans that specifically spelled out how far the

¹²² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 73, l. 2-3, 7.

¹²³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 29, l. 10.

¹²⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 73, l. 23-24, 41.

offensive was to continue, where and when to halt, or what specific targets were to be met.¹²⁵ Leshchinskii pointed to Stalin's attitude toward written orders as a possible reason for the non-existence of documentation relating to the Moscow Counter-Offensive: "I know for a fact that when the central headquarters of the partisan movement presented a plan of its activities, Stalin wrote in the margins about one point...: 'This is necessary, but which idiot attached this to paper.'"¹²⁶ In effect, the silence that was evident around the war's history was so all encompassing that something as grandiose as the planning of the Moscow Counter-Offensive was contested territory as some were unsure of its origins. It was admitted that "it seems to us that some organizing principle from the STAVKA of the high command was evident" but "we cannot find documents in regards to this question." It was possible that veteran commanding officers could shed light on the situation and Fokin observed that "it is highly desirable and necessary for participants of these events to talk to us, so that they can give comprehensive information about what STAVKA and the fronts were doing."¹²⁷

The disappointing treatment of well-known operations meant those expecting new or original information to be forthcoming about the war were dissatisfied. Discussions touched on the unoriginality of the chapter covering the Battle of Moscow. Previous works already discussed this turning point and it was insisted that the authors of the chapter added nothing new, even though they were supposedly privy to the use of previously unavailable archival source material. A lack of original information on the

¹²⁵ Harrison, *The Battle of Moscow 1941-1942*.

¹²⁶ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 73, l. 37-38.

¹²⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 28, l. 16.

planning and progress of the Moscow Counter-Offensive meant those insisting it was conducted without an overall plan and that “the forces available were mismatched for the assignment they received” might be correct, thus lending credence to the idea that the counteroffensive was a result of conditions that were out of Soviet control. Without evidence to the contrary, there was little authors endorsing the idea that the offensive outside Moscow was unplanned should fear from the conclusions they drew.¹²⁸

The chapter covering the offensive outside the capital only discussed the “purely military” situation, including the “disposition of troops” and the “objectives” but omitted “preparations and the course of the offensive” as well as the “planning” stages, part of which were dictated by the activities, both defeats and victories, sustained and achieved by the Red Army in October and November of 1941.¹²⁹ Undoubtedly, the disastrous encirclements at Via’zma and Briansk (October 1941), resulting in over half-a-million prisoners of war, were not something Soviet authors wanted to dwell on, thus limiting discussion about the conditions that facilitated the beginning of the Moscow Counter-Offensive.

Other major operations and campaigns came under similar scrutiny with respect to planning and progress as well. Minasian pointed out that “there are always people who claim that there were no plans and that everything happened spontaneously...” The organization of the Lvov-Sandomierz and Iassi-Kishinev offensives were presented as if they occurred spontaneously as well.¹³⁰ These assertions were met with a stern reply:

¹²⁸ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 73, l. 13.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 13, 14.

¹³⁰ They were successful operations that took place in July and August 1944.

“We must put an end to this talk – was there a plan or was there not. Everything has its limits.” Going to an extreme, some even argued that throughout the war “no campaigns were planned” – a direct opposition to the Stalinist narrative that considered all the aspects of the war preplanned by Stalin’s genius.¹³¹

Such a seeming abuse of the history of the war was becoming a problem for some members of the commission. The military historian Vasili Moskovskii had enough of the continued discussions around this subject “from the first day of work” and the lost hours to debating the issue. He insisted from his own experiences that such documentation existed: “We had the task of creating a museum to Stalin. I received eleven boxes of materials at comrade Stalin’s dacha and worked with these materials. There were maps belonging to Stalin and Vasilevskii and there were plans of a counterattack...to say that there was no planned counteroffensive outside Moscow is unprecedented, it is nonsense.”¹³²

Discussions revolving around descriptions of battles throughout 1941 seemed to consistently point to inadequacies. One reviewer believed further research needed to be devoted to the Kiev “catastrophe” in order “to draw the correct conclusions about this operation.”¹³³ Issues were encountered with the reasons for the failed Soviet offensives

¹³¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 31, l. 35. Others raised similar questions in regards to plans. For instance, see K. K. Rokossovskii, *Soldatskii dolg* (Moscow: Veche, 2013), 31.

¹³² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 31, l. 47-48. The lack of knowledge with respect to the planning for the Moscow Counter-Offensive was evident in other instances, as when Fokin had to correct Boltin that the commander of Kiev Military District, and in turn the Southwestern Front, Mikhail Kirponos, did not commit suicide but was fatally wounded attempting to escape the Kiev encirclement. Although it should be pointed out that, before being corrected by Fokin, Boltin’s comment was meant to argue for more transparency as he stated that he saw no reason “to keep quiet about front commanders committing suicide.” RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 69, l. 6. For a look at Soviet casualties among generals throughout the war, see Maslov, *Fallen Soviet Generals: Soviet General Officers Killed in Battle, 1941-1945*.

¹³³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 586, l. 221.

around Leningrad. Descriptions of operations undertaken outside Leningrad in 1941 omitted any results in regards to territory gained or lost and losses sustained.¹³⁴ Thus, there was no “indication of the major cause of failure,” which was purported to be a consequence of consistent head-on attacks “with huge losses” and no real results. The counteroffensive outside Tikhvin (located in the Leningrad Oblast) received more analysis and attention than the fighting outside Moscow, which appeared to be “discussed in passing.” Throughout these operations, the names of front commanders operating along the frontlines went mostly unmentioned.¹³⁵

Inadequate discussions of campaigns continued through 1942 and, unsurprisingly, Stalingrad received an enormous amount of attention within the war’s history.¹³⁶ Chapters devoted to Stalingrad in submitted manuscripts lacked any mention of the infamous “Not One Step Back!” order No. 227.¹³⁷ This order came up for discussion and A. Emel’ianov, one of the editors, described how it had consistently been evaluated purely “in terms of propaganda and agitation, as a document which demanded an

¹³⁴ Oddly, it was argued that the same operations were covered by the same author in another publication and detailed all of the above while giving a greater explanation for what was achieved outside Leningrad during 1941. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 68, l. 6.

¹³⁵ This could have been another reflection and relic of the Stalinist period. Looking through the General Staff study of the Moscow Counter-Offensive shows rare instances when front or army commanders are mentioned, unlike the numerous mentions of Stalin and STAVKA. In addition, the majority of the time units were discussed it was in a general sense. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 73, l. 5, 6.

¹³⁶ Mention of the city continued to draw Khrushchev into the discussion. As a result of Khrushchev’s speech Fokin commented how in the struggle against Stalin’s cult “all Stalinist language in regards to the intentions of the German command” was rejected, including the idea expressed by Stalin that in the summer of 1942 Germany was “getting ready to break up the Soviet Union.” This idea turned out to be false as according to a “series of documents...the Germans were only going to attack in the southern direction.” RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 28, l. 17.

¹³⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 74, l. 7. This was amended in the published second volume, perhaps thanks to these discussions, where order 227 was discussed it was portrayed as a “motto” that was adopted by “every military unit, every soldier and commander” and “strengthened” Soviet “military resistance” as soldiers and officers saw the renewed danger that their Motherland was once more under. Fokin et al., 430-431.

intensification of political work among troops.” However, there was another “side” that needed to be mentioned. Specifically, the execution of regimental and divisional commanders as a result of their soldiers retreating without authorization appeared as a “normal requirement in wartime.” However, too often the conditions which Soviet troops were operating under were forgotten, as when commanders lacked the ability to communicate in a timely manner with their superiors in order to carry out assigned orders. “It often happened that army commanders lost all communication with divisional commanders...if we look at this aspect of the order, we can see that the excessive brutality that was utilized was not always justified by the reality...of the fighting.”¹³⁸

Consequently, some viewed order No. 227 as a continuation of Stalin’s repressive policies toward military cadres, an argument that was not mentioned in the war’s official history. Nor was the accusation made that “order 227 was an attempt by Stalin to shift the blame for the failure of the Kharkov operation, which he was mainly responsible for, onto the army.” This operation consisted of a failed Soviet offensive in the spring of 1942 against the German Sixth Army that occurred mere days before the Germans were supposed to launch an offensive of their own. “This order was, in fact, an insult to the army, an insult to soldiers and all officers.” Emel’ianov argued that order 227 was linked to the 1930s when Stalin’s article “Dizzy with Success” was published and blamed lower level party functionaries on their excesses with regard to collectivization, similar to how order 227, among others, blamed officers and soldiers for the Red Army’s disastrous situation in the summer of 1942.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, l. 62.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 81, 82.

A weakness that ran through all military operations was a lack of attention devoted to the development of military art.¹⁴⁰ More in-depth descriptions of major engagements were needed as they lacked contextualization “within Soviet historiography and their implications for the entire course of the Great Patriotic War.”¹⁴¹ It was emphasized that the volumes exaggerated the Battle of Stalingrad yet the “the Battle of Moscow, where we essentially started to defeat the Germans, is underestimated,” as were aspects of the Battle of Kursk.¹⁴²

Unfortunately, since the Battle of Stalingrad spanned two of the six volumes, it did overshadow other operations. This could have been influenced by Khrushchev’s administration and those military men who found themselves in the limelight after having served with him at Stalingrad. Thus, it must be kept in mind that Stalingrad, aside from being a decisive encounter between the Red Army and the Wehrmacht, served as a cornerstone for Khrushchev’s biography throughout the war years, including the leading marshals that found their way to his side (such as Eremenko and Malinovskii). Their participation in the battle often decided their future career paths (unlike many of the participants of the failed Rzhev offensive that simultaneously occurred to the north).¹⁴³ Thus the commission at times found itself at a crossroads, they needed to highlight Khrushchev’s wartime career but such an emphasis meant a heavy concentration on the

¹⁴⁰ RGASPI, f. 72, op. 22, d. 916, l. 28.

¹⁴¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 395, l. 1.

¹⁴² RGASPI, f. 72, op. 22, d. 916, l. 26. In all, the chapter covering the Battle of Kursk, the fifth in the third volume, stretched for sixty-eight pages – this included the preparations for the battle and its military-political significance.

¹⁴³ For details on the Rzhev offensive, see David M. Glantz, *Zhukov’s Greatest Defeat: The Red Army’s Epic Disaster in Operation Mars, 1942* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999).

Battle of Stalingrad, thus prompting future issues with readers who commented on the prominence of Stalin's name and its derivatives throughout the volumes.¹⁴⁴

Finally, both authors and editors point to chapter length limits to partly explain the poor presentations of individual battles. Organizational restrictions limited the amount of information that could be conveyed and were a recognized problem. Sections that were allocated dozens of pages at times only took up less than ten, in part due to lack of materials or the sensitivity of the subject. The section on the failed Soviet offensive at Kharkov in 1942 was supposed to comprise twenty pages but only took up eight-to-nine – in its final form it encompassed six pages. In trying to cover up or simply omit the “shortcomings” of the Red Army's actions outside Kharkov “nothing is understandable – neither the course of military actions, nor our mistakes.” Although soldiers and commanders “behaved themselves heroically” – the commander of the front was killed in action (which was enough to be considered “heroic”) – throughout the operation, their names were absent. Leaving out a significant portion of the failed operation's narrative explained why so much space went unutilized. The end result was an inability to give an accurate and objective “impression” of the situation Red Army forces faced. The conclusion reached was that “If you have never read about these events, do not know anything [about them] then after reading such an account, you will remain a person not well versed in these events, you will not understand why it happened and what happened.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 32, l. 15-16; d. 586, l. 170. The former folder contained a discussion from 11 January 1963 which looked at corrections to the already in print texts of the first and second volumes.

¹⁴⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 74, l. 73. In addition, the limited discussion of the failure outside Kharkov in 1942 might have been a reflection of the authors and editors knowing that Khrushchev played a role in the

A similar situation was encountered in the presentation of the defensive battles along the Voronezh direction which led the enemy into the Donbass. Twenty pages were earmarked for the section but only eighteen were utilized – in the end this subsection of the second volume’s ninth chapter was covered in seven pages. Again the mistakes of Soviet forces were “not highlighted” and the “difficulties” encountered were missing. Authors themselves complained in reply. I. Zhabkin claimed “We need to say something about everything and I have the right to write up to twenty-three pages. I would be happy to show heroics and name members of the Military Council...but where is the space?” When suggested changes were implemented to one chapter Zhabkin was “reproached” by Tel’pukhovskii, one of the editors, because he “talked too much about military actions.” Partisan activities were also left out as there was not enough space – thirty one pages covered activities in the enemy rear throughout the second volume. The Stalingrad direction was privileged over that of the Northern Caucasus, where more German forces operated in more directions but they could not all be equally covered due to imposed limits. In part, this was to be expected from an effort that consisted of numerous editors, but more so from a topic and subject that was previously so poorly treated and now needed to be covered and analyzed through multiple angles with many diverging points of view while keeping censorship in mind. The initial manuscript for the second volume was 1500 pages, Fokin, the editor of the volume, commented that the maximum should

operation, even though later in his memoirs he continually tried to present himself in the best light by shifting the blame of the Red Army’s failure to others. Khrushchev, *Commissar, 1918-1945*, 299, 378.

only be 1200, thus 300 pages would be cut. “This must be done, while we will be tight with words, ideas will be ample.”¹⁴⁶

Debating the Partisan War in the Rear

The history of the partisan movement became another contested territory. As previously debated, its beginning needed to be portrayed as a spontaneous reaction to the invasion, rather than an answer to German occupation policies. From discussions and debates commission members engaged in, it appears the Soviet narrative relied on a portrayal of the partisan movement as spontaneous and a confirmation of the population’s loyalty to Stalin and the Soviet Union. Conversely, Western histories, it was argued, depicted the partisan movement as a reaction to German excesses in the rear against the local population.

However, among commission members, there was a desire to show the nature of the German occupation as its depravity and cruelty were a cornerstone of Soviet propaganda during the war. Here commission members were met with a dilemma – if they offered an analysis of the German occupation then there was another reason for the “spontaneous reaction” of the masses, but by avoiding a discussion of the occupation they were leaving out an essential aspect of the war experience. One suggestion was for the development of the war in the rear to be presented from its beginning as a “people’s movement,” a grassroots initiative to oppose the German occupation that was coopted, organized, and led by the Party.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 74, l. 73, 77, 82.

¹⁴⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 69, l. 57, 59.

Such a suggestion was quickly opposed. Proposing that the partisan movement “was organized spontaneously at the beginning of the war...will be a mistake.” One speaker went so far as to proclaim that “not one partisan unit during the Great Patriotic war arose spontaneously.” Party responsibility was said to have extended past the initial organization of partisan detachments to including their becoming “numerous” and eventually forming into an all-people’s movement. Fokin argued that the Party, after all, “based on the experience of previous wars, understood well the role and importance of the partisan movement...and when the Party was preparing for this war” it had the “partisan struggle” at the forefront of its preparations. The men and women that came under the heading of “partisans,” those who remained or found themselves in the enemy rear, “were Communists, Komsomol members, Soviet citizens” who were “brought up” and led into battle “by our Party.” Due to the Party’s preparation of the country “ideologically” for future struggles against “bourgeois” elements, any partisan struggle that erupted in the initial period of the war needed to be attributed to said “ideological” preparations. Fokin thus argued that the Party called on the people to rise up in the struggle against the invader, “the people responded to this call and the Party headed this national movement.”¹⁴⁸

An unnamed speaker leaned on a Leninist position and quoted him as stating that “the partisan movement is a military movement.” The beginning of the partisan war in the enemy’s rear was a result of soldiers left behind enemy lines, soldiers who were as yet “not shown objectively” in the role they played in organizing partisan detachments. An unnamed veteran argued that when coming out of encirclement, military personnel

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 61, 75, 76.

“did not find Party workers in many areas” and, as a result, had to take the responsibility of creating partisan groups onto themselves with the help of the local population. Where partisans already existed “we integrated into these groups. Soldiers were at the time an important link in the development of partisan groups, and the partisan movement. Therefore, we cannot belittle this role.” Trained soldiers, it was contended, played the “decisive” role in the initial organization of the partisan movement as workers simply did not have the knowledge or knowhow to start such an organization behind enemy lines.¹⁴⁹

Throughout the entire debate around to what extent partisan groups were a spontaneous creation, there was never an indication that the history of partisan formations and their members needed to be studied on a case by case basis, including their ideological character. In many respects this would have proven impossible since so many partisans perished, especially in 1941 and 1942. Thus the majority of the arguments that took place revolving around their origins circled back to the idea that those who left their ordinary lives and choose to go “into the woods away from the Germans” were spontaneously creating what became the partisan movement, which “was done by left behind underground organizations, and some spontaneously.” There was no room for a collapse of this binary and numerous speakers and former partisans continued to tiptoe around the paradox that if “much of the partisan struggle” was “spontaneously” created then it could not be initially organized and led by the Party. A minor concession with a caveat was made by Tel’pukhovskii who insisted that “we should present the partisan movement in broad political terms, show more party-political and mass work, which the partisans waged. If such extensive, mass party-political work was not conducted, then

¹⁴⁹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 76, l. 8.

the partisan movement would not have been so broad.” In cases where groups were created spontaneously, where party-political work was missing, “there detachments did not work well and began to break apart.” Consequently, according to Tel’pukhovskii, the Party’s leadership was not only responsible for organizing and broadening the partisan movement but also served as a unifying force that helped keep unit cohesion.¹⁵⁰

An entire session was organized on 23 February 1959 to review the documentation available on the struggle in the enemy’s rear and ensuing discussions revolved around defining who exactly could be considered a “partisan.” Starinov, a famous veteran partisan, argued that “people who gave bread, hid our people” and undertook a variety of risks “need to be included in those we list as partisans.” Distributing leaflets could get someone killed just as quickly as carrying a gun but those leaflets “weakened the rear of the enemy” more than a firefight in the woods that few would ever hear about. Figures available for fighters did not necessarily include all those working in the enemy’s rear in different capacities, “we need to show that we had a national partisan movement that was wide in scope and was not confined solely to armed struggle...those who gave a piece of bread were not risking only their own lives but that of their families. These people should be included in the lists, otherwise it will be unfair to people who actually fought but without weapons.”¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 12, 18. Once again, due to the nature of the partisan movement and the lack of documentation, it becomes difficult to either oppose or support the position proposed by Tel’pukhovskii. For recent discussions of the partisan movement in the Soviet Union see, Slepyan, *Stalin’s Guerrillas: Soviet Partisans in World War II*; Hill, *The War Behind the Eastern Front: The Soviet Partisan Movement in North-West Russia 1941-1944*; Kenneth Slepyan, “The People’s Avengers: The Partisan Movement,” in *The Soviet Union at War, 1941-1945*, edited by David R. Stone, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2010); Alexander Gogun, *Stalin’s Commandos: Ukrainian Partisan Forces on the Eastern Front* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016).

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 2.

Starinov's remarks were opposed by the argument that the partisan movement differed from partisan warfare. While the movement included partisan warfare, and all of the other activities mentioned above that aimed to destabilize the German rear, it was argued that "a mandatory element of the partisan movement" was the "armed struggle" without which "we cannot talk about a partisan movement." Stalin's name and speech were invoked in an attempt at clarification, but, argued Tel'pukhovskii, decisions on who could be considered "partisans" needed to be made on a case by case basis and were better left to the regional and district commissions to decide since they had first-hand knowledge of all the people and work that was done.

The concept of an "all-people's war" was then discussed, as it surpassed and encompassed both the partisan armed struggle and the partisan movement in general, including all actions that either inhibited the German occupation and war against the Soviet Union or helped the Red Army against Germany.¹⁵² Thus, instead of having to decide who was and was not a "partisan," or needing to address the intricacies of the politics of the German occupation and Soviet collaboration, everyone who found themselves behind enemy lines could simply be described as having participated in the "all-people's war" effort.

Looking at discussions revolving around initial internal reviews and commentary on the war's official history brings to light the numerous shortcomings not only in the war's narrative but also within Soviet society. As the line separating fact from fiction was partly excised during the war by journalists and censors, the war's narrative became

¹⁵² Ibid., 13, 14, 16-17.

one that could frequently be amended to suit Stalin's needs. After Stalin's death and Khrushchev's succession, a similar process was evident as Khrushchev and a select group of officers reaped the benefit of their growing importance to the war effort while Stalin became a pariah, posthumously accepting whatever blame deemed necessary as a new official history was created. Other important personalities continued to be omitted with the end result that the majority of the war was conducted by a faceless mass, only reinforcing the stereotype of eastern "hordes" so often heard about from German accounts.

The debates that took place within the commission showcase that the war's history was a contested territory and some of the most heated exchanges took place among the commission members themselves and official reviewers, who were made up of high ranking war veterans and military historians. Authors and editors were consistently reminded that there was a lack of literature on the war period, more so, what literature did exist was composed of translated foreign publications, domestic productions tainted by Stalin's cult or dry, factual descriptions of well-known events and actions that lacked any type of in-depth analysis from which current and future generations could take away lessons. The war's history needed to serve a number of functions but the final results proved a failure of historical science as Stalinist concepts and censors clashed with a more liberal view on what "truth" and "objectivity" needed to encompass within a new official narrative of the war.

It did not go unnoticed that Red Army operations were presented one-sided in terms of victories with little to no mention made of defeats, thus stifling attempts to indoctrinate future officers in how wars should be waged and what errors avoided.

Mistakes needed to be disclosed and analyzed but no operations that were “unfavorable for us” were discussed in any meaningful context. The severity of the situation in 1941 and 1942 were well known but mistakes needed to be highlighted so that “bitter experience[s]” on paper could be “training for [the] youth.”¹⁵³ The glaring errors committed in the heat of battle had to be presented so that future military cadres could be trained on the blood of their forefathers instead of their own. Casualty figures and force correlations continued to be omitted so that no real examination was available, nor was the validity of orders developed and issued by STAVKA or any other state organization examined.

Although the portrayal of the Party was considered weak, descriptions of its ideological work in the armed forces and the rear of the country were commended. However, that minor praise only led to further indictments. The beginnings of the partisan war was poorly described and scattered throughout the entire second volume while “the struggle of party organizations” in the partisan underground were “not fully disclosed” nor was there the needed concentration on the Party’s political work throughout the occupied regions with respect to the population under enemy occupation. Worse, missing was an in-depth understanding of the “whole theoretical foundation, the essence of the war” in the rear and “its political significance.”¹⁵⁴

As these initial reviews and comments were received it appeared that many reviewers and commission members were unhappy with the choices made by the authors and editors. Some campaigns and battles overshadowed others, undoubtedly in part due

¹⁵³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 796, l. 264, 278-279.

¹⁵⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 117, l. 4-5.

to the participants and their current positions within Khrushchev's administration. The navy and air force were quite vocal about the dominant position of the ground forces throughout the war's narrative and the ignored contributions of pilots and sailors. Where objective positions were taken, as with respect to how best to represent the situation the Soviet Air Force found itself in in 1941, there was an immediate limit placed on what could be disclosed to the public in order to not undermine previous claims and reverse earlier positions developed under Stalin's guidance.

An examination of fundamental issues, like the planning and implementation of the Moscow Counter-Offensive, or an analysis for why certain orders were issued and what their implementation resulted in compared to expected results, was continually missing. It appeared that authors reiterated facts, figures, and details without adequate explanations or contextualization to help steer readers along the war's course. And while some wanted emotions and "blood" dripping from the pages of this unmoving historical "protocol," the end result was a document with seemingly more weaknesses than strengths. A lack of diversified heroic figures and feats, a faceless officer corps, ignored operations and failed campaigns, and the continued presence of Stalin and a reliance on his ideas and speeches continued to permeate the pages of the war's official history.

Throughout these discussions and critiques of the initial volumes of the war's history could be seen the "hypernormalization" of text that Yurchak discussed. Historians could no longer offer opinion or analysis but rather relied on being the transmitters of knowledge rather than its creators. A tendency to "shift" discussions "into the past" combined with limits on archival access and a continued reliance on previous texts, whether citing Stalin or Lenin, meant a lack of original or new "authoritative

language.” Instead, arguments were consistently built on “prior temporalities” where information, whether new or old, was “presented as knowledge previously asserted and commonly known.”¹⁵⁵ As such, the war’s narrative continued to lean on past ideas. Any debates that arose were settled by leaning on familiar concepts without any new analysis or an examination of evidence that might potentially endanger the foundations of the Soviet system.

¹⁵⁵ Yurchak, 60, 61.

CHAPTER 5
READERS' RESPONSES TO THE PUBLICATION OF THE WAR'S OFFICIAL
HISTORY

In 1963, on the anniversary of Victory Day, *Pravda* published an excerpt from the fifth volume of the war's history discussing the storming of the Reichstag.¹ The head editor of *Pravda*, Petr Pospelov, received a letter in the middle of June 1963 written in a rather harsh tone claiming that one of the participants in the capture of the Reichstag, battalion commander K. Samsonov, portrayed a falsified version of events “from beginning to end,” as the author himself (and his friends), also participants, could testify. The veteran claimed that “the cult of personality did its criminal job. It is no accident that for 18 years within memoir literature it [the storming of the Reichstag] has not been corrected...” At least a dozen letters were received attacking this article. In this case it was asserted that Samsonov placed the soldiers of his battalion front-and-center in the story of the taking of the Reichstag while the involvement of other formations, and their participants, was absent.²

This chapter analyzes a number of letters received from readers by a variety of outlets. Readers sent hundreds of letters to newspapers, journals, high ranking party and military representatives and the Institute of Marxism-Leninism, the publisher of the volumes. In addition to the content of the letters themselves, to whom they were addressed also helps ascertain the author's intended target(s). Furthermore, there were sometimes replies attached to original letters. The replies written, and presumably sent,

¹ “Kak bylo vodruzhenno znamia pobedy,” *Pravda*, May 9, 1963, 4.

² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 796, l. 113-115. See also d. 796, l. 4-6; 20-25; 90-92; 96-98; 122-126.

to the original authors help to establish to what extent those on the receiving end offered support or condemnation of their own against letter writers. In analyzing the reaction of readers to the publication of the first official history of the war it becomes clear that this was a subject many, if not most, were fascinated by yet at the same time treated as contested territory. Most interesting to note is that some of the most vociferous accusations made against the history of the war were lodged by two participants of previous commission meetings, Lev Leshchinskii and Ilya Starinov, the latter of whom was removed from the commission for his views and ideas on the war. Leshchinskii was a historian and veteran of the war, including a participant in the partisan movement, and Starinov was one of the most famous partisans who participated in operations from the Russian Civil War, through the Spanish Civil War, and the Second World War.³ He was involved with the creation of the war's official history for close to 4 years. Their denunciations of the war's history, and the intended targets of their letters, show how Khrushchev's Thaw allowed for alternative narratives, with certain limitations, when it came to Soviet history and Stalin, including what readers and participants of the war continued to view as their right with respect to the memory of the war.

Aside from the usual mentioning of shortcomings that many noticed, whether omissions, inaccuracies or general weaknesses, the most important topic and thread that could be found in most complaints, consistently, was the impact that Stalin's cult of personality had on the war and its historiography. Much of the feedback received fell into three categories: those that were happy with the final product, those who thought Stalin's cult and wartime narrative was still being utilized as the foundation of the war's

³ See Ilya Starinov, *Over the Abyss: My Life in Soviet Special Operations* (New York: Ivy Books, 1995).

official history, and a few who asked why Soviet failures needed to be publicly exposed in front of enemies and friends.⁴

The war's history was lauded as a needed antidote to what was previously written and the publication was commended for highlighting the fighting qualities of the Red Army along with its description as an international force made up of many distinct nationalities all eager to achieve the same end goal.⁵ When it came to criticisms, feedback touched on all aspects of the history of the war, from major generalized statements to individual details of names and locations. Many pointed out incorrect information and asked for additional clarification. Often the names of settlements, workers, and various other facts needed to be corrected even though it was contended that "during the preparation of the volume all facts were taken from documents" and were checked.⁶

The Purges and Stalin's Continued Impact on the War's History

Stalin's previous dominance within Soviet history was a continued topic for criticism. Although discussions over manuscripts had ended for the first few volumes, commission members continued to send in thoughts and opinions about corrections, additions and omissions that should be made in future editions. Some readers insisted that the war's history "upheld" Stalin's cult. A 10 January 1962 letter from A.

Timofeevskii, a member of the editorial commission, contained desired amendments and

⁴ A similar response in general could be found to Khrushchev's 20th Congress speech against Stalin's cult. Taubman, 286.

⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 585, l. 77.

⁶ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 32, l. 12.

corrections to be implemented in the first volume; sections discussing Stalin's "authority" and "popularity" needed to be reduced. He believed "Stalin's thesis about the escalation of the class struggle was not only wrong, but also caused great harm to the Party and the state." These erroneous ideas "caused great confusion" within the Party's ranks.

Timofeevskii argued that Stalin was himself responsible for encouraging the spread of his cult which resulted in "sycophancy, fraud, servility, careerism, etc." Guilt for the repressions, however, should include figures aside from Stalin, specifically, Molotov, Malenkov and Kaganovich needed to be portrayed "as perpetrators of massive repressions" rather than having their actions justified. Others, such as previously mentioned Arkadii Sidorov, director of the Institute of History, as well as a participant in commission meetings, similarly thought that the decision by the editors to excise "the remnants" of Stalin's cult was a necessity. To help in the process it was also suggested "to list the most important names of the leading figures of the party and the Soviet state" who became victims of Stalin's cult at the height of the purges, while members of the armed forces who suffered in the 1938 purges were to be mentioned later.⁷

The repressions of the 1930s, when millions suffered, were portrayed in the war's official history as an evolution of the Party when half-a-million *vydvizhentsy* assumed leadership positions throughout the country. This notion was condemned and it was argued that "there is a strong suggestion for the reader that, in fact, the main idea in terms of what happened to our cadres in 1937-1938, consists not in the destruction of many thousands of honest people, senior officials of the Soviet state, but in the promotion [*выдвижении*] of young people." The history of the war, in addressing this topic,

⁷ RGASPI, f. 72, op. 22, d. 309, l. 95, 118, 119.

contained a quote from Stalin that discussed the above mentioned figure of half-a-million “young workers” being “promoted” and it was asked: “Do our comrades understand, that in providing this quote [and] this number, that it (mostly) also reflects the number of ‘vacancies,’ freed by the destruction of the Party’s and government’s cadres?”⁸

Consequently, Stalin’s views on the necessity of the purges were reiterated within the pages of the official history rather than criticized by the authors – although it was mentioned that this new cohort of workers did not have enough experience and training.⁹

One of the most passionate and confrontational letters, highly critical of the war’s history and the presence of Stalin’s cult, was sent to the editorial board of the newspaper *Izvestiia*, undoubtedly with the hope that at least some part of it would be printed to raise awareness of the mentioned weaknesses. The author, a candidate of historical sciences, member of the Communist Party since 1931 and a Lieutenant Colonel, was Lev Leshchinskii, a member of the commission himself. He complimented the first three volumes, which contained a “large number of new factual materials” written by “authors who spared no effort” in “vividly” describing “the historic feat of the Soviet people, who saved mankind from the fascist plague.” Yet simultaneously, he could not leave unmentioned the fact that Stalin’s cult left a large “impact” on the war’s history, which included “dogmas, concepts, illustrations, and other materials from the period of the cult of personality.” Even though they were published after the decisions of the 20th Party Congress, Leshchinskii argued that “any excuse is made to quote Stalin’s speeches and to

⁸ Ibid., 94, 95. David Brandenberger in part sees the purges, of the Old Guard and the military, among others, as “unintentionally cripp[ing] the party’s ability to mobilize their society,” which in turn “forced party ideologists to intensify...their embrace of the personality cult...” Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis*, 248.

⁹ Deborin et al., 427.

attribute to him personally NKO [People's Commissariat of Defense] orders.”

Furthermore, Stalin's quotes either replaced the author's voice or reflected it with the end result that Stalin's role was being consistently promoted instead of written out or contextualized.¹⁰ Going a step further, it was believed the war's official history was actually “impos[ing]” Stalin's cult on the reader.¹¹

Leshchinskii argued that the cult was being “advocated,” something that was “reflected not only in justifications and the praising of Stalin, popularized by the many quotations from his speeches [and] a full gallery of his portraits and pictures...but also in historical interpretations...and selected groupings of materials which the party [previously] condemned.”¹² Starinov, in his letter to the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, went so far as to count how many times Stalin's name and photographs appeared throughout various volumes and believed Stalin was continually being praised with “primitive clichés.” According to Leshchinskii and Starinov, the tools advocated for dealing with Stalin's presence within the war's history seemed to heavily rely on Stalinist thinking and dogma from the period of the cult, especially when the question of his illustration was brought up. Leshchinskii wrote that “it is known that one illustration may influence a reader more than a thousand words.”¹³ There were also concerns that quoting Stalin, or at times simply utilizing his

¹⁰ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 309, l. 82, 96, 97.

¹¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 586, l. 171; d. 309, l. 87, 89, 91, 95, 102.

¹² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 309, l. 96.

¹³ According to Leshchinskii, Stalin's image appeared 12 times in the three volumes. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 309, l. 102. According to Starinov, in the first volume his photographs could be found “up to 50 times” and “derivatives of his name can be found ‘on 80 pages...up to 400 times.’” In response the editors

name, meant “upholding” Stalin’s cult. “Stalin’s false statements” were presented by the authors as they assured readers “that Stalin ‘outlined the harsh truth’ about ‘temporary military failures’ and even supposedly ‘revealed the reasons for these failures.’”¹⁴ These were direct quotes from the published second volume where Stalin’s speech from November was presented as outlining the previous four months of fighting on the German-Soviet front – the official history’s authors made no attempt to correct or contextualize Stalin’s words, admissions or omissions.¹⁵

In response, the editors only confirmed that Stalin’s continued mention was due to his being “Secretary General of the Central Committee of the CPSU(b), Chairman of the State Committee of Defense, Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR, Supreme Commander and People’s Commissar of Defense of the Soviet Union.” In a written reply to Starinov, the head of the Department of World War II history, Boltin, wrote that as a result of the “strengths” of Stalin’s “positions his name cannot be erased from history” and claimed that the third volume was “free from attempts to glorify Stalin and even more so to revive his cult. Stalin’s name is mentioned in the text of the volume only during the presentation of military, political and international events that took place during the second period of the war.”¹⁶ In addition, “derivatives” of Stalin’s name were unavoidable in the third volume, argued the editors, since the first chapter “describes the fighting at Stalingrad and in the Stalingrad area, including the actions of

insisted that “no one considers it a glorification” if the names of Hitler, Mussolini and Antonescu were mentioned. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 586, l. 158, 167, 170, 171.

¹⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 309, l. 88.

¹⁵ Fokin et al., 252-253.

¹⁶ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 586, l. 150, 171.

troops of the Stalingrad Front, shows numerous feats of soldiers and residents of Stalingrad...the editors could not replace the word ‘Stalingrad’ with any other (the volume was published before the renaming of the city), and it is unlikely it would be correct [to do so]. But is it possible to treat this as a glorification of Stalin?” In the opinion of the editors – “no.”¹⁷ Nonetheless, in writing to *Izvestiia*, Leshchinskii’s criticisms laid bare the fact that the war’s history was not representative of the changes the 20th Party Congress was supposed to have signified. His voice joined those attacking the continued use of not only Stalin’s illustrations, but that of Molotov as well.¹⁸

For Leshchinskii, Stalin’s cult was tied to the official history’s presentation of the purges of the Red Army, the description of which ran counter to the decisions of the Party and “historical truth.” And this contradictory presentation became the “guiding principle” when covering other issues, like defensive operations and the “causes of our defeats in the initial period of the war.” Furthermore, Leshchinskii contended that Stalin’s guilt was “artificially downplayed” since the repressions were only mentioned during coverage of the war’s initial period. Nothing was said about the continued impact of the “decimated cadres for the entire period of the war” nor was there any discussion or analysis about the continued repressions that were carried out as the war progressed.¹⁹ Mentioning these victims of Stalin’s purges “would only be logical, as it would allow for a more scientific look at the entirety [of the repressions] generated by the cult of

¹⁷ Ibid., 170.

¹⁸ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 309, l. 80, 96, 97, 102; d. 586, l. 171.

¹⁹ For instance, Dmitrii Pavlov, who was executed in July 1941 after being blamed for his front’s encirclement around Minsk, merited a single mention in the second volume, when he was listed as commander of the Western Front. Fokin et al., 29.

personality from the moment of its creation in 1934 and up to its conclusion and condemnation in 1953 and to figure out its impact on the defense [of the nation]...” Leshchinskii argued that “the repressions – were one of the main causes of our defeats and casualties,” yet the first two volumes omitted “this obvious truth.”²⁰ In some ways Leshchinskii’s letter illustrated the thoughts of a historian as he appeared to aim for a more balanced representation of Stalin and his crimes. When he reflected on “the process of writing these volumes” he lamented how “scientific criticism was absent.”²¹

Soviet Operational Art and the Initial Period of War

Although he did not take part in commission meetings, among those writing to the editors was the well-known military theorist Georgii Isserson.²² Isserson’s “closed letter,” written in November 1960 and likely meant only for the eyes of the commission, concentrated on the development of Soviet operational art and strategy and partly attacked the impact of Stalin’s cult on military theory and theorists and the prewar doctrine that was championed by Voroshilov, among others, which claimed that future battles would take place on the enemy’s territory with little blood spilled.

Isserson, the author of numerous research papers on military theory and a participant in the development of the theory of operational art in the prewar period, felt the descriptions in the first volume about military theory were neither factually or

²⁰ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 309, l. 93-94.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

²² For a recent monograph on Isserson and his contributions to Soviet military science, see Richard W. Harrison, *Architect of Soviet Victory in World War II: The Life and Theories of G. S. Isserson* (North Carolina: MacFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2010).

historically truthful, and in some areas even biased.²³ He claimed “the authors writing about Soviet military science, are insufficiently acquainted with our literature on this subject and, in particular, with the theoretical and practical development of the General Staff’s defense academy,” which discussed and “fully developed” “the question of defense in depth in particular.”²⁴

Isserson praised the development of Soviet operational art, claiming that the Red Army’s “advanced” military theory on the eve of the war was at a “high level,” and included an ability to “foresee the possibility of deep operations into the enemy’s depths,” but he did not see the volume as having adequately addressed “the history and development of our military theory before the war.” The discussion of the Red Army’s initial failures appeared a failure of military theorists rather than of actions on the ground and circumstances beyond the ability of military theory to envision and overcome. Isserson argued that military theory alone could not have foretold “the drama of the beginning of the Great Patriotic War,” nor should it “have been able to predict” the invasion “as it is the task of strategic and political policies and is beyond the scope of [military] theory as it stands.”²⁵ Consequently, it appears that in part the authors of the war’s history found a scapegoat in Soviet military theory in order to explain away the disastrous beginning of the war. Considering the majority of the most well-known personalities that worked on military theory in the 1930s were purged, Isserson appeared to be the only voice who could offer any type of opposition as he was one of the very few

²³ He specifically referenced a subsection of the tenth chapter of the first volume, entitled “Soviet military thought on the eve of the Great Patriotic War.”

²⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 309, l. 222, 252.

²⁵ Ibid., 215-216.

to survive the purges and continue working in the field. An issue that neither the official history's authors or Isserson touched on was the difficulty of separating the developments made before and after the purges of the Red Army within military science as that would have meant highlighting how much military theorists suffered and to what extent their ideas were then forbidden from being propagated. Instead, they were replaced by the all-encompassing notion that all future conflicts would be settled quickly, with little blood, and on the enemy's territory.

A response was penned to Isserson with an attempted explanation. The author(s) noted that Isserson's letter was received after the publication of the first volume, otherwise his ideas and thoughts would have been utilized. More so, it was emphasized that the preparation of the war's history was practically a national affair.

You had to know about [the fact] that a multivolume edition of the History of the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union, 1941-1945 was being prepared. We have repeatedly appealed to the public – through the press and by word of mouth – with calls for help. You had an opportunity to offer us your help, your knowledge and experience. We fully understand your scruples [about the text], but still believe that you should overcome them. You would have been given the friendliest welcome by our collective.²⁶

The central premise of Isserson's arguments against the war's history was that he believed too much blame was being assigned to military theory in the prewar period, but it is conceivable that he wanted prewar theorists, including himself, to be excluded from those blamed for the war's disastrous beginning. In doing so it appears he was guilty of contradicting himself and assigning blame to the history's authors when they were in agreement with Isserson's assertions. Thus, respect for Isserson did not translate into an outright acceptance of his ideas. His "characterization of the development" of Soviet

²⁶ Ibid., 199.

military theory, when discussing defensive problems the Red Army encountered on the eve of the German invasion, matched the official history. Isserson argued that all theoretical work within the prewar Red Army was based on an offensive mentality. The German invasion, however, created an environment where a “completely different orientation of strategic thought” was needed and could not have been predicted. “In this specifically was our greatest mistake,” commented Isserson. Similarly, the authors of the war’s history stated: “Our theory on the question of the development of defense was incomplete,” which complemented Isserson’s statements.²⁷

However, to the question of whether or not there were “flaws in Soviet military theory on the eve of the war,” the first volume answered in the affirmative. In fact, the authors of the first volume mentioned the impact Stalin’s cult of personality had on the evolution of military strategy, concluding there were “a number of weaknesses and gaps.”²⁸ Thus, contrary to Isserson’s claims, the authors believed that “significant deficiencies occurred” within the realms of military theory and these “shortcomings” could not be overlooked or omitted from the war’s narrative:

Moreover, if we had not mentioned this we would have been met by condemnation from an overwhelming majority of our generals and officers. Among whom there are individuals who tend to sharply criticize the state of Soviet military-theoretical thought before the war more than is evidenced in the first volume.

The real division between Isserson and the war’s history was the evaluation of prewar military theory. Isserson defended it as being at a “high level” while the war’s history claimed it contained “significant deficiencies.” Consequently, the authors and editors

²⁷ Ibid., 197.

²⁸ Deborin et al., 439.

were following a rather narrow path in trying to not alienate high ranking veterans of the Red Army, nor Khrushchev's administration, in how they described the events on the eve of the war. Even so, there was at least some support for Isserson's position as one major-general wanted to "dwell" on the issues he raised, noting Isserson's reputation and merits as an author of military-scientific works.²⁹

In a similar vein, another letter, written by a P. D. Mushchinskii to the head editor of the journal *Kommunist*, contained complaints against descriptions of Soviet military theorists, including military theory, and Stalin's purges and cult. The author contended that in viewing the contents of the first volume, it seemed as if the text was written before the 20th Party Congress. This criticism was specifically applied "to the descriptions of the armed forces, their combat readiness, military equipment, as well as Soviet military knowledge and art," which was still "not free of the spirit of the Cult of Personality." Although Mushchinskii had no problem with the official history's praising of Lenin and his development of "Soviet military science," he objected to "several outdated positions" when it came to Stalin's role in similar developments. Because of the close positioning of Lenin's name to Stalin's, he argued that "from this it can be inferred that after Lenin, Stalin is the only person to develop Soviet military science (more so, since the authors of the first volume do not mention any other names)." As a result, he considered the methodology utilized by the authors when confronting military issues to have been "borrowed from the Cult of Personality" with the end result that "their interpretations are erroneous and inconsistent." Mushchinskii opposed the previous and now official history's narrative of the war, which highlighted Stalin's ability to gather reserves and

²⁹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 309, l. 195, 197.

pick the correct direction of a main attack by tracing and ascribing similar thoughts and actions to Lenin and in general as being “important tenets of Marxism about strategy.”³⁰

A further disappointment for Mushchinskii included descriptions of the development of Soviet military science that excluded famous and well-known names. Specifically, the authors of the first volume wrote that “A great contribution to Soviet military science was made by our outstanding commanders and military leaders: M. V. Frunze, B. M. Shaposhnikov and others.”³¹ Although Frunze and Shaposhnikov were evident, many other important figures were missing:

No one is going to deny the role of Shaposhnikov in the development of questions regarding Soviet military science. The objection is to the fact that other equally honorable Soviet military workers and leaders are omitted. B. Shaposhnikov is even put on a similar level as Frunze, yet Tukhachevsky, Kamenev and Egorov are unjustifiably forgotten in the pages of the first volume. It raises surprise and even protest to see...the outstanding military leader and theorist M. N. Tukhachevsky is only mentioned in the first volume among authors of military-scientific works and next to little-known teachers of military academies...how can these people be put on par with the fully-developed military figure of M. N. Tukhachevsky! As can be seen among the pages of the first volume, there is no recognition of those Soviet commanders who were executed during the time when Stalin violated the law and are now fully rehabilitated.³²

Finally, there was a distinct absence of military district commanders, under whose leadership multiple inter-district military exercises were undertaken to showcase the development of Soviet military art. The repressed commanders, Avgust Kork, Ieronim

³⁰ Ibid., 75, 76. Lenin was intimately tied into the development of Soviet military theory by the authors of the official history who also wrote: “A number of generally important military-theoretical problems were emphasized and affirmed by I. V. Stalin, particularly questions about the choice of direction for a main attack, about reserves and others.” Thus the authors repeated practically verbatim ideas expressed throughout the war, within the General Staff study on the Battle of Moscow, and from Voroshilov’s work on Stalin’s role in the war. Deborin et al., 437, 439.

³¹ Deborin et al., 437.

³² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 309, l. 75.

Uborevich, and Iona Iakir, were missing from the entire first volume and the authors were “unjustified in ignoring them.”³³

Not missing, however, was Stalin’s continued presence. A quote within the official history mentioned Stalin “speaking at a meeting of the Supreme Military Soviet on 17 April,” he “spoke about the need for command staff to study modern war.” This statement seemingly forced the reader “into a false conclusion that Stalin allegedly conducted the correct military policy in preparing the defenses [of the country], based on an understanding of the new demands of warfare.” The end result was a “praising” of Stalin and extended to a portrayal of him helping in the “development of military science.” Simultaneously, the official history was silent about the damage caused to Soviet military science as a result of the purges unleashed in the 1930s. The deaths of prominent military theorists meant their views on deep operations as well as strategic defensive operations and withdrawals were discredited, leaving the Red Army in a vulnerable position. The defeat of the Wehrmacht needed to be portrayed as “in spite” of Stalin’s cult, as the Soviet population “moved forward toward the building of socialism as well as military victory.”³⁴

Ignoring military commanders from the 1930s allowed authors to propagate another aspect of Stalin’s narrative. When discussing the Battle of Stalingrad, it was claimed the Soviet counteroffensive against the German 6th Army “revealed the clearly huge capabilities of the armored and mechanized forces who were able to, in the short term, achieve a tactical breakthrough and maneuver in the operational environment to

³³ Ibid., 73.

³⁴ Ibid., 90, 91.

encircle a large group of the enemy...” Left unanswered was why it took so long for these “huge capabilities” to reveal themselves. In his 19 July 1962 letter, a Lieutenant General Al’bert Shtromberg argued that this was wholly incorrect since “these capabilities were known even before [the war]. They were evident in a number of major exercises and maneuvers, starting in 1930 (in the Moscow, Belorussian, and Ukrainian military districts...). They were studied and presented to listeners in our military academies, particularly in the Academy of the General Staff. But in the Battle of Stalingrad these capabilities were confirmed in new, previously unseen scales, but that does not mean that they were firstly discovered here.”³⁵ The war’s official history seemingly presented a Red Army learning through bloody battles to wage war. This was an essential part of the Stalinist narrative that was reinforced by Korneichuk’s play *The Front* and became contested territory for some readers. Here the authors of the official history reiterated the idea that outdated commanders were replaced by the time of the Stalingrad counteroffensive, at which point recently promoted junior officers showed what they learned from the past two years of wartime experience.

In propagating the idea that military commanders learned their craft through battles, authors apparently felt no need to criticize those in the prewar period who championed the idea that a future victory in war would be achieved “with little blood.” Voroshilov was singled out for ridicule with a reader commenting that “Soviet people of the older generation remember that a victory with ‘little blood’ over a likely opponent was repeatedly proclaimed by K. E. Voroshilov before 1940. Consequently, the authors of the first volume cannot keep silent that the so-called theory of victory with ‘little

³⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 586, l. 208.

blood' had its supporters, even among some of those who held very important positions within our armed forces.” Reasons given for the “introduction of the institution of military commissars in 1937” were also criticized by readers like the previously mentioned Mushchinskii. They were described as “superficial” and the offered explanation was ridiculed as being similar to what was utilized under Stalin, “that is to say the institute of military commissars in 1937 was introduced to eliminate the consequences of the ‘sabotage’ of the ‘enemies of the people’ in the army and navy. But such an explanation in light of the decisions of the 20th and 22nd Party Congresses is erroneous, and even harmful.”³⁶

Deborin, the editor of the first volume, penned a reply, which was forwarded by Boltin, to the letter received by the journal *Kommunist*. It stated that some of the comments were “right” but they did “not take into account when the first volume of the history of the ‘History of the Great Patriotic War’ was written (1958-1960).” However, the criticisms toward the “volume, arising out of the 22nd Party Congress...are clearly wrong. Aside from this,” the author “would like details to be incorporated into the first volume which have no place within this book. Of course, we will take into account the letter writer’s ideas in case a second edition will be published. However, there is no discussion about that presently.”³⁷

Thus, the introductory volume on the war’s history found new scapegoats in the form of military theorists in order for others to save face. Errors from 1941 were partly

³⁶ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 309, l. 72, 73. With respect to a victory with “little blood” the authors of the first volume wrote that this “provision” “did not meet the characteristics of modern warfare, which require great sacrifice.” Deborin et al., 441.

³⁷ Ibid., 79.

blamed on poor military-scientific theories that did not predict the opening phases of the German invasion. This in turn partly absolved Stalin and the high command of mistakes and miscalculations that cost millions their lives. Additionally, well-known and respected military theorists, including numerous commanders of military districts who were purged in the late 1930s, were barely mentioned as the Red Army's evolution was attributed to bloody lessons from the field of battle or to Lenin who inherited the prestige that formerly belonged to Stalin.

The biggest impact of Stalin's cult continued to resonate with the portrayal of the war's initial period and the "content and wording" that readers encountered throughout the war's history. Commented on the "wording" of the first volume's introduction and initial chapters, a reader mentioned the use of the expression "hordes" of Germans and complained that "prior to the use of this expression, here and after, there is an emphasis that against the Soviet Union was pitted a multimillion-man army with the most technically well-equipped army of the capitalist world. If these were 'hordes' (by definition – a messy crowd, mob, gang), it would thereby belittle the heroic struggle of the Soviet people and the power of its armed forces, which took four years to defeat these 'hordes.'"³⁸ Consequently, the war's narrative could not portray the German Army as technologically advanced, compared to the Red Army, as that would invalidate previous propaganda positions, nor could the Wehrmacht be portrayed as incompetent "hordes" as that would denigrate Soviet achievements. Furthermore, he pointed out that the

³⁸ Ibid., 58. Observations on the first, second, and third volumes of the official history of the war written by A. Shtromberg. The word "hordes" is still tied to descriptions of the German Army as they are part of the most famous song about the Great Patriotic War, *Sacred War* (*Священная война*), which includes the following lyrics: "Вставай, страна огромная, Вставай на смертный бой, С фашистской силой тёмною, С проклятою ордой."

“reference to a ‘sudden and treacherous’ attack by Germany” essentially repeated “Stalinist era justifications” similar to the idea that “the agreement with Germany provided a respite from inevitable war and time to better prepare for it, which required the greatest vigilance and readiness,” a not so veiled critique of the non-aggression pact.³⁹

Some viewed the purges as the root cause of the tragedy of the initial period of the war, including the egregious losses suffered by the Red Army. “Workers and cadres promoted during the revolution, reared by Lenin, were replaced with those taken from the bottom by Stalin, Molotov, Voroshilov, Malenkov and Kaganovich. A commander of a formation was turned into a front commander in a matter of three-four years, while a pilot became the commander of the Air Force.”⁴⁰ It was impossible to understand how “the real culprits” could so readily “shift the blame onto the shoulders of these honest people.” More so, limiting the guilt of Stalin and his closest associates meant “not only distorting the historical truth, but also resorting to the same ‘arguments,’ which were used before 1953-56.” Consequently, even when the problems the Soviet Union faced on the eve of the war were highlighted, “they are inevitably accompanied by the invisible presence of Stalin’s dangerous concept,” which tried to explain away the initial period of the war by leaning on the idea “that the aggressor is always bound to be stronger” than the defender, who was unprepared for the coming conflict – in effect reiterating the idea of a “peaceful” Soviet Union being attacked by a belligerent Nazi Germany. This concept

³⁹ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁰ This was undoubtedly a reference to Major General Ivan Kopets, who at the age of 32 became commander of the Western Front’s Air Force. Three years earlier he was a captain and veteran of the Civil War in Spain. The purges propelled him through the ranks and on the evening of the first day of the war he shot himself after the Western Front’s Air Force suffered devastating losses both in the air and on the ground. Constantine Pleshakov, *Stalin’s Folly: The Tragic First Ten Days of WWII on the Eastern Front* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 127.

was traced to Stalin's speeches during the war, supplying a ready answer for the Red Army's poor performance during the German invasion and becoming a part of the Stalinist narrative. Stalin's "vicious acts" were labeled "miscalculations" and only evident on the eve of the war within the multi-volume history. Worse, in the wake of their being mentioned the focus immediately shifted to explanations that attempted to justify why and how these "miscalculations" were made.⁴¹

Stalin's cult precluded an emphasis on discussing mistakes, or even poor judgement, in the realms of domestic, foreign or military policy. Sections devoted to these questions throughout the first volume, "represent quite a jumble of many different facts." There were "critical remarks" that portrayed a level of "disorganization, instead of reorganizing, reducing armaments, instead of rearmament, weakening of troop combat readiness, flagrant violations in terms of strategic and operational requirements, etc." However, what continued to be omitted was a linking of all these "shortcomings" to Stalin's cult as "there are no connections established" to these inadequacies within the Soviet system.⁴² As a result, too often Stalin, including those around him and within the army high command, escaped any direct condemnation.

The shortcomings mentioned were "written off" and hoisted onto the shoulders of NKO workers, "propagandists, writers, etc.," leading to the conclusion that the fate of the Red Army and Soviet state was not being decided by Stalin. However, his actions and speeches, in concert with Molotov, were what set the stage for the war, and shifting "responsibility for preparations of defense, even for strategy, onto NKO workers [and]

⁴¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 309, l. 89-93.

⁴² Ibid., 92-93.

individual commanders” was considered “strange.”⁴³ These were not the only instances where responsibility was removed from Stalin and those surrounding him. Blame for the Red Army’s inability to meet the German invasion on a level playing field “was shifted to the workers of the People’s Commissariat of Defense and the General Staff” rather than being attributed to Stalin. The explanations offered for initial defeats and forced retreats were laid out on the basis of “Stalinist explanations” with Stalin, once more, relegated to the role of “genius” who during this period “designated” roles, “exposed” weaknesses, and “directed” victory. The role of the State Committee of Defense (GKO – which Stalin headed) was “exaggerated,” the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Union Republics and regional party committees were belittled. As a result, “this not only leads to the excessive praise of Stalin, but to the defense and praise” of his associates.⁴⁴

Even where Stalin and his miscalculations were mentioned, readers had a hard time comprehending what lessons were supposed to be drawn from these admissions. Although Stalin was portrayed disallowing any movement of troops closer to the border on the eve of the war, thus constraining the Red Army’s ability to resist a German invasion, the overall tone pointed to this being a result of “a desire to keep peace,” a desire in contrast to the 20th Party Congress decisions, which clearly condemned Stalin’s actions. Similarly, supporting the idea of the Soviet Union’s “peaceful nature” was the distribution of forces throughout the western border districts, which were not poised for offensive action. This line of thinking was considered “absolutely unjustified,” even if

⁴³ Ibid., 92.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 103.

true, since it was previously “imposed primarily by Stalin.” Overall, criticisms directed toward Stalin were considered “insufficient” and too often they were “discarded while taking their place are evaluations from the period of the cult of personality which were previously criticized by the party.”⁴⁵ Consequently, present needs for showing the Soviet Union as a victim of German aggression meant partly rehabilitating Stalinist justifications.

The continued concentration on Stalin obscured other aspects of the war, especially in the initial period. The implementation of an “active defense,” the creation of a war economy, the preparation of reserves, and the organizing of a partisan movement were described as if they were pre-planned and “done in accordance to Stalin’s directives and speeches” while readers saw “nothing about Stalin’s confusion” nor “about the weakening of the cult of personality which made it possible to organize a struggle against the Nazi hordes.” Furthermore, “the reader will encounter very little about the initiative of the masses, about the independence of communists and non-party local, national, regional, and district, and army workers who selflessly overcome the evil inflicted by” Stalin’s cult. Consequently, the Soviet leader was continually praised as a military theorist, similar to the postwar period, while his actions, such as the TASS announcement on 14 June, “which adversely affected the combat readiness of our troops, is treated as a wise course of action by Stalin and Molotov.”⁴⁶ To the credit of the authors of the official history, this last accusation seems misplaced. The authors noted that the TASS

⁴⁵ Stalin’s cult was tied to numerous controversial decisions, including the taking apart of the Stalin Defensive Line, the chaos caused by the dispersal of troops during the initial period of the war, and the dangers associated with “moving troops forward to a new and unfortified border.” *Ibid.*, 87, 88, 89.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 87, 104.

announcement was a “miscalculation” by Stalin which resulted in “a negative impact on the combat readiness of the Soviet Armed Forces” as well as the “vigilance of command and political personnel.”⁴⁷

Leshchinskii insisted the second and third volumes contained “basically...none of the 20th Congress’s resolutions” but rather relied on Stalin’s narrative and publications. Stalin’s words were frequently quoted as both volumes praised him as a military commander and presented “a number of critical issues in the spirit” of his cult. Whatever criticisms were visible, were there only to “cover up” aspects of his cult that were present. Meanwhile, “the idea that, despite some mistakes, it was Stalin that led the entire struggle and achieved victory in the Great Patriotic War” confronted and undoubtedly confused readers. The damage done by the leadership of the state was omitted and, worse, the “renegades” responsible were “unjustly glorified.” The end result was that “these volumes on the history of the Great Patriotic War bear the heavy burden of the cult of personality while being presented as if they were written based on the decisions of the 20th Congress of the CPSU. This complicates the restoration of historical truth and plays into the hands of our detractors, making it difficult to bring up our soldiers in the spirit of the 20th and 21st Congress of the CPSU.”⁴⁸

In describing Stalin’s leadership, Leshchinskii believed “what’s written is often the same as was evident during the period of the Cult of Personality,” which was greatly upsetting.⁴⁹ Unfortunately, he could not give a detailed explanation as to why the war’s

⁴⁷ Fokin et al., 10.

⁴⁸ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 309, l. 102, 103.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 82.

history remained mired in the shadow of Stalin's Cult. "Every now and then we return to this issue and I am deeply worried about what has happened and I cannot be satisfied with any superficial explanation." Throughout the writing process for these volumes, much was done to prevent any type of criticism from being carried over onto the pages of the war's official history. At the end of his letter, Leshchinskii asked the editorial board "to organize a critique of the incorrect positions contained within the text of these books" as "it will help to eliminate the remains of the cult of personality within the historical sciences...and establish a deep scholarly work on the history of the Great Patriotic War."⁵⁰ Only in the mid-1960s would meetings be held to discuss the continued impact of Stalin's cult on the war's history, unfortunately the final result still contained many weaknesses.

Partisans, Khrushchev and Stalin in the War

The partisan movement also received a fairly detailed amount of criticism and discussion.⁵¹ The Party's role in the evolution of the partisan movement came under review, as did that of Stalin, Khrushchev and local organizations. Beginning with the prewar period, Leshchinskii's letter raised concerns over the lack of attention to the "extermination in 1937-38 of the valuable, specially trained and battle hardened [partisan] cadres, about the destruction of large networks of bases, and the termination of

⁵⁰ This letter was written on 27 April 1962, meetings held to discuss the cult's influence on the war's history took place 2-3 years later. Consequently there is some possibility that Leshchinskii's letter did influence the editorial board and committee members. *Ibid.*, 80-81.

⁵¹ In February 1959 an entire meeting was devoted to discussing source material on the partisan war within the war's official history, both Leshchinskii and Starinov participated in this meeting. See RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 76.

theoretical and academic work and the development of special equipment. Not one of the volumes features the distortions in the leadership by Stalin, Ponomarenko and Malenkov in the partisan struggle. There is no exposure of the repressions, whose victims during the war included a series of partisan commanders and commissars.” Additionally, since many partisan formations began due to soldiers falling into German encirclements, and considering the lack of coverage in the official history of German encirclement operations in 1941, Leshchinskii pointed out the silence that greeted “the indiscriminate distrust which was spread about those people and soldiers who fought in encirclements.”⁵²

Aside from the important role played by former Red Army soldiers who found themselves encircled or in the German rear, another letter, written by a Stepan Surzhik to the editors of the official history, discussed the creation of partisan detachments from local party committees, the police, court, and prosecutor’s office, which the letter’s author witnessed first-hand. As these detachments took to the woods, many other “ordinary communists” were “left to fend for themselves.” Without assignments from higher officials, who presumably retreated with the Red Army, these men and women were left without any leadership and “subsequently were killed by the fascists.” These issues – the creation of partisan detachments and the elimination of other communists that were left without direction – needed to be addressed within the war’s official history.⁵³ While a “significant amount of time has passed since” the end of the war,

⁵² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 309, l. 85-86.

⁵³ In September 1955 those imprisoned during and after the war for collaboration, including former prisoners of war who were liberated by the advancing Red Army, were amnestied by the Supreme Soviet. Additionally, after Marshal Zhukov presented a commission report on 29 June 1956 “the Presidium

wrote Surzhik, there were still numerous issues that the population was unfamiliar with that needed to be detailed and explained. Boltin replied stating: “You correctly drew our attention to the...composition of the partisan groups in the border areas of the USSR at the beginning of the war. Your comments will be taken into account in the 6th volume of the ‘History of the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union.’ Thank you for your letter.”⁵⁴

A letter sent to the editors of *Pravda* from a former partisan, a Spaniard who fought against the Wehrmacht in the Soviet Union, complimented the efforts put into the creation of the first volume, which he found “interesting,” “useful,” and “well written” in its portrayal of the war against Hitler’s Germany, “which saved humanity from the brown plague.” He was happy to see for the first time the Soviet Union’s role in the Spanish Civil War openly described and outlined as it explained “how the Soviet Union helped the Spanish people in the struggle against fascist invaders and Franco’s gangs.” Yet simultaneously he thought the partisan struggle, which was “widely praised” on the “40th Anniversary of the Soviet state,” was completely absent from the first volume. He wanted the portrayal of the partisan struggle to include an international dimension as those fighting against the German invaders of Soviet territory included “peoples from other countries,” who “would very much like to see the internationalism during the years of the Patriotic War, especially in the partisan struggle, to be reflected in subsequent

accepted its recommendation to amnesty, release, and compensate those Soviet POWS from the war who were still in prison camps.” Hopf, 150, 180.

⁵⁴ RGASPI, f. 72, op. 22, d. 916, l. 2, 3. Although the sixth volume included a chapter on the “War of the Soviet population in the enemy’s rear,” the 32 pages devoted to partisan activity mainly focused on the latter period of the war and were filled with references to numbers of units, numbers of active partisans, names of partisan and local party commanders, etc., without much references to the issues Surzhik brought up for discussion. V. A. Vasilenko et al., *Istoriia Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny Sovetskogo Soiuz, 1941-1945*, Vol. 6 (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel’stvo Ministerstva Oborony Soiuz, 1965), 251-282.

volumes.”⁵⁵ Thus, Soviet efforts to show the unity of the people were lacking when it came to the international arena. In part, this could signify a reflection of the continued Soviet interest in presenting the war as one that was mainly fought and won by the Red Army, rather than the allies, or even volunteers who joined the Red Army’s war effort.

Further weaknesses were noted when it was pointed out that “not one name of the organizers of some of the largest partisan movements in Lithuania [was] mentioned...” Similarly, the Institute of Party History in Belorussia recommended “a fuller disclosure of the fighting in Belorussia by partisan and the local population against Nazi attempts to seize the harvest of 1943, indicating the names of those who performed major diversions, and highlight the activities of the Komsomol-youth groups in Minsk and other [cities].” All such comments were “taken into account for future editions.”⁵⁶

Leshchinskii voiced further concerns over the presentation of the partisan movement. He focused on the ninth chapter of the third volume, which dealt with the expansion of the Partisan War in the enemy’s rear (November 1942-December 1943), and complained that it was “written at a low academic level and contains coarse methodological distortions. In accordance with the flawed concept of the period of the cult of personality...it lacks the ability to educate the reader in a correct understanding of the source and driving force of the Soviet partisan movement, which were the socialist system and the correct leadership of the Communist Party of the masses.” In general, he claimed that the party’s leadership within the partisan movement lacked analysis, a “fact” that “cannot [be] ignore[d].” His emphasis on the importance of the Party mirrored the

⁵⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 309, l. 20-21.

⁵⁶ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 586, l. 85-86, 178.

party line during Khrushchev's time.⁵⁷ This focus on the partisan war echoed the discussions of the commission where they attempted to ascertain the "nature" of the partisan movement and the Party's role, unfortunately it appeared that an emphasis was still missing.

According to Leshchinskii, the partisan struggle in the rear of the enemy, as presented in the official history, was mainly stimulated and developed as a result of the occupation regime, "when Nazi atrocities could only strengthen the desires of the masses to fight." There were two opposing narratives revolving around the "motivation" for the struggle in the enemy's rear. "Our opponents claim that if not for the 'excessive cruelty' of the occupiers, then there would have been no partisan movement," and this "dangerous" claim was not challenged or criticized by the authors. "There is no feeling of an understanding of the popular nature of the struggle" nor was the "correct approach" taken in regards to the issues of the size of the partisan movement or the "national support" they were provided by the local population.⁵⁸ He pointed to "miserly figures" that claimed "at the end of 1943 in Ukraine only some 12-15,000 partisans operated and in the occupied regions of the Russian federation – up to 40,000..."⁵⁹ He insisted these figures did not include partisans that were not part of the central headquarters of the partisan movement or "the helpers of numerous partisan contingents..."⁶⁰ Although a

⁵⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 309, l. 83-84, 85.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 84, 85.

⁵⁹ Cited figures are from Petrov et al., 447.

⁶⁰ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 309, l. 84. An adjustment to figures was also requested where it was specified that during the period of May-July 1943 partisan detachments derailed not "several hundred" trains, as the war's history claimed, but "more accurately – 1814." RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 586, l. 87-88.

critic of the multi-volume history and Stalin's cult, Leshchinskii was reliant on some aspects of the Stalinist narrative as it was crafted from 1941-1945, which cited large numbers of partisans operating in the enemy rear as a reflection of not only the all-encompassing nature of the war but also the popularity of the Soviet cause against that of the Nazis. In retrospect, fully freeing oneself from the dominance of Stalin's cult and its impact on the war's narrative might be asking too much of any 1960s Soviet citizen, and Leshchinskii's detailed criticism of the continued dominance of Stalin's cult throughout the war's official history speaks for itself in that he was able to engage with larger, more fundamental questions about the prewar period, the war itself and Stalin's role.

Starinov's letter to the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union encompassed at its heart a critique of the third volume, specifically the presentation of the partisan movement and Stalin's cult. The letter was most likely forwarded to the Institute of Marxism-Leninism and provoked a 24-page reply, addressing many of his points. Starinov emphasized that he viewed the role "of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine" in "leading the nationwide struggle in the rear of the enemy in occupied territories" as being diminished when the partisan struggle in Ukraine was described. There was some truth to Starinov's accusation. Looking at the war's history, the authors concentrated on the "Communist Party" and "Central Committee of the Party" rather than republican institutions.⁶¹ In

⁶¹ One section reads: "In the difficult struggle of the first period of the war, Soviet partisans gained experienced [as the] partisan command and political cadres developed. The Communist Party carefully studied the experience [gained by the partisans] to compile and disseminate it, directing the activities of Party organizations in the enemy rear to further develop the partisan movement." Another claims the Central Committee of the Party played "A huge role in the development of the partisan movement that took place in early September 1942" which featured a "meeting of commanders and commissars of partisan detachments and formations." Petrov et al., 447.

general, the reply to Starinov presented an interesting view of the criticisms Starinov levelled against the war's official history and the defense offered by the editors. More often than not the latter followed the party line and stressed the importance of the Communist Party for the victory achieved over Germany. Starinov was accused of "manipulating" facts, "distorting" parts of the text to suit his needs, making "irresponsible statements," as well as utilizing "contrived allegations."⁶²

Khrushchev's importance during the war and for the partisan war effort was emphasized by both Starinov and the editors in their reply to him as Khrushchev himself touted his role organizing the partisan movement in Ukraine.⁶³ The editors defended themselves by claiming that the activities of the Communist Party of Ukraine were discussed in the volume and pointing to how much Khrushchev's role was emphasized, in part reflecting how the cult, to some extent, had transferred over from Stalin to Khrushchev – Khrushchev's name was mentioned dozens of times throughout the third volume.⁶⁴ In effect, if Stalin was overwhelmingly found throughout the second volume then the third exhibited a move from the continued dominance of Stalin's role in the war to that of Khrushchev. Starinov put forth the idea that Khrushchev was instrumental and performed "a great service in the establishment, improvement and maintenance of" equipment used during the partisan struggle against the Germans. In October 1941, according to Starinov, on Khrushchev's orders large numbers of mines with delayed

⁶² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 586, l. 152, 156, 158, 166, 167.

⁶³ Khrushchev, *Commissar, 1918-1945*, 473.

⁶⁴ Although Khrushchev and the Communist Party of Ukraine were mentioned, they were really only visible on two pages of a twelve page section. Petrov et al., 448-449. That a new cult was developing around Khrushchev was noticed as early as March of 1956. Hopf, 180.

action fuses were ordered produced, specifically for use in the enemy's rear. Buildings throughout Kharkov were mined on Khrushchev's initiative that then "dealt huge irreparable damage to the enemy" after Kharkov was evacuated. He described how "Nikita Sergeevich was personally interested in the course of manufacturing mines, the training of cadres, the progress of mining, and gave valuable tips on the technology and tactics of mining."⁶⁵

In rare instances Khrushchev's declarations were utilized as support for or against positions in order to settle disputes, but these statements usually supported already well-known positions rather than championing new, original ideas. Thus, in response to Starinov's claim that the number of partisan detachments was underestimated for the beginning of 1943, the editors replied that "the author of the letter is wrong...all information on the number of partisans in Ukraine, contained in this chapter, are taken from the memos of comrade N. S. Khrushchev to the central committee VKP(b), as well as the report of the headquarters of the Ukrainian partisan movement... There is no other [trustworthy] data on the number of Ukrainian partisans, including in the hands of comrade Starinov."⁶⁶

⁶⁵ With Khrushchev's permission, the mining of many objectives was carried out" at times to the "horror" of Red Army commanders who were watching mining operations going on before their eyes. As did Starinov, others also commended Khrushchev as well as the chapters on the partisan movement in 1941-1942. Additional mention of Khrushchev's role included letters he wrote to Stalin concerning "the question about the strengthening of agitation work in the temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine" and another to "the Union of Sumi Partisans" that discussed how to strengthen the partisan movement in Ukraine. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 390, l. 156, 189.

⁶⁶ It was also mentioned that "Much of the material that characterizes the growth of the partisan movement in Ukraine was sent to the Department of History of the Great Patriotic War IML at the CPSU Central Committee Institute of Party History of the Central Committee Communist Party of Ukraine." RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 586, l. 152.

Starinov also accused the authors of exaggerating the role of the Supreme High Command (STAVKA), which Starinov considered the equivalent of Stalin, to the detriment of individual commanders of armies and fronts. The response claimed the contrary, insisting that STAVKA's role in the war was not exaggerated and that the war's history presented "often greater and brighter than any other works on the history of the war...the large and often decisive role of commanders of fronts, armies and individual commanders and superiors in the planning and implementation of major combat operations."⁶⁷

The editors defended their portrayal of both the army and Stalin by describing the presentation of the planning phase for the Red Army's operation to encircle the Germans at Stalingrad. In "illuminat[ing] the process of the development of the counter-offensive with the aim of the encirclement and destruction of the enemy between the Volga and Don" the third volume "convincingly refutes" the previously dominant narrative of the war that "attributed the authorship of this plan personally to Stalin" and assigned responsibility to the "creative activity of the commanders of the Southwestern, Don, and Stalingrad fronts, the General Staff and the Supreme command..." Moreover, the third volume depicted a STAVKA plan that was "significantly corrected" by "the Front Military Council" as the original plan detailed a "relatively shallow breakthrough in the enemy's defense" while "the Military Council of the Stalingrad Front in opposition to this" suggested an operation that would "take place on a broader front" and "to a greater depth." "In this way," argue the editors, "the content of the first chapter reveals that in planning one of the most important operations of the war the role of front commanders

⁶⁷ Ibid., 150, 168, 169, 170.

turned out to be no less [important] than the role of STAVKA.” Coincidentally, when recording his memoirs Khrushchev echoes this version of the planning for the Stalingrad offensive when he claims that the idea for an encirclement of the German Sixth Army either originated with a report he submitted with Eremenko or was independently yet concurrently developed by his front’s military council and STAVKA.⁶⁸

The editors were partly correct, but what they did not mention was the fact that the “decisive role of commanders” was often centered around or directly connected to the presence of Khrushchev throughout the third volume. Thus, for instance, the defense of Stalingrad mentioned Khrushchev in tandem with the commanders of the 62nd and 64th armies, Vasili Chuikov and Mikhail Shumilov, respectively. Similarly, the planning for and the implementation of the counteroffensive around Stalingrad centered around the commander of the Stalingrad Front, Eremenko, and the member of the front’s Military Soviet, Khrushchev.⁶⁹ Simultaneously, the presence of STAVKA was almost as frequently encountered in the third volume as in the second.

The editors took a similar position regarding the role of STAVKA and front commanders when it came to the Battle of Kursk. “The commanders of the Voronezh and Central Fronts correctly and in a timely manner predicted the enemy’s summer offensive and on the basis of this recommended to STAVKA a plan of action by Soviet troops...STAVKA endorsed this plan and the troops achieved a decisive victory.”

⁶⁸ Ibid; Khrushchev, *Commissar, 1918-1945*, 432-433.

⁶⁹ Petrov et al., 13, 17, 37, 41,

Khrushchev figured at the center of these plans as well. He was a member of the Military Soviet of the Voronezh Front.⁷⁰

The editors argued that Starinov was “deliberately” implying that “STAVKA” was the equivalent of Stalin and not a “collective body,” which in either case was “far from being praised in the third volume.” Contrary to what Starinov claimed, the third volume “emphasizes the role of initiative ‘from below,’ the initiative of the front commanders. This idea, not the idea of glorifying Stalin, as comrade Starinov is arguing, permeates the contents of this volume.” Similarly, Starinov accused the authors of diminishing “the role of the masses in achieving victory” and replacing it “with a glorification of Stalin.” The response was that “this accusation is completely groundless.” From published reviews, there was a “unanimous opinion” that the “question of the masses in the struggle against the German-Fascist invaders in 1943,” was offered “fairly complete coverage. Within the volume there is extensive factual material showing the heroic feats of soldiers and workers.”⁷¹ The editors of the war’s history believed if they did not overstate Stalin’s significance they did not play into the cult that was created under his leadership, but others appeared to believe that continuing to view the war in the spirit of the cult mean something wholly different.

⁷⁰ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 586, l. 168; Petrov et al., 246.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Starinov's Removal

Close to the end of the reply to Starinov, some accusations were made that put in question the position of both parties involved in the exchange. The contested nature of the memory of the war comes out most clearly in how Starinov was treated and how he viewed the publication of the war's official history. He worked with the commission as a "consultant" from its beginning in 1958 until his continued questioning of the war's narrative forced his eventual removal on 31 October 1961 and his, in turn, denunciation to the Central Committee of the continued presence of Stalin's cult within the war's history. Starinov's career, spanning from the Russian and Spanish Civil Wars, through the Winter War and the Second World War, mean his views of the final product in the form of an official history of the Great Patriotic War deserve some recognition. Starinov commanded troops and participated in the partisan war in various capacities from 1941-1942, helping in Kharkov's defense and in blowing up enemy railroads, before being tasked as head of the military mission to Yugoslavia in 1943-1944 to advise partisans there, Tito's in particular.⁷²

Boltin, the author of the response, claimed Starinov "did not sufficiently help the editors of the volumes correctly, from a Marxist standpoint, in highlighting the issues of the partisan movement." After his dismissal "comrade Starinov began to speak out – orally and in written form – with various criticisms of the labor, which he himself bears some responsibility for." Boltin summed up his thoughts at the close of his rebuttal: "Comrade Starinov's letter is not written from an objective position and does not come from a desire to help overcome the effects of the cult of personality. It is overall highly

⁷² Chubar'ian, 549-550.

biased and carries a demagogic character. Wittingly or unwittingly, this letter showcases a misleading view of the Party Central Committee.”⁷³ Meanwhile, Boltin and the rest of the commission continued to view themselves as Marxists capable of producing a “truthful” and “objective” work on the history of the war, which all participated in to one extent or another. The use of a collective authorship and editorship meant personal bias could be avoided and prevented, or that a new Stalinist conformist could emerge out of a “consensus” view which Starinov seemingly could not abide.

Boltin claimed Starinov authored the letter “due to personal motivations” that were a result of “the fact that the editors of the third volume...refused to allow comrade Starinov to be included as one of the authors of the chapter, which highlighted the development of the partisan movement in the second period of the war and did not agree with many of his fundamental positions on this issue.” These “fundamental positions” included Starinov’s “deni[al]” of “the role of the party underground in the development of the nationwide struggle in the rear of the enemy, and the beginning of the partisan movement.” Most likely Starinov disagreed with the idea that the central Party was instrumental in the beginning of the partisan movement and wanted local organizations to be highlighted for their role in the movement’s creation. Boltin concluded by claiming that “Comrade Starinov tried to impose his erroneous views onto the editors...and when they were rejected, he undertook a never-ending ‘battle’ and wrote a complaint.”

Boltin made further claims against Starinov:

[he] completely denied and continues to deny the influence of the occupation regime on the growth of the partisan movement. Simultaneously, he muddles the question of responsibility for the atrocities and heinous crimes that the fascists perpetrated in the occupied territory of our country. Comrade Starinov opposed

⁷³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 586, l. 148-150.

the broad and comprehensive discussion of the “rail war” as a complex partisan operation behind [enemy] lines [against] railroads, and in general denied its value... Comrade Starinov repeatedly put forward groundless accusations against the Central headquarters of the partisan movement. He tried to impose [the idea] onto the workers of the section of the history of the Great Patriotic War the incorrect idea that the TsMPD [Central Headquarters of the Partisan Movement] not only did not play a positive role but also restrained the beginning of a partisan war, confusing partisans and engaging in fraud. Meanwhile, as we know, the TsMPD, in fact, was the military organ of the Central Committee of the VKP(b). Thus the accusations against it are at the same time directed toward the leadership of the Central Committee of the partisan movement.⁷⁴

It appears both Boltin and Starinov utilized the only tools at their disposal that they were familiar with. Starinov denounced the war’s official history, but he in turn was denounced by Boltin for his polemical attacks against not only the editors but various government organizations that took part in the war. Neither side presented an objective view of the war. Their personal experiences during the war and the political atmosphere they found themselves in dictated the framework of their arguments. Starinov wanted his own personal experiences and memories to become representative of the evolution of the partisan movement in the enemy rear, while highlighting the important role Khrushchev played in the war effort, Boltin, however, continued to reiterate the party line, which at the very least appeased Khrushchev and the current administration.

⁷⁴ Ibid. Starinov was put in charge of a “school” for partisan special operations training (VOSHON – Vysshiaia operativnaia shkola osobogo naznacheniiia) in August 1942, which came under the direction of TsMPD, so there’s a possibility that Starinov would have had something of an insider’s knowledge of the organization’s history during the war. Chubar’ian, 550.

Contested Memories and Force Correlations

Echoing the letter about the storming of the Reichstag, from the beginning of this chapter, were additional complaints about inaccurate portrayals of other military engagements. An editor commented that in recounting the defense of Sevastopol, the soldiers of battery No. 35 were described as fighting to the last shell as “the defenders of the battery died heroically.” As it turned out, the battery commander survived. “He said that indeed they fought to the last shell, then blew up the battery, and retreated, but in all Soviet sources it is written that they die...” Similar “inaccuracies,” it was claimed, were found throughout the war’s history.⁷⁵

Issues concerning recognition for famous or well-known operations became contested territory, especially considering the egos that were often involved on the part of members of military councils, like Khrushchev, and commanding officers. Consequently, the former commander of the 50th Army, Colonel-General Ivan Boldin, wanted “to specifically emphasize that the defeat of the German 9th Army and the capture of the bridgehead on the Desna River in September 1943 was not carried out solely by the 2nd Guards Cavalry Corps but by all the troops of the 50th Army.”⁷⁶

⁷⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 32, l. 12.

⁷⁶ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22; d. 586; l. 85-86. Similarly, in the aftermath of the Soviet encirclement of German forces during the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi operation, a T-34 tank was mounted on a pedestal in the center of the town of Zvenigorodka and the inscription memorializing the event read: “Here on January 28, 1944, the ring around the German invaders encircled in the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi area was closed. The crew of a tank belonging to the 2nd Ukrainian Front 155th Red Banner Zvenigorodka Tank Brigade under Lieutenant-Colonel Ivan Proshin and including Lieutenant Evgeny Khokhlov, driver-mechanic Anatoly Andreyev and turret commander Yakov Zaitsev shook hands with tank-men of the 1st Ukrainian Front. Glory to the heroes of our country!” Unfortunately, the inscription fully omitted the tankers of the 1st Ukrainian Front. Marshal of the Soviet Union Zhukov believed “This oversight should be rectified, and the names of the heroes from the 1st Ukrainian Front who broke through to Zvenigorodka added...” Zhukov, *Marshal of Victory*, vol. 2, 241. In general this operation was rife with controversy as the commanding officer of the 2nd Ukrainian Front, Ivan Konev, received the entirety of the recognition for the destruction of

A similar situation was described in a letter by a Vladimir Ter-David'ian to Pospelov, highlighting the inaccurate portrayal of the liberation of Rostov. Ter-David'ian was independently studying the combat path of the 28th Army, which liberated Rostov, and found that the history of the war described a battalion, under the command of Gukas Madoian, as the first to break into the city.⁷⁷ In the ensuing fighting for the Rostov railway station, the battalion's forces withstood dozens of enemy counterattacks without retreating, for which the battalion commander was awarded the title Hero of the Soviet Union.⁷⁸ While Ter-David'ian did not dispute the merits and heroism of Madoian, he was upset that the history misrepresented the size of his force – in truth it was a composite unit made up of most of the rifle battalions within the 159th Independent Rifle Brigade, rather than a sole battalion. As it turned out, the description offered within the third volume “denies the courage and valor of the soldiers of the other battalions of the 159th Independent Rifle Brigade.” Worse, on the 20th Anniversary of the liberation of Rostov a memorial plaque was installed that reiterated the false narrative found within the volume. As a result, many of those who participated in the fighting and liberation of Rostov came to read the “inscription on the plaque with resentment” while those defending the version of Rostov's liberation memorialized by the state “refer to the third

the majority of the encircled enemy while Nikolai Vatutin, commander of the 1st Ukrainian Front, felt insulted and overlooked.

⁷⁷ When Khrushchev was recording his memoirs, he recounted the 28th Army's liberation of Rostov, which he described as being liberated “virtually without a fight.” In fact, Khrushchev gave credit for the German retreat from the city to forces operating to the north of the city (the 28th Army was moving against Rostov from the south). In looking at the “essence of the matter” the commander of the 28th Army, V. F. Gerasimenko, received credit for the city's liberation although his troops “didn't have to do anything special to accomplish that. On the other hand, the general who led the offensive farther north and forced the Germans to abandon the city remained in the shadows and was not given any particularly honorable mention.” Khrushchev, *Commissar, 1918-1945*, 480-481.

⁷⁸ Petrov et al., 98.

volume of the history of the war” as a source for support.⁷⁹ The result was an inaccurate portrayal of Rostov’s liberation that when questioned utilized an inaccurate official state sponsored narrative for confirmation.

A further major point of contention, as it was in previous meetings between authors and editors, was force correlation figures. One letter pointed to the lack of force correlations between the Red Army and Wehrmacht “during the beginning period of the war, and in some cases in later periods of the war (beginning of the summer campaign of 1942, before the battle on the Orel-Kursk, etc.).” Figures for both sides were a necessity so that readers could understand the situation that greeted the Red Army when the Germans invaded. While the official history stated that along a front of 2000 km there were nine “covering” armies, “there is no mention of the amount of soldiers, tanks, aircraft, artillery, etc., these armies were composed of.” The reader, a Ia. Bran’ko writing to the editors of the official history, wanted to know why it was “not possible to present a detailed comparison chart of the ratio of forces that existed on 22 June 1941” when similar information was available for other periods of the war.⁸⁰ Furthermore, some operations included figures of German troops, like the Orel-Kursk Operation, but comparable figures for Red Army troops were missing.⁸¹

⁷⁹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 585, l. 122-123.

⁸⁰ Information on the number of planes received by the Soviet Air Force in the first half of 1941 was absent as well. Figures were provided for the “beginning of the third German assault on Sevastopol...the balance of power at the start of our counteroffensive at Stalingrad” and the beginning of 1944. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 309, l. 285.

⁸¹ Ibid., 284. Similar issues could be found in other works on the Great Patriotic War, specifically, in Viktor Anfilov, *Nachalo Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny: Voennno-istoricheskii ocherk* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1962) and S. P. Platonov, *Vtoraia Mirovaia voina 1939-1945, Voennno-istoricheskii ocherk* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1958).

The need for a clear understanding of Red Army losses concerned more than just an interest in analyzing how well or poorly the Red Army performed. The “countless losses” suffered by soldiers and civilians were admitted but readers wanted to “be finally shown what the war cost us.” Only casualties for select operations or periods of the war were provided, however, masking total losses for the entirety of the war. Numbers needed to be cited by Soviet sources so that readers could “learn about our sacrifices from our own sources, and not to use data which was provided by our former enemies.” Foreign authors, wrote Bran’ko, estimated losses at 10% of the population of the Soviet Union, and provided troop losses for each period of the war, something that needed to be done by Soviet sources. Moreover, there “should have been more room reserved for criticisms of foreign authors about Soviet military losses.” Supporting this line of thinking was a letter addressed to Boltin from Colonel-General A. Zheltov, the latter wanted references to “unconfirmed German information [on] losses” to be removed.⁸² Additionally, Bran’ko pointed specifically to the argument made in the second volume that German estimates of Red Army casualties in the Kiev encirclement were exaggerated. The authors of the second volume claimed that the starting force of the South Western Front, which was defending the Kiev region, numbered 677,085 and due to the month long battles in the region, and the numerous forces that supposedly escaped the German encirclement, no more than a third of the original starting force could have been taken prisoner.⁸³ But without corresponding Soviet information, claims by the likes

⁸² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 309, l. 131, 283, 284.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 283; Fokin et al., 110-111. Most German accounts give a figure of 665,000 Soviet prisoners of war. For German figures on the Kiev encirclement, see David Stahel, *Kiev 1941: Hitler’s Battle for Supremacy in the East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 301. The latest Russian figures for Soviet losses in the Kiev encirclement are 616,304 missing, confirming that German estimates were closer

of Kurt Tippelskirch, who “determined the losses of our forces only for the period of June 1941 to May 1942 in numerous encirclements to be 2.8 million prisoners of war and more than 3,000 tanks and guns,” could be mistaken for the truth.⁸⁴ Bran’ko thought it necessary “for a better understanding of the heroic struggle of the Soviet people...to include in the last volume several dozen tables.”⁸⁵

Readers were conscious of the evasive nature of the wording used in the war’s history, similar to the propaganda produced during the war, to hide the true extent of enemy losses. For instance, the second volume mentioned how the offensive by the Soviet 20th Army resulted in the liberation of 212 settlements and the destruction and capture of “a large number of German soldiers and officers.”⁸⁶ Lieutenant General Shtromberg referenced an example from the third volume: “During the winter campaign the Red Army destroyed or captured, in terms of trophies, tens of thousands of guns, mortars, tanks and aircraft...”⁸⁷ Shtromberg insisted that “destroyed” and “captured” are two separate categories that could not be lumped together and neither could “mortars and tanks or mortars and airplanes.” “Such a simplification may be acceptable in a

to reality compared to the claims by the authors of the second volume. G. F. Krivosheev, ed., *Velikaia Otechestvennaia bez grifa sekretnosti. kniga poter’* (Moscow: Veche, 2009), 85.

⁸⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 309, l. 283. Recent Russian estimates put Red Army missing and/or prisoners of war from 22 June 1941 – 30 June 1942 at over 2.8 million, once again verifying that German estimates were close to the truth. Krivosheev, 60.

⁸⁵ These tables should include: 1. The balance of forces of the two sides before the war, before large strategic operations, where these ratios are not mentioned; 2. Comparative tables of our losses and German forces and the civilian population based on large operations and various periods of the war; 3. Comparative tables of military equipment, of industries and agriculture during periods of the war, [as well as] civilian and military casualties of both sides. Ibid., 282. Others also referenced force correlation inadequacies throughout the official history. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 586, l. 221, 223.

⁸⁶ Fokin et al., 325.

⁸⁷ Petrov et al., 148.

newspaper article, but it is out of place in such a serious work as the ‘History [of the Great Patriotic War].’”⁸⁸ The reference to a “newspaper article” could readily point to the memories still fresh in the minds of many of how the Sovinformburo covered the course of the war. However, while such muddling of information from mouthpieces of the state propaganda apparatus under Stalin was expected, within government sanctioned publications on as important a topic as the official history of the war, by contrast, readers sought sophistication and more organized and scrupulous analysis than the finished product offered.

Omissions and Heroes

Although no history of the war could hope to discuss every facet and event, some readers were upset by the omission of important aspects of the war effort. A retired invalid, who served as a commander of a reconnaissance tank platoon, wanted to know why two generals, who took part in the Kursk Offensive, were nowhere to be found within the pages of the third and fourth volumes. Additionally, he wanted to acknowledge the grandiose work done by the army’s armored and artillery workshops, “these were truly factories on wheels, the guys did wonders in their repairs of tanks and artillery guns, as well as captured weapons, etc...I think it is necessary that in the last volumes of the History of the Great Patriotic War to highlight some type of supportive work which contributed to our victory over Germany.”⁸⁹ A lack of attention to these workshops could have been a result of not wanting to point out the number of Soviet

⁸⁸ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 586, l. 204.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 225.

tanks and artillery in need of repair, which would point to enemy achievements and Soviet inadequacies.

Another omission was noted in a letter regarding the 16th Lithuanian Rifle Division during the battle of Kursk. The author, a P. Shtaras, senior researcher of the Lithuanian branch of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism, highlighted the activities of the division commenting how “in the defense battles initiated by the enemy on 5 and 6 July, part of the 16th Lithuanian Division completely eliminated the enemy’s attempts to break through to the rear, kept the integrity of the connection of...two armies together and contributed to the overall failure of the German offensive.” He added that, “for defensive and offensive operations in the Battle of Kursk, the 16th Lithuanian Rifle Division was thanked by the Supreme Commander” as well as the front and army commanders. “More than two thousand soldiers and officers were awarded orders and medals. Two were awarded heroes of the Soviet Union...” and yet the unit was somehow absent from the descriptions of the Battle of Kursk.⁹⁰

Additionally, Shtaras’s letter, written on 10 July 1962, brought up aspects of the Holocaust that took place in Kaunas.⁹¹ It should be noted that trials against mass killings in the Baltics took place and were discussed in reports throughout the 1960s. Shtaras thought discussions “about the extermination of the Soviet people” needed to include “Fort IX,” also known in Kaunas as the “fort of death,” “because there fascist cannibals

⁹⁰ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 586, l. 181, 184.

⁹¹ Readers also noticed that Nazi atrocities in general, during the early period of the war, were not fully documented. While they were covered in Lvov, other cities were omitted. RGASPI f. 71; op. 22; d. 391, l. 341.

killed 80 thousand people of different nationalities: Jews, Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussian, and Lithuanians. In addition to Soviet people, the Nazis destroyed in Fort IX citizens of France, Austria, Czechoslovakia and other occupied countries of Europe.” Preserved were inscriptions in different languages that littered the walls of the fort’s chambers. “Here are some of them: ‘Here died 900 Frenchmen’, ‘We are burning bodies and awaiting death! Brothers, avenge us!’”⁹² He considered Fort IX a “monument to the victims of Hitlerite terror,” which carried a significance for the entirety of the Soviet Union, “it should therefore be mentioned, even if briefly” within the history of the war since the volumes were in part representative of “the story of the resistance of the Soviet people to Hitlerite invaders.”⁹³

With respect to the Holocaust, another letter took issue with Auschwitz being assigned the description of most “terrible.” Auschwitz, it was argued, was incomparable to death camps [*лагеря смерти*] that were made first and foremost for Jews [*прежде всего для евреев*] (a minor admission about the targeting of Jews for death), such as Treblinka, Sobibor, Chelmno and Bełżec. In addition, in a comparison between “living conditions of Soviet prisoners of war in Komorovo and Auschwitz – it turns out that in the latter they were far better.”⁹⁴ Thus, while some continued to portray the Holocaust as an event that touched all nations and nationalities within Germany’s grasp, others subtly hinted at Jewish victims being the dominant category.

⁹² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 586, l. 179-180; Lucjan Dobroszycki and Jeffrey S. Gurock, eds., *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union: Studies and Sources on the Destruction of the Jews in the Nazi-occupied Territories of the USSR, 1941-45* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), 40-42.

⁹³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 586, l. 178-179.

⁹⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 390, l. 35-36.

The silence that greeted much of the Holocaust was also evident when it came to Andrei Vlasov. One veteran, who only signed his last name, Kovalev, wrote enquiring why there was no information offered about Vlasov's Army. "There is not a single word about it. Why is that? It is also history." Aside from the ROA (Russian Liberation Army), commented Kovalev, there were also battalions fighting in the German Army made up of Ukrainians, Tatars and others, yet "why is it necessary to write out this [information], it seems to me that this is not right." The question persisted in why these men decided to join the Germans and wage war "against their brothers, against their own Motherland." It was not because they were "upset by the Soviet regime," claimed Kovalev, but then why take up arms? Erroneous views about what exactly Vlasov represented also needed to be addressed. The author explained that in talking with others, including generals, they held the mistaken belief that Vlasov went over to the Germans with his entire army. This flawed notion "slanders honest soldiers and officers who were under the command of Vlasov." Such views needed to be corrected and addressed within the official history of the war, which was "obliged to give an answer and to draw firm conclusions" from the actions of Vlasov and his troops, both before and after he joined the Germans.⁹⁵ Comparable to Vlasov, the controversial figure of Stepan Bandera went unmentioned but Ukrainian nationalists serving under Bandera, and others, were on a few occasions linked to the German occupation and accused of being German agents.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 397, l. 300-301.

⁹⁶ Petrov et al., 439; M. M. Minasian et al., *Istoriia Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny Sovetskogo Soiuz, 1941-1945*, Vol. 4 (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo Ministerstva Oborony Soiuz, 1962), 636.

Similar to the omission of any mention of Vlasov and his army, the previously mentioned Surzhik was also disappointed that nothing about prisoners of war from both the Red Army and the German Wehrmacht was included in the war's official history. Surzhik wrote how "During the Patriotic War thousands of prisoners of war died in fascist death camps. Stalin despised Soviet POWs, who had been captured not of their own will, but due to the high command's mistakes." Furthermore, he claimed that "during the Patriotic War not one partisan detachment had an assignment to free prisoners of war located on the territory of the Soviet Union temporarily occupied by the Germans, despite the fact that each detachment had their own special assignments from the main headquarters in Moscow, this is a gross inexcusable Stalinist [decision]."⁹⁷

Unlike the absence of discussions concerning Vlasov, the Holocaust, and prisoners of war, heroes from the war period came under more scrutiny from commission members themselves, and official reviewers, than from readers. Matrosov's feat and prominence, for instance, were not questioned by readers. No one seemed to care why a Red Army soldier needed to sacrifice his life rather than defeat the enemy with skills and ingenuity or the weapons at his disposal provided by the state and armed forces. The biggest concern revolved around who was the first to accomplish specific heroic feats. Letters that arrived questioned why it was Matrosov's name that was attached to the selfless act of throwing himself over an enemy embrasure when others performed it before him and earned the same distinguished Hero of the Soviet Union award. For instance, a teacher from the Kyrgyz republic, on 13 July 1963 wrote to the head editor of

⁹⁷ RGASPI, f. 72, op. 22, d. 916, l. 2.

Pravda asking for clarification about who was the first to perform the feat Matrosov became famous for throughout the Soviet Union. The teacher's friend, Chollonbai Tuleberdiev, was also awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union for covering an enemy embrasure with his body at the beginning of August 1942, on the right bank of the Don River while part of the Voronezh Front. Matrosov's feat occurred in 1943 and both received the same decoration; yet only Matrosov's name was to be found throughout Soviet literature. The author "received letters from different regional schools and republics in which pioneers and Komsomol organizations" asked for details "to ascertain, which of them was the first" to perform their heroic deed. While Tuleberdiev performed his heroic feat before Matrosov, the press claimed the contrary. The letter was forwarded to Boltin who replied that the volume on the history of the war that discussed Matrosov also mentioned a similar feat occurring previously. He was not the first, and other instances were covered by the war's official history.⁹⁸

Previously, a letter arrived at the end of April in 1962, mentioning similar sacrifices made by Sergeant V. Vasil'kovskii and private Ia. Paderin. The deputy head of the second edition of the history of the war, A. Emel'ianov, replied and tried to explain that while both performed the feat before Matrosov, because the latter's name and exploit fell into the hands of some "lucky journalist, who publicized them through the press," the reading public became familiar with Matrosov before that of anyone else – what might have further illuminated Matrosov's action was that it coincided with the 25th Anniversary of the Red Army. While similar actions were described, even in major

⁹⁸ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 585, l. 327-328. The previously mentioned feat was performed by Ia. I. Bogdan, a Komsomol member. Petrov et al., 134, 146.

publications, their deeds were touted within units on a local level as no other figure reached the heights and popularity of Matrosov. This might have resulted from the numerous articles written about Matrosov and his feat being “displayed in fictional literature.”⁹⁹ What became evident through these exchanges was that no one could pinpoint exactly why Matrosov’s name was attached to this act, and those writing letters were mainly interested in who should receive the glory for being the first rather than questioning why such self-sacrificial acts occurred in the first place or so often.

The Allies and the Germans

When it came to the Western Allies and the Germans, ideas from readers contained a mixture of views. Aspects of the Stalinist narrative were readily recycled, as when an undated letter sent to *Voенно-istoricheskii zhurnal* by a reader claimed that “by June 1941” Germany conquered “almost all of Europe, putting its economy and partly its armed forces to serve in the war against the USSR.” Simultaneously, in a list of recommended alterations, a reader wanted it emphasized that “the US sought to weaken and bleed both the Soviet Union and Germany.” Meanwhile, Europe’s population, “fallen under the fascist yoke, looked with hope toward the Soviet Union,” a statement in tune with Ehrenburg’s articles from the war period, highlighting the liberating nature of the Soviet Union and Red Army. While downplaying the role of the allies, the author also wanted to emphasize the role of communist and Komsomol members with figures

⁹⁹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 396, l. 28.

provided that would show that members of both organizations “were the first to protect the homeland.”¹⁰⁰

Stalin’s cult seemingly left its mark on the reasons some readers provided for the opening of the highly anticipated Second Front in Western Europe. The allied landing in Normandy was portrayed as being due to Stalin’s ability to convince Churchill to finally move against Germany in France. However, one letter quoted Khrushchev as saying that “the allies were themselves in a hurry because they were afraid of being too late.”¹⁰¹ Thus, Khrushchev’s explanations were utilized against the Stalinist version of the war’s history, yet retained similar sentiments toward the goals of the duplicitous Western Allies.

Readers were similarly unhappy with the portrayal of the Germans during the war. The condemnation of how the enemy was depicted reflected a cross-section of Stalinist and anti-Stalinist rhetoric. Although “the volumes contain a fairly extensive and systematized amount of material on fascism,” Leshchinskii insisted that “the study of the question of German militarism in all three volumes (with rare exceptions) essentially revolves around” Stalin’s speeches and orders that were issued by the People’s Commissariat of Defense.¹⁰² Similar to the position adopted by Stalin when he was alive,

¹⁰⁰ In supporting the idea that the US wanted the Soviet Union and Germany to bleed each other dry the author of the letter indicated that Harry Truman’s speech during the initial period of the war should be utilized. Churchill also came under attack for his incorrect claim of Germany’s war economy suffering due to the allied bombing campaign when in fact German production increased in 1943. RGASPI, f. 72, op. 22, d. 309, l. 170, 177, 293.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 103. Letter sent to Army General A. A. Epishev by P. A. Aleksandrov, I. G. Starinov, and N. F. Avramenko and forwarded to the Institute of Marxism-Leninism on September 15, 1962.

¹⁰² Furthermore, “there are no attempts to expose the German general staff, moreover, to articulately explain to the reader that this was a conspiratorial imperialist organization which has been recreated in today’s FRG.” Ibid., 83.

“Hitler becomes the predominant figure [for blame].”¹⁰³ Pinpointing the numerous problems in the official history’s analysis of the enemy reflected “the limited research [done], and at the same time, how representations of the period of the Cult of Personality continue to dominate” the narrative of the war.¹⁰⁴

Arguing for and Against the Stalinist Narrative

For all the letters received that continually condemned the war’s history due to inaccuracies, half-truths or outright omissions, some argued that too much was disclosed and it was ruining the reputation of the Soviet Union. An undated letter written to the Minister of Defense, Marshal Rodion Malinovskii, discussed a soldier’s trip to Poland aboard the train “FRIENDSHIP.” The author, who identified himself as a “veteran-frontovik,” participated in the liberation of Poland and noticed a dramatic change in the attitude of the local population toward the Soviet Union. Whereas before there were signs of “strain” between the two nations, in the present time “Soviet people...literally had flowers thrown at us.” The reason, claimed the author, was the excitement “about the Soviet Union’s struggle for peace, everyone wants peace and Nikitia Sergeevich Khrushchev became the most popular and deeply loved person, like a passionate fighter for peace.” This was most likely in reference to Khrushchev’s efforts at “peaceful coexistence” with the West and as a result it appeared that “Nikita Sergeevich’s authority

¹⁰³ As an example, the Battle of Kursk (Operation Citadel) was used to show that the “author” behind the operation “was not only Hitler, but also Heusinger, Zeitler, and Gehlen.” Ibid. A further clarification was requested with respect to whether or not the German high-command wanted to utilize the Stalingrad area, after its capture, as a springboard for an eventual attack on Moscow – as was evidently portrayed in the war’s history and which “did not differ from the old position on this issue” that Stalin propagated to explain the reason for the German advance in the south in 1942. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 586, l. 87.

¹⁰⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 309, l. 82.

is second to none. Everywhere that I have been, Poles in Polish newspapers have been asking to convey their best wishes for good health to the very dear friend of the Polish people, Comrade Khrushchev.”¹⁰⁵

While in Poland, the author encountered former Polish colleagues from the Soviet Army (by the end of the Second World War, two Polish armies were operating within the Red Army) who inquired about the first volume of the war’s history. In previous conversations about the Red Army’s initial failures, the author often heard a parroted Stalinist version of the events in question. The causes were linked to Stalin’s speech from 6 November 1941, in which he claimed that the temporary success enjoyed by the Germans was a result of their superiority in tanks and planes compared to the Red Army, who nonetheless held a qualitative superiority. This explanation was even offered by historians the author encountered, and was partly expected, as “for the past 19 years this claim was part of our consciousness.” However, a totally different explanation was offered by the war’s history. The first volume claimed that the Red Army possessed a greater amount of tanks and planes than the Germans and, in fact, that many were of a lower quality than what the Germans possessed, a complete reversal of the Stalinist narrative. Furthermore, in “reading the first volume an impression is made that our industry was producing obsolete planes and tanks, unfit for war, and it produced them in such large numbers that there was no place to put them and they fell into disrepair.”¹⁰⁶

Thus, a fear that was initially proclaimed by commission members was in fact coming to

¹⁰⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 309, l. 41; Zubok, 94-122.

¹⁰⁶ The author continued, “...it turns out that in 1932, before the start of the war, we had produced more than 30,000 planes and 28,000 tanks and by the beginning of the war there were supposed to have been about 20,000 tanks, five times more than the Germans, and 22,000 planes, meaning 4 times more than the Germans had.” RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 309, l. 40.

fruition as readers began to question both the Stalinist version of events and a new narrative of the war that showcased the Red Army on the eve of the war in a poor light.

The burden put on Soviet industries and the Red Army, including inadequate logistics, were highlighted as the author claimed how the “entire world learns from the first volume that only 27% of older model tanks were serviceable, and the rest were in need of repairs, but spare parts were only available for 11% of those in demand.” Consequently, when discussing the Red Army’s preparedness for the German invasion, it appeared that “despite all the claims of being ready to repel an invasion, the Soviet Union was in fact quite unprepared...Tanks were not repaired, tankers and aviators were not readied, planes were placed on worthless airdromes, and defensive structures were abandoned, while others were not prepared.”¹⁰⁷

The letter accused the authors of glorifying “German aviation...while ours is discredited” and claimed that “in fact the Germans had a large number of aircraft that our I-16 and even our I-15s were able to knock out” – an accusation that mirrored the earlier complaints of the Soviet Air Force representative, Rudenko, to commission members. The author seemed mired within the discourse that was crafted by the propaganda apparatus during the war itself. He lamented how “a feeling of resentment” arises “against the authors who are denouncing our aviation and praising the Germans.” In part, what becomes visible here was how inconsistencies of the Stalinist narrative were being constantly exposed and defended with no tangible progress in attempting to offer an original analysis of the war. The author continued that “It is simply unbelievable that this volume was written by Soviet people. To what extent they became carried away with

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 39.

maligning our aviation is seen from the fact that they had forgotten about the pilots, who took the oldest training aircraft, U-2, renamed it PO-2 and turned it into ‘night bombers’ who were nicknamed ‘black death’ by the Germans. Our authors have forgotten that our aviation devastated an Italian Corps outside Guadalajara. No! Our older aircraft were not as bad as they are described in the first volume, but we lost a huge number of them on the first day of the war.”¹⁰⁸ Even with the evidence provided by an official history, a veteran of the war could not deviate from Stalinist claims about the superiority of Soviet technology and equipment compared to the Germans and instead pointed to ad hoc measures taken out of desperation by Soviet forces as they struggled against an unexpected invasion as proof of Soviet ingenuity.

The letter accused the “editors of the volume” of justifying “in every way the General Staff, the People’s Commissar of Defense” while “defam[ing] the Party and the Soviet people.” Interestingly, the author asserted that “even if what was written was true, then why give away our state secrets and sow distrust of the Central Committee and Party.” In his interactions with his Polish friends, he cited one as saying, “having read the first volume of the History, our enemies rejoice and say: ‘Soviet comrades said that the tsarist government was criminally negligent in its preparation of the state for defense, yet their own preparations were worse than the tsarist [state’s].’” This derision of Soviet technological abilities translated into ideas about current military capabilities with “enemies” of the Soviet Union “gloating and already predicting that our rocket technology will be on the level of our prewar tank technology.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 38-39.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 38.

Although the author, in discussing the war's official history with others, found out that while "tens of thousands of people have already purchased the first volume...very few have read it" he nonetheless would have preferred that "this bitter truth only be known to those concerned with the preparations of the country's defenses." He asked Malinovskii, "why should our state secrets and shortcomings be made visible to our enemies, so that they can gloat to our friends, so that they [feel] sorrow." He could not understand the reasoning behind why the party needed to be "defame[d]" and why commanders like Zhukov, Timoshenko and Voroshilov were being shielded when it was "their inactivity" that "exposed our army to a surprise attack by the enemy. Why show flaws and not disclose the superiority of our socialist system: Indeed in general our tanks and planes were better than the Germans and the only advantage which the enemy enjoyed – was the surprise of their attack. It is necessary to write about the real culprits, not to defame our tanks and planes." The foundations of the socialist system were more important than its cogs. It was too soon to "reveal military secrets. Soviet history should raise the prestige of the Party and the Soviet state, not humiliate them or reveal military secrets."¹¹⁰

A somewhat contradictory position was taken by another veteran, a Captain Sergei Grinev, who wrote to the Directorate of the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR on 10 February 1966. Unlike the previous author, he wanted an unveiled history of the war, especially from the invasion through the battle of Stalingrad. He lamented that the oft-repeated line "no one is forgotten and nothing is forgotten" was "not quite correct and does not fully reflect reality." The published volumes were "far

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 37.

from perfect.” Although they were entitled “History of the Great Patriotic War” the content contained “less war than politics, and I would like to see more military actions, development and implementation of strategies and tactics and individual battles and operations.” The history presented in the published volumes was “far from being true – [far] from objective, no matter” that it was written by credible and authoritative personalities.¹¹¹

Red Army retreats in 1941 were weakly presented and little attention was devoted to details; the author could hardly find his corps being mentioned, less so his division or their history in the initial period of the war – undoubtedly this could reflect the author’s desire to see his own experiences become part of the collective memory of the war. A more sentimental, and in many ways revealing, thought was expressed when he mentioned the numerous times he’s encountered the phrases “from Moscow to Berlin” and “from the Volga to Prague” but almost nowhere was there in literature, plays, movies or memoirs the phrase “from Brest to Moscow.” Memories of 1941 seemed to be absent from anything dealing with the war period. Although not said outright, Grinev was pointing out not only the fact that most who encountered the Wehrmacht in 1941 were killed or taken prisoner and died in German POW camps, but also that battles and actions in 1941, before the Moscow Counter-Offensive, were simply not a part of the history of the war that authors either wanted to or could discuss. Nonetheless, he wrote that “I know it is sorrowful to speak, talk, and show this, but we cannot remain silent about it.” Looking at the literature on the war it became the norm to consider the initial period, when defeats were regularly suffered by the Red Army, as a distinct and separate period

¹¹¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 796, l. 299, 300-301.

that was often absent. The “war” that so many were familiar with seemingly did not take place in 1941 but only in the periods where victories were recorded. Personally, however, Grinev considered “the first period of the war” with all of its moral, political, material and organizational weaknesses as a “war in the truest sense of the word” while the other periods were “a walk in a relative sense.” He wanted to “unburden my soul” and express his memories of the war years that were continually missing from publications, both literary and scholarly. He understood well enough that it was easier to point out shortcomings than to write a history of the war but, nonetheless, an honest account in all its bitter truth should have been the goal.¹¹²

Readers, in so many ways similar to commission members themselves, were at a crossroads. They wanted to praise the war’s first official history, they understood the war’s parameters meant all of its complexities could not be detailed or outlined, but important events, details, and descriptions were either missing or portrayed in such a way as to embarrass the Red Army and Soviet state in the eyes of the international community. For some, the “truth” need not be shared if it cast doubt on Soviet abilities and the socialist system, better to let those in authority deal with the harsh realities of the war and make amendments for the future. The reputation of the Soviet Union was more important than a humiliating discussion of Soviet weaknesses and inability to deal with the Wehrmacht in the initial period of the war. Thanks to Stalinist propaganda readers could point to perceived victorious achievements that in truth masked early failures – like the need to utilize outdated planes and repurpose them due to the fact that most of the newly designed and created aircraft were destroyed in the war’s initial period.

¹¹² Ibid., 298, 299-300.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, veterans wanted an unvarnished account of the war's initial period, which they considered the "real war." Political discussions dominated the war's history and the complexities of the Red Army's evolution throughout the war were missing or hidden among lists of formations, operations, and organizations. Readers wanted an analysis of 1941 that explained what happened in detail, but, as previously, they were met with obscure language and descriptions that hid the true costs of the German invasion, skipped over Red Army failures, and presented the war's course as one of inconsequential defeats and loudly proclaimed victories. Furthermore, as much as it was hoped that the war's history would become a lesson for future cadres about how to wage war, veterans also wanted the selfless heroic actions of their generation to serve as examples for the youth who might have to put their lives on the line in a future struggle. Self-sacrifice was again perceived to be the norm, not a last desperate act of a population disillusioned by prewar promises and Stalin's failures.

The Stalinist narrative of the war continued to live on long past the former Soviet leader's death. Denis Kozlov sees the 1960s as a time that allowed for thousands of Soviet readers to express their ideas and thoughts on varied historical and political issues "openly" as many "regarded the official media channels as appropriate venues for such self-expression...people perceived reading and responding to literature as consequential political activities."¹¹³ The same phenomenon could be detected in the letters that were received by a variety of media outlets when it came to the history of the war. Letters had as their intended target either public outlets or important figures within the military and

¹¹³ Kozlov, 7-8.

government. Most interesting is that much of the greatest criticism toward the official history of the war came from “insiders,” those with intimate knowledge of the military and participants in commission meetings. Thus the war provided a contested territory where commentators from all sectors of Soviet society, more often than not veterans, debated the merits of the war’s official history.

More general commentary pointed to the continued relevance and reliance on the narrative of the war crafted during the war years and under Stalin’s direction, which could regularly be found in the terminology used by readers and commentators. Some of the harshest criticisms, by the likes of Isserson, Leshchinskii, and Starinov, while attacking Stalin’s cult, continued to utilize aspects of Stalin’s wartime narrative. Whether it was Isserson, who praised prewar Soviet theoretical developments, Leshchinskii, who upheld the notion of a widespread all-people’s partisan movement, or Starinov, who denied the impact of the German occupation regime on the growth of the partisan movement, each decided which aspects of the Stalinist narrative to attack or champion for their own needs and beliefs. In some respects a full nullification of Stalinist thinking when it came to the war was impossible. Considering the conditions that existed within the Soviet Union when it came to the war’s history, as outlined in previous chapters, veterans usually employed their own experiences to express doubts or question the war’s official history. Leshchinskii, the most vocal about numerous topics, deserves credit for taking a stand and airing his grievances not in a private correspondence but in a letter addressed to a national newspaper. His protest against the continued dominance of Stalin’s cult might have resulted in future meetings to address that very issue, which are covered in the next chapter.

Those opposed to a familiar history of the war believed that even when Stalin and his actions were criticized, it was simply a limited cover-up of the heavy presence of his cult. The actions of Stalin and his inner circle appeared to be regularly justified with the blame being shifted onto the shoulders of military theorists, commanders and other scapegoats, thus once more absolving the leadership of their egregious errors on the eve of and throughout the war. Stalin's cult and the war's history proved fertile ground for debates about the purges and their detrimental effects on the Red Army throughout the war, linking the after-effects directly to the poor performance of Soviet forces during the German invasion. Following in the footsteps of Khrushchev's denunciation, the war's history, a collective effort, resembled previous "faceless histories of the Communist Party and Soviet Union" producing what Mark von Hagen described as "formulaic hagiographies of heroism and highly depersonalized narratives."¹¹⁴

A relic of the Stalinist terror and the 1930s seemed to be evident in letters that viewed an erasure of leading figures who were discredited as the norm, no matter the importance of their role in the war. Readers, and former commission members themselves, were upset that Stalin's cult seemed an ever-present phenomenon, including the presence of his photographs and illustrations. The war's history continued to absolve his crimes, and those of his immediate circle, while praising and highlighting his supposed accomplishments. As Nikolai Bukharin and Leon Trotsky were written out of the histories of the revolution under Stalin, so it appeared that readers in the 1960s came to accept that aspect of Stalin's cult and were eager to view any trace of the man himself

¹¹⁴ Mark von Hagen, "From 'Great Fatherland War' to the Second World War," in *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison*, eds. Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 238.

excised from the history of the war, no matter the size of his role or accomplishments. The public was accustomed to outright omission of those deemed ghosts, erased from the Soviet past, and expected the same to occur with Stalin. Thus, citizens were often operating within the confines of the cult created by Stalin, almost a decade after his death. As Stalin's role was diminished, Khrushchev's authority continued to rise. If in the second volume Stalin's name could be found on 36 pages, in the third volume that number lessened to 27. Khrushchev's name, however, which could be found on 31 pages in the second volume had grown to 41 pages in the third. Thus, Stalin's name could be more readily associated with the defeats of 1941 and 1942 while Khrushchev's name was more prominent in a period of the war that witnessed mainly continuous victories. The ideas of readers evident during Khrushchev's "Thaw" reinforces the argument that Stalinist methods continued to be retained and utilized, not just by the Party hierarchy, but throughout Soviet society, making a regression under Brezhnev to something akin to Stalin's Cult of Personality, an affinity that surrounded the Great Patriotic War itself, easier to understand.

CHAPTER 6

STALIN AND THE STALIN CULT

As early as 1959, Andrei Kuchkin, commenting on the role of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in the official history of the war, stated that authors and editors were “ashamed” to mention Stalin’s name, while the zealous concentration on and references to Khrushchev resembled “sycophancy.”¹ Undoubtedly he wanted Stalin to receive some of the attention and merit his leadership deserved and resented the dominant role Khrushchev was beginning to play, especially considering the significance the Battle of Stalingrad played in the war’s history. Soon, however, attitudes began to change as Khrushchev’s term as leader of the USSR came to an end.

With the release of multiple volumes on the war’s history, and the reception of a considerable amount of feedback, both solicited and unsolicited from reviews and readers, additional meetings were held as late as 1963 and 1964 to discuss the continued impact of Stalin’s cult of personality on the war’s history.² There were over a dozen participants in these meetings, among them most of the head editors of the published volumes, such as Boltin, Fokin, Emel’ianov, Tamonov, Petrov, Tel’pukhovskii, Roshchin, and Vasilenko. In part, these meetings appear to be a result of the aftermath of the 22nd Party Congress, held in October 1961, where Khrushchev once more launched an assault on Stalin’s name, cult, and those around him, continuing to disparage their

¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 585, l. 39.

² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, 111.

reputations, which then resulted in the removal of Stalin's remains from the Mausoleum at the end of October 1961.³

This chapter examines these meetings, including candid opinions and arguments as the zenith of the criticism against the continuing presence of Stalin's cult, its influence on history and historians, and the continued limitations it imposed on the war's history was reached. Commentators were quite open during these meetings, at times more so than earlier, about Stalin's impact on the Red Army during the purges in the 1930s, his flawed foreign policy decisions, the guilt of those working with Stalin, and numerous references to subjects that the official history of the war had omitted. However, as frequently as Stalin continued to be utilized as a scapegoat for numerous failures, his mistakes were just as often contextualized and other culprits found to share in the blame. At no time were egregious errors, whether in the realm of foreign, military, or domestic policies, tied to the Soviet system in its entirety. When Soviet foundations were questioned, it was through accusations of a "cult in reverse," which signaled fears about the nature of the system since if Stalin was proven to have been guilty of all crimes, then the system failed to stop him and all Soviet accomplishments became void. Unfortunately, with Khrushchev's ousting in 1964, the decisions reached during these gatherings, while resulting in sincere admissions, had little, if any, influence on the last volume of the war's official history, published in 1965, aside from a new emphasis on the devaluation of Khrushchev's contribution to the war effort.

³ Taubman, 514-515.

The Stalin Cult's Influence on Historians and History

The meetings convened to address the presence of Stalin's cult were characterized by pronouncements that reiterated previous ideas and positions. Participants could "argue" and "actively express" their opinions as part of a "free discussion" but at the same time needed to be on guard against assessments that were too critical of Stalin's cult and how it impacted the initial period of the war. Authors and editors were reminded that their main task was the need to reveal "that the main actor" behind the victory of the Soviet Union in the war, operating both on the frontlines and in the rear, were the Soviet people.⁴

From the numerous exchanges it becomes clear that conference participants understood reasonably well the impact the cult had on the history of the war, but could not escape it as they only seemed able to deflect it onto the next cult, that of Khrushchev. Tamonov, one of the authors of the first and second volumes, commented how "the problem of overcoming the consequences of the cult of personality in historical science, including in the history of the Great Patriotic War, is, as experience shows, very complicated and difficult." For Tamonov, the "complexity and difficulty of this issue" within history remained the need to not only offer a simple "correction of Stalin's certain erroneous concepts and assessments, [but] a deep rethinking of the whole methodology behind history as a science, its return to Leninist principles of historical materialism, which were violated under Stalin." However, fighting against the harmful consequences of Stalin's cult by simply deleting the name Stalin or Stalingrad from the war's history

⁴ To help achieve this goal, speakers mentioned that archival documents of "national importance" were made available to the reading public for the first time. What those documents were, however, was never specified. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, l. 72, 112.

meant standing on an “anti-Marxist path in dealing with such an important issue.”⁵ Thus, years after the initial decision to publish an official history of the war that was supposed to be free of Stalinist influence, there was no real agreement as to whether Stalin’s cult had been excised or even how to begin qualifying such an evaluation.

The first edition of the multi-volume history (the five volumes already in print), was “received positively” by readers, according to Boltin, but was not fully liberated from Stalin’s influence. Removing the stains of Stalin’s cult was achievable, as the history “exclude[d] his name and epithets such as ‘brilliant commander’, [and] ‘great leader’” but evaluating the war’s course without the influence of Stalin’s cult was a more difficult prospect. As Boltin explained, “we are still often unconsciously influenced by old formulations, which were born in the period of Stalin’s cult of personality.” The corrections proposed to published volumes meant that “we did not yet do everything to overcome” Stalin’s cult. Boltin commented that “our job implementing the Party’s decision to overcome the cult of personality in the history of the Great Patriotic War is not over, we need to continue it.”⁶

Changes were already up for consideration as it was decided to remove all citations to Stalin’s book, *O Velikoi Otechestvennoi voine Sovetskogo Soiuzza*, which many relied on, including almost all references to it.⁷ Stalin’s name was also to be excluded; too often, it was argued, the text included the phrase “Supreme Commander

⁵ Ibid., 64, 112-113.

⁶ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, l. 20, 21.

⁷ Stalin’s text was cited at least ten times in the second volume. Similarly, the *Short Course* was denounced after the 20th Congress as an editorial in *Voprosy istorii* claimed “the work as a whole...was effectively a denial of Marxism and discredited as a basis for scholarship.” Markwick, “Thaws and freezes in Soviet historiography, 1953-64,” 178.

Stalin” when his name was “absolutely not needed.” Furthermore, any institutions or enterprises carrying Stalin’s name were retitled. As a result, a Leningrad factory named after Stalin was instead referred to simply as “Leningrad Metal Factory” while collective farms named after Stalin were renamed after the villages where they were located. The title “Stalin prize,” awarded to numerous “heroes of socialist labor,” was replaced with “the national prize.” Additional proposed changes included altering chapters that included the city name “Stalingrad.” Instead of “The Heroic Defense of Stalingrad” it was suggested the chapter be entitled “The Battle of the Volga: The Heroic Defense of Soviet Troops.” The phrase “The Battle of Stalingrad” was to be replaced with “The Battle on the Volga” while “fighting in the city” was to substitute “fighting in Stalingrad.” While these proposed changes would reduce the mention of Stalin’s name, its complete elimination from the chapter and text in general was “impractical.”⁸

A further alteration under consideration was the description of Stalin’s speech, summing up the initial six months of the war. It was of “great significance” when it was made during the war. Its description in the second volume mirrored how it was presented during the war, as a report that described “the harsh truth about the difficult situation, in which our country found itself, about our losses, temporary setbacks, reveal[ing] the reasons for these failures, etc.” But in fact much of what was presented was skewed and “Stalin distorted the reasons and hid the real” causes of failure. It was proposed that the speech itself could be referenced but its contents need not be detailed because “erroneous positions” were “repeated.” The question was posed as to whether Stalin could have even presented the real reasons to the population as that would mean informing the

⁸ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 32, l. 15-16.

enemy of the chaos and disorder that had engulfed the government, society and army. While it might have been “inappropriate” to speak about the real reasons for the Red Army’s failures during the war itself, at the war’s conclusion “we gave a detailed analysis of the mistakes made in this period, and gave an assessment where lay the roots of [our] failure.”⁹ Unfortunately, speakers only mentioned generalities and excluded specific mistakes or Stalin’s responsibility for them. This discussion fits in well with previous criticisms from readers and reviewers in that details about the initial failures of Stalin and the Red Army were still missing. Unfortunately, no real conclusion on this issue was reached.

Agreement was visible when it came to highlighting “the question of unity with our friends, of the fighting units of the Bulgarians, Czechoslovaks, and Polish army” and the need to justify the Soviet presence in Eastern Europe. While some former allies were already new Cold War enemies, those states in Eastern Europe that the Soviet Union relied on in its fight against the West needed to have their narrative “respected.” Such a move was judged to have “wide significance today.”¹⁰ One of the few places where Red Army losses merited mention in the official history were figures for those who died on Polish territory in the fall of 1944.¹¹ Echoing these ideas were Soviet actions in Berlin – the taking of which cost the Red Army hundreds of thousands of casualties – in 1961, when Khrushchev donned his Lieutenant General uniform from his Stalingrad days. At the end of the summer in 1961, the Soviets denounced NATO’s growing military

⁹ Ibid., 14, 59; d. 108, l. 51; Werth, *The Year of Stalingrad*, 82-83.

¹⁰ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 585, l. 94.

¹¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 309, l. 284.

aggressiveness and in turn justified Soviet belligerence as a way to avoid a repeat of the disastrous initial period of the war, when Germany was able to surprise the Red Army. Similarly, the reaction to the Prague Spring in 1968 featured articles written by Soviet marshals who recalled the “blood debt” owed to the Red Army by the Czechs for their liberation from the Germans and the fear that the western borders of the Soviet state might once more be in danger of being breached. Retaining control over Eastern Europe and preventing a repeat of 1941 was of “the highest priority for the defense of the Soviet Union.”¹²

Stalin and the Prewar Period

Considering the limitations imposed on the commission, their own biases, and the continued presence of censors, many of Stalin’s actions in the prewar and war period were defended, justified, contextualized or partially siphoned off onto the shoulders of others who shared the blame. Among commission members, there was dissatisfaction in that attempts to expose Stalin’s faults were often reduced to simple silence. It was as if he existed and then disappeared. Stalin was head of the party and the state for over two decades and his speeches were often treated as representative of the stance state and party policies were to take.¹³ Writing that out of the history of the Soviet Union and the war and silencing Stalin, members argued, was impossible.

¹² Jonathan R. Adelman, “Soviet Risk Taking in Major Crises in the Postwar Era,” in Jonathan R. Adelman and Cristann Lea Gibson, eds., *Contemporary Soviet Military Affairs: The Legacy of World War II* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 66, 67, 68, 72.

¹³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, l. 85.

As an example, a publication by the Institute of International Relations was mentioned and it was emphasized that when it came to Soviet foreign policy “all the documents that had something to do with Stalin were thrown out.” The result was a lack of understanding of Soviet foreign policy as the Soviet Union went “from being a political subject to a political object.” Arguments ensued about the impossibility of writing a history of Soviet foreign policy by omitting documents that bore the stamp of Stalin’s cult. Protesting against the cult was a must but in so doing Soviet “policies must not be disposed of together with Stalin’s mistakes.” The Soviet Union’s foreign policy was elevated above both Stalin and Molotov and claimed to have been “the policy of the socialist state. Just as the cult of personality could not change the socialist nature of the Soviet state, it could not change the socialist character of Soviet foreign policy.”¹⁴

Studying available documentation on Soviet foreign policy in the prewar period, Tamonov concluded that the “political crisis” and “military threat” that existed from the time Hitler assumed power in Germany until 1939 meant that Stalin’s efforts to create “a system of collective security and the...strengthening of the country’s defenses was correct, as the conditions of a capitalist encirclement at the time made it impossible to carry out any other policy.” Effectively, Soviet foreign policy was split into two. The foreign policy of Maxim Litvinov was viewed as being “successful” and creating needed “conditions” so that when war did develop an anti-Hitler coalition was able to coalesce. But the foreign policy of Stalin and Molotov was regarded as a failure. Stalin was thus praised for Litvinov’s efforts while Molotov’s failures earned him contempt as the

¹⁴ Ibid., 85, 86.

actions of Stalin and Molotov resulted in the failure of collective security.¹⁵

Additionally, Stalin was declared guilty of erroneously analyzing “the internal state of Fascist Germany” when he stated in November 1941 that “Fascism would soon collapse under the weight of its crimes...in half a year to a year fascism will be finished.” This was considered a “fundamental error” that undoubtedly influenced Soviet strategy.¹⁶

Similar to ideas on Stalin’s role within the sphere of Soviet foreign policy, the military policy he implemented on the eve of the war included “a lot of inconsistencies and retreats from Leninist principles.” However, much of what was accomplished under Stalin’s direction was nonetheless deemed correct. For instance, when discussing the rearmament of the Red Army on the eve of the war, Stalinist wartime rhetoric was utilized in claiming Stalin’s policies transformed the army of 1939 “into a cadre army.” However, in conjunction with all that was “correct,” including developing a new doctrine, Stalin again “retreated from Leninist principles” when he introduced dual command (allowing commissars the same authority as military commanders) and carried out “unjustified repressions” directed at the officer corps while “overestimating the treaty with Germany” and the “combat readiness” of the Soviet Union on the eve of the war.¹⁷

Further inconsistent assessments of Stalin’s actions were evident when the non-aggression pact with Germany was analyzed. G. Lekomtsev viewed Stalin’s 3 July 1941 speech as “correctly” justifying the pact, although there were “some examples of dubious benefits” present as well. One of those “dubious benefits” was the allusion to having

¹⁵ Ibid., 65-66, 116, 117.

¹⁶ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 111, l. 9. This folder contained a record of a meeting to discuss lessons from the war on 20 April 1964.

¹⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, l. 65-66.

gained two years for the strengthening of the Red Army and Soviet Union. It was argued that compared to Nazi Germany, those two years were not utilized to the utmost of their potential. This argument was made from hindsight. However, it might point to a subconscious reiteration of the idea that Stalin was able to foresee future developments, including Hitler's attack. Nonetheless, Lekomtsev claimed due to Stalin's failure to correctly predict the timing of the invasion, the pact "led to a whole series of negative consequences that were mainly the result of the fact that this agreement was misunderstood and overestimated by Stalin." In addition, Stalin's rhetoric against the Western Allies – claiming England and France were the aggressors while Germany was waging a defensive war – meant a disorientation of Soviet society and its leadership.¹⁸

The aftermath of the pact witnessed repressions against Poles in 1939, which were omitted from the war's history. The repressions were said to have been "organized by Beria after the liberation of Western Ukraine and Belorussia" and continued to heavily affect Polish society. While Stalin was blamed for the actions against the Poles, the division of Poland between Germany and the Soviet Union was not treated as a crime, only the "massive repressions" that left a lasting impression on Polish society as "Polish intelligentsia" were forced into "camps" on Beria's orders. Lekomtsev mentioned how "Polish comrades" noted that when Soviet scholars spoke about repressions they neglected those that occurred "against the Polish intelligentsia in Western Ukraine and Belorussia," omitting mention of territory that previously belonged to Poland, and

¹⁸ Ibid., 82, 83-84.

lending credence to the idea that the Red Army was “liberating” former Soviet lands from Poland.¹⁹

Thus, Stalin continued to be entwined with domestic and foreign policies of the state and commission members continued to experience problems separating one from the other. Simply omitting Stalin seemed to be the preferred method when possible, to avoid any controversies or need for further questions, but the result meant a removal of not only agency from the Soviet state but also an understanding for why certain policies were adopted or specific positions advocated. Where Stalin’s name and presence was still detectable, inconsistencies usually followed as members wanted to portray the Soviet state and government as an actor that aimed to benefit not only its own population but the world as well, yet was continually prevented from doing so by Stalin and members of his entourage, such as Molotov and Beria. What they were unable to say was that Stalin headed a dictatorship that paid little heed to the consequences of his deeds and misdeeds.

The Stalin Cult, the Purges and the Winter War

The cult and Red Army failures were repeatedly tied to the 1930s and the purges. The campaign to root out enemies of the people among the armed forces during the repressions was described under Stalin as a “defeat of enemy agents” that resulted in an increase of the Red Army’s defensive capabilities and the Soviet Union’s overall “readiness to repel the enemy in 1941.” Initially this line of thinking could not be challenged by historians. Meanwhile, the purges resulted in “the devastation” of the military’s officer corps and the truth was not only silenced but “replaced with a lie” that

¹⁹ Ibid., 84-85.

transformed the damage done into a victory over “enemy agents.” Such “outright lies” in turn “led to a number of wrong conclusions, which were the basis of an incorrect assessment about the prewar period and the first period of the war,” especially since the purges continued past 1937 with commanding generals tried and executed after the German invasion.²⁰

The purges, and the atmosphere they left in their wake, were also linked to the war against Finland. The Red Army’s poor performance in the Winter War was blamed on Voroshilov, who held the post of People’s Commissar of Defense, and the institution of Military Commissars, which was introduced in May of 1937 – supposedly the result of Stalin’s mistrust of the officer corps – and abolished in August of 1940.²¹ Even though Voroshilov was obedient to Stalin, without whose “knowledge” he “did not undertake any principal decisions,” Stalin was never associated with the failure in the war against Finland or the initial period of the war against Germany.²² While the history of the war discussed the reasons for the early failures of the Red Army, Fokin, head editor of the second volume, insisted that “even now this question is not fully or deeply enough developed.” He hoped the future sixth volume will allow authors “to think seriously over this matter,” including the period of the Winter War as this was when the preconditions of future Soviet failure at the beginning of the German invasion were laid out. Stalin’s “real guilt” needed to be evaluated and revealed while not omitting responsibility from Voroshilov, or even Timoshenko and Zhukov, when it came to the numerous instances of

²⁰ Ibid., 12-13, 43.

²¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 391, l. 313.

²² Khrushchev’s memoirs contained similar ideas. Khrushchev, *Commissar, 1918-1945*, 251, 256, 278, 330, 654-655, 665.

egregious errors and failures that led to continued retreats.²³ With Stalin's cult denounced it now appeared that smaller personality cults, which developed around important figures within the Party and military leadership, had space to expand their influence. It quickly became evident that there was no end to "personality cults."

Fokin described how the familiar Stalinist narrative of the initial period of the war employed four reasons to explain Germany's triumphs. Germany was prepared for war, the German attack was "sudden" and "treacherous," there was a lack of a second front, and the Red Army had fewer planes and tanks even though they were better quality. "With these explanations," said Fokin, "our reasons for failure are exhausted."²⁴ This remained a major theme that was insufficiently addressed within the published volumes and on which "more thorough work" needed to be done. The scapegoating of Dmitrii Pavlov and the leadership of the Western Front was provided as an example of casting blame away from the "main culprit behind the indiscriminate withdrawal of our troops." Initial Red Army retreats were said to have been a "phenomenon" that resulted from Stalin's "personal failings."²⁵ Repressions against Red Army personnel "could not but

²³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, l. 53-54. In analyzing where the blame lay for the Red Army's position in 1941, the sixth volume placed the blame squarely on Stalin's inability to correctly dictate the international situation on the eve of the war, as he "belittled" the military danger the Soviet Union was in and the "military capabilities of our most likely enemies" while "exaggerating the degree of the Red Army's readiness." Furthermore, the Red Army's lack of mobilization was also pointed to as being an important variable for Germany's success in 1941, which Stalin was also responsible for. Vasilenko et al., 190-191.

²⁴ Ibid., 51; Werth, *The Year of Stalingrad*, 82-83.

²⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, l. 61, 62. In addition, prominent military personnel such as Iakov Smushkevich (Twice hero of the Soviet Union, commander of the Air Force), Grigorii Shtern (Hero of the Soviet Union), and Ivan Proskurov were repressed as the German invasion commenced. These three prominent commanders were among a total of twenty-five prisoners being held in Kuibyshev who were executed on Beria's orders. *Organy gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti SSSR v Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voine: Sbornik dokumentov*, tom vtoroi, kniga 2, *Nachalo 1 sentiabria – 31 dekabria 1941 goda* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo 'Rus,' 2000), 215-220.

exacerbate...the dangerous situation” the Soviet Union found itself in as the German Wehrmacht invaded.²⁶

There was agreement among speakers that a major result of the Red Army purges was the surprise the Germans initially achieved and the success their military experienced throughout 1941 and 1942. The purges, combined with surprise, resulted in initial German superiority and “confusion or insufficiently clear guidance from” higher Soviet organs. There was an inability by the state to make good the “severe losses” within the army’s command cadres as well as the “leadership of the party, economy and Soviet labor.” The invasion, exacerbated by the atmosphere left in the wake of Stalin’s purges, resulted in major Soviet defeats.²⁷ The decapitation of the Red Army officer corps meant a climate of mistrust was left in its wake with a “severely weakened” command system that feared independence, initiative and creativity and relied on over-cautiousness and “excessive formalism.”²⁸

Aside from the destruction wrought against the command cadres of the Red Army, the purges also had a lasting effect on the partisan struggle in the rear. In the wake of the Civil War, arms caches were created throughout Soviet territory based on the knowledge of those who participated in the partisan struggle during the Civil War and against “foreign military intervention.” With Stalin assuming power and his cult’s influence permeating through all sectors of Soviet society, the repressions affected the

²⁶ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, l. 66.

²⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 111, l. 93-95.

²⁸ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 391, l. 313.

“cadres” and “material resources” of the former partisan movement.²⁹ Hidden arms caches were destroyed and partisan commanders purged with the end result that the partisan movement needed to be rebuilt and rearmed from scratch after the invasion.

Commission members readily admitted that the history of the war lacked needed documentation, a result of continued limits placed on archival information, and analysis when it came to the purges and their effect on the officer corps, the Winter War, and the beginning phases of the German invasion. They were aware of Stalin’s numerous attempts to scapegoat the defeats of the Winter War onto Voroshilov and of the initial period of the war onto the shoulders of the Western Front command staff, yet simultaneously, they themselves did not want Stalin to assume full responsibility but to have it spread to high-ranking commanders who needed to share in the blame. There were no attempts to suggest the system itself was in part or wholly responsible for what happened in the 1930s and 1940s, nor why discussions over Stalin’s cult and its continued impact on the war’s history were only now taking place rather than when the first volumes on the history of the war were being authored.

Disagreements and Arguments over Stalin

Ambiguous ideas did not only revolve around Stalin’s role in the war, but also included the origins of his cult. During a session going over reviews and observations of the second volume, a speaker wanted to propose that additional material be included in order to highlight “the enormous damage caused to the defense [of the country] by Stalin personally.” There ensued an argument about whether or not Stalin’s cult could be

²⁹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 111, l. 75-76.

separated from Stalin himself. The question was immediately raised by Pospelov, “you mean the damage caused by the cult of personality?” The original speaker defined Stalin’s cult as a phenomenon “created by others around him” and described what he meant as “Stalin’s personal mistakes.”³⁰ Mints interjected that, “The cult of personality – is the combination of all mistakes/errors,” a convenient rubric for which to lump all ideas under and omit any real analysis of the mistakes in question. In the end, the consensus rested with the notion that the cult included Stalin’s mistakes and was a reflection of his personal behavior, rather than a phenomenon that was propped up or initiated by those around him – undoubtedly this would have meant an indictment of those currently in power.³¹

Consequently, Stalin’s mistakes proved impossible to separate from his cult. Unfortunately, this explanation was never offered to the reading public or to members of the commission themselves. Everyone knew of the cult’s existence but no one offered a definition by which to recognize it.³² As the original speaker concluded, if all mistakes and errors were included under the umbrella of the concept “Cult of Personality,” “then this needs to be reflected in our volumes” which at the moment featured discussions about Stalin’s mistakes rather than those of his cult.³³

³⁰ An understandable definition given the numerous publications and work done on Stalin by those around him, including a history of the Civil War and Red Army by Gorky and Voroshilov, respectively, that centered on Stalin. David Brandenberger, “Stalin as symbol: a case study of the personality cult and its construction,” in *Stalin: A New History*, eds. Sarah Davies and James Harris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 260.

³¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 32, l. 65-67.

³² It should be mentioned that this debate occurred at a time when literary figures were attempting to move beyond such a simplistic explanation for the errors of Soviet society and sought to uncover “corruption, public and private cowardice, apathy and indifference...” Rothberg, 18.

³³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 32, l. 67.

Commission members were not in total agreement about the evolution of Stalin's cult, whether before, during or after the war. For instance, Tamonov claimed that "during the war years" the cult was "strengthened," "reigned supreme, and was not restricted." This idea went against arguments made by others, which stated the initial period of the war saw a weakening of Stalin's cult. Following this line of thought, a minor breakdown of the system permitted other actors to take Stalin's place and prop up the army and state in the face of the German invasion. In opposing Tamonov's position, the "Party" was invoked as being the leading figure during the beginning of the war when Stalin "did not intervene in the decisions of many questions," which "were solved by Party and soviet organs, or directly by leading Party and government officials, acting on their own."³⁴

Hence, it fell to the Party and its representatives to take over where Stalin could no longer exert control. The editor of the third volume, Iu. Petrov, commented that during the initial period of the war "many members of the Party Central Committee" exhibited "great courage in arguing with Stalin" and mentioned how Khrushchev "aggressively sought" a stop to Soviet offensive operations around Kharkov in the spring of 1942, which eventually resulted in a German encirclement of Red Army forces.³⁵ While the Party's leadership abilities were lauded, the military leadership came under scrutiny by Tamonov. Others, however, defended commanders with the idea that the victorious end results justified themselves and a "very strong enemy" was defeated. If the reason for considering the military leadership a failure rested on "unnecessary

³⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, l. 72-73, 132. Khrushchev reinforced this idea in his memoirs, claiming that Stalin's "breakdown" meant others assumed the initiative in his absence and supported the notion that the state survived in spite of Stalin rather than thanks to him. Khrushchev, *Commissar, 1918-1945*, 304.

³⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, l. 74. Khrushchev would argue this himself when he recorded his memoirs. Khrushchev, *Commissar, 1918-1945*, 379.

casualties” it was an issue that stemmed from “excessive centralization and the limitations placed on collective leadership as a result of the cult of personality.”³⁶ Thus, once again Stalin assumed the blame.

Stalin’s failures, especially in 1941, were argued to have been exacerbated by the fact that he created a system of rule, influenced by his cult, which left the military, along with other institutions, powerless while freeing Stalin of any responsibility to the Party and people when it came to the country’s defenses. No matter the international situation that existed at the time, it was contended, measures could have been taken that would not have opposed the Soviet Union’s “political line” and could have resulted in a successful opposition to the suddenness of the German invasion – something the General Staff should have been responsible for (but due to its powerlessness could not do anything about). The military establishment could not hope to submit to the Central Committee or Stalin any plans or recommendations to counter German activities on the border. Taking into account the risks of a sudden invasion, and the political situation the Soviet Union was facing, meant a limited possibility of undertaking any initiatives to bring the troops to a heightened state of alert. Whatever recommendations were made from lower ranking officers and generals on the ground in the western military districts for bringing troops to combat readiness Stalin categorically rejected “believing that their implementation may give rise to accusations by Fascist Germany that our country was preparing to attack...”³⁷

While mention was made of the fact that “Stalin and the General Staff” were “aware of the deployment of Germany’s armed forces on our border” more emphasis

³⁶ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, l. 132, 133.

³⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 391, l. 312.

needed to be placed on it so that relevant “conclusions” could be drawn. It was argued that “if our party did not spare Stalin’s authority...then what reason do we have for treating so sensitively issues related to our military leadership.”³⁸ Others saw a more complex situation arise when dealing with Stalin and the general staff. The idea was expressed by the head editor of the sixth volume, V. Vasilenko, that while the initial military failures suffered by the Red Army could be explained away under the umbrella of German “surprise,” “the country as a whole was ready.”³⁹

The issue of surprise became a question of short-term versus long-term preparations. It was the atmosphere left in the wake of Stalin’s purges and the propaganda provided by the Stalinist party line, which claimed “in the near future there will be no war” that heavily influenced the General Staff. While the military leadership shared some of the burden there were reasons to “not...cast too much blame on the general staff” since they followed Stalin’s miscalculation, an “expression of Stalin’s cult,” and “therefore were not ready for war.”⁴⁰ Once more, agency was being taken away from other institutions and personalities while laying the majority of the blame on Stalin and his cult’s influence.

Others disagreed and felt the General Staff deserved a fair amount of blame. The Wehrmacht enjoyed a level of motorization that the Red Army lacked and this, to a large extent, dictated the length and breadth of German advances in the first two years of the war. The Red Army’s lack of motorization, it was suggested, could be attributed to the

³⁸ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 75, l. 8, 23.

³⁹ Ibid., 49.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

General Staff. While Zhukov blamed Stalin for the war's disastrous beginning, there were examples of Red Army commanders taking the initiative and altering the situation for the troops under their command. The example of the navy was put forward, who received a battle alert and were brought to full readiness, as well as the air force in the south of the country, where aircraft were dispersed on aerodromes and suffered fewer losses. Speakers argued that it was hard to believe that Stalin was the only one to blame for the lack of dispersed aircraft.⁴¹ Unfortunately, these arguments omitted the atmosphere left in the wake of the Red Army purges that left little initiative within Red Army commanders aside from some notable, although limited exceptions. When dealing with military mistakes it was not only decisions made by the General Staff or by commanders on the frontlines that needed to be considered, but the limitations under which both operated as a result of Stalin's previous decisions.

With Stalin continuing to be blamed for the situation the Soviet Union found itself in during 1941, commission members claimed that Stalin's decision-making process on the eve of the war was in part influenced by the inaccurate information he received from those around him, like Beria, who gave Stalin a "false orientation" and "deliberately misinformed the armed forces." The same Beria who via telephone told Admiral Oktiabr'skii, the Commander of the Black Sea Fleet, that his report about the bombing of Sevastopol on the morning of 22 June by the Luftwaffe was nothing but a fantasy.⁴² However, the question of whether Beria was following Stalin's lead with respect to not

⁴¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 75, l. 62, 63.

⁴² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 67a, l. 16; Vladimir Petrov, *June 22, 1941: Soviet Historians and the German Invasion* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1968), 220; Pleshakov, 104.

allowing Soviet forces to give in to what Stalin believed were provocations on the part of German generals or was acting on his own initiative remains unanswered.

When listing the reasons for Germany's initial victory against the Red Army in 1941 – the mobilization of the Wehrmacht, German “treachery” and the factor of surprise, mistakes committed by Stalin, Molotov and military leaders, the propaganda efforts of the Soviet government on the eve of the war, and the mistakes of the General Staff – the “main determining cause” was nonetheless “associated with Stalin’s cult of personality.” All of the above reasons can, in one form or another, be linked to either Stalin, the atmosphere he created in the country and around himself, or his misreading of the international situation. There was agreement that “political reasons” needed to be stressed as the “main” causes for the failures of 1941, including the activities of the government and Stalin in the 1930s. Those “comrades” who disagreed with the above characterization of the war’s beginning were invited to speak their minds. However, it was pointed out that even though the impact Stalin’s cult had on the initial period of the war was continuously acknowledged, the chapters covering this period in the official history somehow omitted any mention of the cult altogether.⁴³

Stalin’s cult played a large part in how the initial period of the war developed as its dominance “and Stalin’s reluctance to consider the opinions of other Party and government leaders” made it impossible for the Party to gain the time and ability “to correct these errors in evaluating the situation and prevent the serious consequences of the political blunders [that were] committed.” Furthermore, mistakes “were the result of the excessive suspicion and distrust of Stalin and Molotov toward reports on the German

⁴³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 75, l. 7-8, 20a.

preparations for an attack on the USSR in the near future.” But while Stalin and Molotov helped propagate the atmosphere of the cult, the military’s inadequate leadership had to also be placed in context.

With sufficient information about the impending German attack on the USSR, they, as military leaders, were not able to sort out the created military-political situation and did not show enough courage and perseverance in order to prove the strategic feasibility of an advanced start of activities according to plans for covering the state borders. They are directly responsible for the fact that in an environment of an immediate threat of war the border military districts continued to live and engage in combat training for peacetime, and proposals by more visionary commanders from border military districts about the need to bring the troops to battle readiness were rejected as a provocation.⁴⁴

Another variable tied to Stalin’s cult that needed further scrutiny was the TASS announcement on 14 June 1941. It was blamed for being responsible for “wrongly orienting the Soviet people and the Soviet armed forces” and should be classified as “disinformation.”⁴⁵ The country and its armed forces were lulled into a false sense of security. The head of the Archives of the Ministry of Defense, Major General Dudarenko, commented in a letter that in his opinion Stalin’s announcement “to the world” that Germany had no intention of breaking the non-aggression pact was “the main reason of our defeat in the initial period of the war and our retreat into the interior of the nation.” Stalin’s miscalculation resulted in a lack of preparation in terms of military industry and a delayed mobilization of the armed forces in the border districts where units were often caught engaging in “maneuvers” with officers on leave.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 392, l. 244-245.

⁴⁵ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 75, l. 9.

⁴⁶ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 390, l. 200-201.

The TASS announcement was highlighted as “one of the most important reasons that our army was taken by surprise,” which needed to be stressed and clearly outlined as “the population awaits this from us, the Soviet armed forces await this from us, they want to know the truth and we need to show this truth.” With this in mind the question was raised as to whether it was possible to accuse Stalin of “treason.” If the attack was not a surprise, and Stalin knew or even suspected that it was coming, he gave instructions and sent out directives that could be considered “criminal.” Disagreement was not long in coming. Since “comrade Khrushchev” previously testified that Stalin “politically misjudged the documents with Germany [and] incorrectly decided the question of the timing of the attack” this meant that for Stalin the invasion was unexpected and a surprise. This issue, while a contested topic, was thought solved and “perfectly clear,” especially after Khrushchev’s disclosure. It was decided to stop arguing and move on, while identifying Germany’s attack on the Soviet Union as a surprise, not only for the people and the army, but for the political leadership as well.⁴⁷

The factor of surprise was entwined with Stalin’s leadership to explain the reasons for the Red Army’s initial failures. Since the country was put at ease by Stalin’s belief that an invasion was not about to begin, both the economy and the armed forces were not mobilized to their full potential. “Necessary measures” for timely evacuation were not taken, nor was there a switch to a war footing or deployment of military assets to needed areas. The “organizational arrangements” that were initiated at the time were due to continue for another year-and-a-half. As a result, the “unpreparedness” of the Soviet

⁴⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 75, l. 10, 51-52, 54. In the second volume the TASS announcement was treated as a “miscalculation” by Stalin. Fokin et al., 10.

Union's economy and armed forces only "came to light when the war had already begun."⁴⁸

While Stalin and his cult continued to receive a large amount of blame, there were also some who aimed to alter the collective memory revolving around Stalin and his actions. Kuchkin wanted "a vivid, clearer and more intelligible position with respect to the parade on Red Square on 7 November 1941." He requested for a separation to be made between what the commission and country knew and what "actually happened" during the war since at the time "we did not know about Stalin's mistakes, but with Stalin's name...we went to battle, died on the front, covered embrasures of bunkers with our bodies, and the speeches of comrade Stalin in this period played a huge role inspiring confidence in the victory over Fascist-Germany."⁴⁹ The suggestion was for Stalin's other actions and words to be momentarily silenced since they were not uncovered during the war, while what was known and acknowledged was that he inspired the country and the men and women of the armed forces to self-sacrifice and achieve victory.

Furthermore, Tel'pukhovskii argued that attacks on Stalin's cult in defense of the "honor of the Party" needed to encompass other figures as well. While Stalin was discredited "under the banner of a fight against Stalin's cult of personality" there was a need to now turn against others, like Zhukov (this was proclaimed on 29 January 1959, after Zhukov already lost Khrushchev's support).⁵⁰ Stalin could not be solely blamed for the incorrect "political assessment of the situation and the lack of preparation of our

⁴⁸ Ibid., 55-56.

⁴⁹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 30, l. 26.

⁵⁰ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 73, l. 25; Taubman, 362.

country and army,” the blame needed to be shared by “those closest to him.” While Molotov was already a well enough known name, there were calls for “expand[ing] the circle” beyond him. Casting all blame on Stalin would support “critics of the Party,” and as a result whatever was presented in regards to the Stalin cult and the mistakes made on the eve of the war “must be illuminated in terms of the solutions of the July Plenum.”⁵¹

Although discrediting Stalin’s cult was a necessity, there was also a fear that “fighting against the cult of personality” might inadvertently mean “fall[ing] into the camp of bourgeois historiography.”⁵² In response, there was talk of taking a middle ground, “we cannot blame Stalin for everything, if we cast all blame on Stalin this will be wrong, this will be the cult of personality from the other side.”⁵³

Praise and Prisoners of War

Weakening Stalin’s cult and salvaging the image and reputation of the Party was central to the mission behind the multi-volume history. Even with all of the reviews and comments that were received after the publication of at least the first four volumes, while some could see the weaknesses of the work, others continued to praise what it had accomplished. Tel’pukhovskii claimed that these volumes gave “a Marxist-Leninist assessment of the origin and character of the Second World War,” which was missing

⁵¹ This was undoubtedly a reference to the Plenum held in July of 1953 when Georgii Malenkov denounced Beria for his “criminal” activities, thus spreading the blame for actions perpetrated during Stalin’s time in power to those around him. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 75, l. 57-58; R. J. Service, “The Road to the Twentieth Party Congress: An Analysis of the Events Surrounding the Central Committee Plenum of July 1953,” *Soviet Studies* 33, no.2 (1981): 233.

⁵² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 74, l. 45.

⁵³ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 75, l. 57-58.

from previous texts. The mistakes made before and during the initial period of the war were “objectively discussed” and the Communist Party took center stage as the organizing force behind the victory achieved in spite of the numerous mistakes and errors committed by Stalin and his entourage. The multi-volume history was praised as being “the first time historical literature” provided “a comprehensive analysis” and critique “of the consequences of Stalin’s cult of personality and how the party overcame” them within the realms of the military, economy and foreign policy.⁵⁴

An evaluation of the fifth volume credited the authors and editors with creating a history of the war that would resonate with “every conscientious reader” who after a careful reading will come away with the “belief that the main role” in the “historical victory” of the Second World War, and specifically in 1941, “was played by the masses” who were organized and led by the Communist Party. Progress was assured since Stalin name appeared only eighteen times in the volume, where it was deemed “necessary” or where his actions were criticized and revealed the damage his cult caused (Stalin’s name actually appeared around thirty times in the fifth volume, although often in relation to his cult). The volume, meanwhile, concentrated on the “massive heroism of the people at the front and in the rear, illuminating the role of local party organizations, emphasizing the many activities of provincial committee secretaries, members of the Central Committee of our Party, [and] front and army commanders in achieving victory over the enemy.”⁵⁵

Aside from all the good the history of the war had accomplished, an aspect of the cult that undoubtedly merited a large amount of discussion, but which went practically

⁵⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, l. 30, 31.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 88.

unchallenged, was the treatment of Soviet prisoners of war and Red Army troops who escaped encirclement.⁵⁶ Soviet forces who, on their own initiative, crossed the front line, often “in a disorganized fashion,” were not met with gratitude by Soviet representatives but instead wound up having to go through filtration camps at the hands of SMERSH and the NKVD with some being forced to serve in penal companies and battalions. Similarly, those who had no choice but to surrender to the Germans and found themselves in temporarily captivity, only to escape and return to Soviet controlled territory, or were eventually liberated thanks to Red Army advances, also went through filtration camps. They were assigned to “penal companies or battalions only due to the fact that they escaped captivity, fulfilling their military duty.” Such an attitude toward army personnel was also attributed to the “harmful consequence” of Stalin’s cult. The distrust that was associated with the high command of the Red Army was argued to have been a leftover of the 1937 purges and the continued suspicion of Soviet forces, from the rank-and-file to commanding officers, throughout the army and country was believed to be a continuation of Stalin’s cult. A suspicion of all prisoners of war without exception meant a lack of “faith in the Soviet people.” Yet simultaneously there was a distinct omission of how to discuss those who, after being captured, decided to fight with the Germans or joined Vlasov’s army. Such thoughts seemed anathema when the idea was expressed that “as a rule” those who were captured “fought against fascism [and] remained until the end conscious Soviet people.”⁵⁷

⁵⁶ It should be mentioned that in the wake of Khrushchev’s speech against Stalin at the 20th Party Congress, a commission under Marshal Georgii Zhukov investigated imprisoned POWs. As a result of the commission’s findings, “the Presidium accepted its recommendation to amnesty, release, and compensate those Soviet POWs from the war who were still in prison camps.” Hopf, 180.

⁵⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, l. 63, 138-139.

Fears of the Cult in Reverse

By the conclusion of these discussions there seemed a real fear of the power being associated with Stalin's cult. There was anxiety that its exaggeration would give "nourishment for our enemies" who would claim that "Soviet historians themselves admit that everything they have is rotten" and could easily lead to the supposition that without Stalin's presence "the victory of the USSR was won by chance" rather than the abilities of the military command, the organizational skills of the Party, and the will and endurance of the people. This was an assessment that could hardly be allowed to stand in the midst of the beginning period of the Cold War. Additionally, criticizing Stalin's cult to such an extent could give it an all-encompassing negative quality, the cult in reverse.⁵⁸ Thus, when the question was posed of how advanced could the Soviet art of war be if it was commanded by Stalin, it meant for some that "one person is capable of nullifying all Soviet military art...from the development of military technology" to the "activities of military cadres."⁵⁹

Opposition from the military to Stalin's full removal from the war's history, by the likes of Marshal of the Soviet Union Rodion Malinovskii, was evident. While it was correct, according to Malinovskii, to indicate that Soviet military theory contained

⁵⁸ This was an observation shared by others during this period. Smith, *Remembering Stalin's Victims*, 30.

⁵⁹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, l. 133. A precedent existed in some ways when it came to Soviet literature. Almost as quickly as Khrushchev denounced Stalin did he begin to backtrack and soon the Soviet press claimed that there were attempts by "writers abroad" to "declare all Soviet literature of the past two decades 'ruined' by the cult of the individual leader..." This was labeled a "slandorous anti-Soviet campaign waged by the enemies of Communism...to cast doubt on the world achievements of the socialist camp" and seemingly similar attacks against the Soviet military and its accomplishments were expected by some. By 1966, the trial of the literary figures Andrei Siniavskii and Yuli Daniel made it apparent that literature that "could be used profitably by enemies of Communism" overseas, whether with or without permission, was now a criminal offense that could lead to time in prison and hard labor for the original author(s). Cited in Rothberg, 23-24, 156.

weaknesses due to Stalin's cult, high ranking commanders, such as Grigorii Kulik and Dmitrii Pavlov, made mistakes of their own that the Red Army had little time to correct or recover from before the onset of hostilities.⁶⁰ Proposed, instead of a full nullification, was to show how Stalin retreated "from Leninist theory" and perverted "the teachings of the CPSU." In the wake of the German invasion, and the minimization and weakening of his cult, previous ideas and theories, with the help of the organizing abilities of the Party, took the lead and directed the Soviet Union and Red Army to victory. Boltin insisted that "if we say...that everything that was done by Stalin – everything was bad, then we denigrate all that was done in our state and even in our Party." Criticizing the cult and liberating history from its consequences were both a must, but Boltin warned that "we must not slide into a nihilistic position of indiscriminate denial bent on maligning all that was done by Stalin and on his behalf."⁶¹

Stalin's cult proved too often to be a catchall for the issues and problems the Soviet Union and Red Army experienced before and throughout the war. The end result was the "organizational system" of the Soviet Union, including armaments and "the preparation of cadres," proved "extremely weak" due to Stalin's interference.⁶² The same applied to views directed toward the planning and operations by the Red Army throughout the Great Patriotic War. The many "errors" and their "hectic conduct" was almost solely attributed to the "negative influence" of the leader's cult allowing for limited room to discuss what other variables might have influenced the poor performance

⁶⁰ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 391, l. 315-316.

⁶¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, l. 134, 147.

⁶² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 111, l. 59.

of the Red Army and the General Staff. Looking at the operations around Kiev in 1941 or Kharkov in May of 1942, Boltin pointed out that “the causes” of the defeats were the “harmful effects of intemperate actions of Stalin or his stubbornness, his personal character, etc.” Such an analysis omitted an examination of the root causes that led to these Red Army failures. One of the most important reasons for the creation of an official history of the war, however, was for the military to learn from its mistakes so as to avoid them in the future. But, as Boltin explained, “we actually do not disassemble these questions and often overlook moments associated with errors in strategic planning...if we do not have this, then this just adds grist to the mill of critics of Stalin’s cult of personality.”⁶³

The Turning of the Tide against Khrushchev and Censorship

Fears of assigning too much blame to Stalin were soon forgotten as his partial rehabilitation began. A meeting convened in 1965 to look over the “results of the publication” of the multi-volume history paid tribute to the educational value of the work for the “Soviet people and youth” as well as officers and generals. This was a “major work, which is a big step in the development of historical sciences” but one that contained “significant shortcomings” in need of addressing. Already concerns over descriptions of Stalin were evident as after Khrushchev’s removal from power he became a target while Stalin was slowly rehabilitated. Members of the editorial commission argued that there was a one-sided portrayal of Stalin’s leadership role in the war and only the negative aspects were highlighted, especially before and after the beginning of the

⁶³ Ibid., 60-60a, 61.

invasion.⁶⁴ Further retreats from previous anti-Stalinist positions were also evident. “In the work the name of I.V. Stalin is referred to mainly where shortcomings are mentioned, and where successes are mentioned STAVKA and the supreme command are mentioned. But Stalin commanded the STAVKA.” Thus, there was a need to rethink how Stalin’s activities and actions should be portrayed in the future.⁶⁵ One commentator mentioned that it was worth talking in detail about the fact that too often the name “Stalin” was crossed out throughout the pages of the volume and replaced with “STAVKA.” Instead, he wanted to “specify to not write ‘STAVKA but ‘Stalin’” as there were “things that needed to be given as is.”⁶⁶ These thoughts and attitudes were predated by recommendations as early as 1959. One reviewer commented that the pages of the third volume read as if “the authors and editors...are ashamed to mention the name of Stalin...for example, they speak of ‘the people’s commissar of defense,’ but the name of the people’s commissar – the reader is left to guess on their own.” Simultaneously, some chapters and sections of the initial volumes, which were published before the October Plenum of the Central Commission in 1964, exaggerated “the role and activities of N. S. Khrushchev during the war” and there was the comment that “the name of N. S. Khrushchev is too zealously mentioned, even where it is not required.” The end result were platitudes that “smell[ed] like sycophancy.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 796, l. 266.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 265; d. 585, l. 93.

⁶⁶ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 117, l. 34. The speaker was A. Burliai and these comments were made on April 13, 1966 at a meeting to discuss a second edition of the second volume of the war’s official history.

⁶⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 585, l. 39; d. 916, l. 28.

As a byproduct, there was some concern that the third volume, which dealt with the German defeat in Stalingrad, devalued the importance of the counter-offensive outside Moscow in the winter of 1941. Reviewers lamented how a battle that “defined a radical change” within the Second World War, was “so miserably” portrayed. It appeared that the battle for Stalingrad received most of the glory with some concern also arising over how the battle of Kursk was being presented. The significance of the victory achieved at Kursk was argued to have been poorly examined and its greater meaning for the course of the war was missing. The reasons for the defeat of the Wehrmacht were described “superficially” with the end result that “significant improvement” within the text of the volume was needed.⁶⁸ Reinforcing the argument that Stalingrad received too much attention in the war’s official history was the fact that the fighting for the city encompassed chapters within two volumes, something no other battle merited.

Khrushchev was removed from power in October 1964, a move approved by both Stalinist and anti-Stalinists, and almost immediately his role in the war was opened to criticism.⁶⁹ The tide was turning against the previously lauded examples of Khrushchev’s contributions to the war effort. Although letters as late as the middle of 1965 can still be found supporting Khrushchev, as when a veteran of the war who participated in the Battle of Kursk reflected that “Some say that there is too much talk about Khrushchev...I do not share such views with the comrades. No matter what you

⁶⁸ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 585, l. 4, 6; d. 916, l. 26. The fifth chapter of the third volume that covered the Battle of Kursk encompassed sixty-eight pages in total. The actual defensive and offensive phases were covered in thirty-five pages and the “military-political significance” of the victory at Kursk had twelve pages devoted to it. In contrast, chapters devoted to the Battle of Stalingrad – nine and ten in the second volume and the first in the third – took up a total of 131 pages, the significance of the battle was covered in seventeen pages.

⁶⁹ Zubok, 190.

say, he was a member of the Military Council of the front, and hence carried a grandiose political responsibility.”⁷⁰ Nonetheless, statements at meetings made about the history of the war included how “the first volumes published before the October plenum of the Central Committee (1964)” offered “undue exaggeration of the role and activities of N. S. Khrushchev during the years of the war...” Speakers highlighted the absence of other military leaders but instead of mentioning the exaggerated role of Stalin it was once more Khrushchev who received criticism. There were many members of military councils throughout the war but only Khrushchev was singled out.⁷¹ Lieutenant General of aviation N. Zhuravlev commented about the same issue asking if the omitted names of some heads of political departments meant they discredited themselves while others, those who were mentioned, were by default “given preference.”⁷² In a more subtle change that in so many ways was a reminder of Stalinist times, at the end of 1964 a correction was proposed to footnotes where Khrushchev’s name appeared; references to the former premier were to be removed.⁷³ In the same vein, illustrations of Khrushchev were also slated for deletion, not only from the Soviet edition but the Hungarian and Polish editions as well.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 585, l. 78.

⁷¹ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 796, l. 265, 266; d. 585, l. 92.

⁷² RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 585, l. 39.

⁷³ In one instance it was recommended to “delete the reference to the report of N.S. Khrushchev. Instead, give [the] reference, ‘Report of the Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars of the Ukrainian SSR at the VI session of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR 1 March 1944...’” RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 705, l. 109.

⁷⁴ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 585, l. 130, 131, 134, 136.

The continued work of censors was another throwback to Stalinist times that was evident throughout the production of the war's official history. Censors continued to abide by "old concepts," similar to the prewar period when they were concerned with military secrets "and the suppression of any kind of economic, technical, or military data that would aid foreign powers in planning an attack on the Soviet Union."⁷⁵ Figures for non-ferrous metals, for instance, could not be discussed because "this has not been mentioned in any other book as of yet." Similar to how during the postwar period authors could only rely on information that was already published, evidence and sources that had yet to be utilized in any publications were treated as national secrets. In addition, there were still issues to clarify in terms of consistency. Because authors and censors continued to rely on Stalin's speeches, whenever facts did not coincide – as when the figure of shells produced in 1944 by the Soviet Union came into conflict with figures mentioned in Stalin's speech from 9 February 1946 – needed to be clarified before they could be published.⁷⁶ A speaker lamented such an "understanding of the assignments of historical science," where "people are living with old concepts" and, worse, "are aggressively seeking to impose these concepts on researchers."⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Similar issues were encountered when authoring the Soviet experience of the First World War. Petrone, 201-202.

⁷⁶ In general there were numerous differences in the figures provided throughout the history of the war. It was noted that two volumes listed the number of artillery pieces that were utilized in a few major operations throughout the war and the figures differed by the thousands. Where one figure listed for the Stalingrad operation mentioned 27,000 pieces of artillery used another listed 13,540, for the Battle of Kursk a figure of 38,000 and 20,000 was found, and finally for Operation Bagration, which took place in the summer of 1944, the figures 31,000 and 41,000 were listed. Speakers were despondent that there needed to be "some sort of conformity" and more accurate figures should be presented, otherwise "we can't just list them." RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 111, l. 25.

⁷⁷ RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 108, l. 121-122.

The Last Four Volumes in Print

By 1965, all the volumes of the war's official history were published. The third and fourth volumes (published in 1961 with a print run of 180,000 and 1962 with a print run of 178,000, respectively) began what would become a narrative of inexorable Soviet offensive operations, culminating in the eventual taking of Berlin. Any unsuccessful operation, like that of the Red Army's failure to hold onto Kharkov in the spring of 1943, were masked as failures of German forces to encircle and destroy their Red Army counterparts in meaningful numbers. When it came to allied support, Lend-Lease merited a few minor mentions, although specific numbers were absent and Soviet accomplishments and sacrifices were treated as more than enough payment for what was received.

In general these volumes concentrated on the "beginning" of the "expulsion" of German forces from Soviet territories, and eventually Eastern and Central European territories as well, including Poland, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Albania, Greece, and Yugoslavia. Major accomplishments included the defeat of German forces around Stalingrad, the breaking of the Leningrad Blockade, the defeat of German forces around Kursk and the destruction of Germany's Army Group Center in Belorussia. Individual chapters were allocated to the war in the air, the actions of the Soviet navy and the "all people's war in the rear of the enemy." The third volume offered a look at the significance of the Red Army's victories on the international arena while chapters in the fourth discussed all other theaters of operations, including the "expulsion" of German troops from Italy, France and Belgium as well as the war in the Pacific and Asia (covered in seventy pages).

The controversial topic of the Warsaw Uprising, which occurred in the summer of 1944, was discussed in the fourth volume. The Polish attempt to wrest control of Warsaw from the Germans before the arrival of the Red Army was portrayed as an “unplanned” event. Since the Soviet government was never made aware of the uprising before its beginning, and the war’s history claimed no efforts were made by the Poles to coordinate any actions with the Red Army, the Home Army’s actions were labeled as “reckless” since they endangered the population of the Polish capital – as a result the Soviet government needed to “dissociate itself from the Warsaw adventure...”⁷⁸

Throughout both volumes, the concentration remained on political figures, with Khrushchev, Stalin, Lenin, Churchill, Roosevelt, and Hitler receiving heavy mention (the fourth also featured Ion Antonescu and Tito). Interestingly, in the third volume the military commander who received the most attention was German General Erich von Manstein, while in the fourth it was General Eisenhower.⁷⁹

The fifth volume (published in 1963 with a print run of 223,000) brought the war to its conclusion. Major Red Army operations were covered as Soviet forces moved toward the Vistula and Oder Rivers, into East Prussia, Pomerania, Silesia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Königsberg, and eventually Berlin itself. The international situation close to the end of the war merited a subsection when the Crimean conference was

⁷⁸ Minasian et al., 242-243. This remains a somewhat controversial event. See David M. Glantz, “The Red Army’s Lublin-Brest Offensive and Advance on Warsaw (18 July – 30 September 1944): An Overview and Documentary Survey,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 19, no. 2 (2006): 401-441.

⁷⁹ In the third volume Manstein was mentioned on thirty-four pages, in comparison, Zhukov and Vasilevskii were mentioned on four and five pages, respectively. Nikolai Vatutin and Rokossovskii were mentioned more often and could be found on fourteen and nine pages, respectively. In the fourth volume, Eisenhower was featured on twenty-four pages. From Soviet commanders, Malinovskii was mentioned on ten pages, Zhukov on three and Vasilevskii on four.

discussed in fourteen pages, sandwiched by sections dealing with Soviet advances against the Wehrmacht throughout German territories. Major sections within the volume were devoted to the Soviet economy, both at the beginning of 1945 and its eventual transfer to a peacetime economy. A twenty-nine page chapter then discussed the Soviet Union's fight for a "democratic world," including its participation at the conferences in San Francisco and Potsdam. The final part of the fifth volume outlined the Soviet Union's role in the fighting in the Far East against Japan, which was portrayed as the "decisive" role in the defeat of Imperial Japan.⁸⁰ Once more, the concentration stayed with political personalities and while Zhukov's name could be found on seven pages, the likes of Generals Montgomery and Eisenhower could be found on twelve and eighteen, respectively.

The final, sixth, volume (published in 1965 with a print run of 201,000) attempted to reiterate much of what the previous volumes had already discussed. The "Great historical victory" of the Soviet Union's population was presented to readers, including the technological and industrial achievements as well as the political and ideological power of the Soviet state that sustained the war effort on behalf of the Red Army on the frontlines and in the enemy's rear. Resistance movements, in Europe and Asia, were allocated twenty-eight pages, including the Soviet Union's impact on their development. In comparison, the Soviet partisan movement and the Communist Party's leadership of the partisan war was devoted thirty-two pages. The "conclusion" of the volume concentrated on peaceful internal Soviet politics and how to avoid war in the future as

⁸⁰ S. I. Roshchin et al., *Istoriia Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny Sovetskogo Soiuz, 1941-1945*, Vol. 5 (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo Ministerstva Oborony Soiuz, 1963), 592.

well as a number of chapters dedicated to “short” discussions about how the war’s historiography was presented in the Soviet Union juxtaposed with “capitalist” states and “fraternal socialist” states.

Clearly the ideologues among the commission’s members won in the end. Figures like Pospelov and Kuchkin retained a flexible position when it came to Stalin while Khrushchev was premier. They allowed mention of Stalin’s faults but, either immediately or soon after Khrushchev’s removal from office, both followed a more favorable line with respect to Stalinist achievements. Others, like Minasian and Leshchinskii, held more objective positions when it came to Stalin and the war’s history – wanting to separate and contextualize Stalin’s impact on both the course of the war and its historiography in the postwar period. Unfortunately, the official history could not conform or mirror the flexible positions that were evident in Soviet society due to it being a collective effort. But debates over its creation and the reviews and feedback received from the public show a flexibility existed throughout all sectors of Soviet society.

The personalities and events that became the cornerstone of the official history of the Great Patriotic War were in many ways a result of the initial narrative of the war crafted under Stalin and cemented by his cult in the postwar period, including those who found themselves close to Stalin and the decision-making process. These “heirs” of Stalin could never fully disassociate themselves or their actions from Stalin’s cult and the country continued to suffer under ideological institutions that for all intents and purposes hardly changed since Stalin’s time in power. This included generals in important

positions who regularly steered conversations away from their failures and concentrated on prestigious victories already familiar to the population.

Soviet historians working on the war's history were continually entwined within the cult, no matter if they left out Stalin altogether or included him, since any documents that dealt with the Stalin period and the man himself were tainted by his presence. Consequently, Stalin could not be wholly excluded when analyzing and authoring a complete history of the war. Yet including him meant retaining an awareness that any history dealing with Stalin was inevitably prejudiced by his methods and cult and should never truly be treated as "objective."

Commission members struggled to understand whether the Soviet system could exist in Stalin's absence without constantly employing his way of thinking. In attempting to address Stalin's cult, it becomes clear that Stalin could not be fully excised from their ideas and "formulations" – he was an inherent part of the state as it existed in the postwar period and their ideological thought process. While Lenin replaced Stalin in some respects when it came to the war effort, it was still Stalin, his positions and actions, which ensured the Soviet Union's survival and victory against Nazi Germany. In part, thanks to his policies since the late 1920s, and the numerous propaganda efforts that inherently tied Stalin to all Soviet achievements, he was transformed into the founding father of the Soviet Union.

Soviet historians and the majority of the Soviet population had internalized much of the language and ideas that they were continuously exposed to during the war years when it came to the war's course and its history in the postwar period, when Stalin's cult permeated each publication on the war and previous publications that did not adequately

feature the leader of the Soviet state were avoided or rewritten. After Stalin's death, historians who assumed prominent positions within historical journals and honestly thought their efforts to free historical science from Stalin's cult was reflective of the 20th Party Congress proved "no defense against Stalin's still well entrenched protégés."⁸¹ Undoing so much so quickly proved impossible in the atmosphere of Khrushchev's administration.

The commission responsible for the official history of the war could never hope to find the real reasons for the motivations that led to the Second World War or where the Red Army's failures originated from as a full disclosure meant a greater indictment of the Soviet system in its entirety – from foreign policy decisions to military operational art and strategy. Similar to how in the wake of Khrushchev's revelations at the 20th Party Congress, which aimed to separate the socialist state from the evils of Stalin's crimes, the war's history only allowed a superficial analysis to take place with an initial separation of Stalin from that of the state. From his prewar policies through the conclusion of the war, Stalin was an ever-present figure whose actions and decisions continued to incite debate. The multi-volume history continued to parrot an already familiar version of the war that featured an organizer of the victory, in this case the Party instead of Stalin, and emphasized the limitless heroism and self-sacrifice of the population. Commanding generals who were allowed a voice in the war's narrative magnified their own contributions while attacking Stalin and the system he implemented for any mistakes and miscalculations.

⁸¹ Markwick, "Thaws and freezes in Soviet historiography, 1953-64," 178.

The “stubborn resistance” that was exhibited by the Party hierarchy in the 1950s and 1960s grew out of the inevitable repercussions that developed from an opening of the floodgates to Stalin’s crimes. Those who worked at Stalin’s side would need to be judged guilty as accomplices. If he was found guilty of incompetent handling of foreign policies and the international situation on the eve of the Second World War and the German invasion then so were those around him, and if his accomplishments within the realms of Socialism and Communism needed to be reassessed in light of exposed crimes and gross negligence then so, too, must those who stood at his side or simply remained silent and signed the relevant paperwork.⁸²

Soon enough even those first steps of greater intellectual freedom were opposed as Khrushchev began to partially rehabilitate Stalin. In the shadow of the Hungarian Revolution, Khrushchev’s approach to Stalin’s memory changed. Taubman describes how “At a massive New Year’s Eve reception for the diplomatic corps and the Soviet elite, he startled his audience by declaring that he and his colleagues were all Stalinists in their uncompromising fight against the class enemy.”⁸³ Khrushchev’s inconsistent attitude toward Stalin was also evident in a speech featured in *Pravda* on 10 March 1963. While Stalin was presented as severely damaging to the party with “arbitrary acts and abuse of power,” Khrushchev felt the need to “pay credit to Stalin’s services to the party and to the Communist movement” and continued to present him as a devoted Marxist.⁸⁴ With Khrushchev’s eventual removal the new administration “prohibited unrestrained

⁸² Rothberg, 368.

⁸³ Taubman, 301.

⁸⁴ “Vysokaia ideinost’ i khudozhestvennoe masterstvo – velikaia sila sovetskoi literatury i iskusstva: Rech’ tovarishcha N. S. Khrushcheva,” *Pravda*, March 10, 1963, 1-4.

criticism of Stalin and encouraged limited praise of his activities,” this stance lasted for a year and was followed with a moratorium placed on any criticism of Stalin’s “erroneous or harmful policies” while he was “exonerated of his miscalculations prior to and during World War II.” As a result, by 1966 the history of the Second World War was rewritten, the Party’s new, or in this case old, line consisted of Stalin being aware of German intentions and taking the necessary precautions to meet the existential threat to the Soviet state.⁸⁵ Similar ideas were echoed by the population at the end of the decade, Stalin was once more believed to have foreseen the war and attempted to do all in his power to avoid it.⁸⁶

The “Thaw” under Khrushchev allowed for the exposure of an initial idea that the history of the war needed a reevaluation, but the door to an objective understanding of how the Soviet Union found itself the target of invasion and was eventually able to triumph over Germany was soon closed with familiar rhetoric taking the place of extensive research and analysis. A reexamination of events was allowed as long as Stalin, and a select few personalities deemed acceptable, were included as the central figures of any accusations made. Thus the question of Red Army prisoners did not elicit much criticism as it was not the system that was attacked but rather Stalin’s abuse of the officer corps and the Red Army. Any critique of the system at its core, however, was disallowed. Many voices would continue to shout for “truthful” accounts and to demand that the phrase “nothing is forgotten and no one is forgotten” be adhered to, but only in the 1980s, when a new generation was coming to power that did not suffer and endure the

⁸⁵ Shapiro, 196; Rothberg, 162.

⁸⁶ RGASPI, f. 588, op. 11, d. 1414a, l. 73-74.

excesses of the Second World War, would an outlet once more appear for accounts that went against the status quo.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ “No one is forgotten, and nothing is forgotten,” according to Lisa Kirschenbaum, “became during the 1960s and 1970s the watchword of the war cult, and as such, suggested that a grateful, victorious nation remembered.” Kirschenbaum, *The Legacy of the Siege of Leningrad, 1941-1995*, 205.

EPILOGUE – THE WAR’S CONTINUING LEGACY

The narrative that appeared during the war represented a “collective memory,” a collaborative effort undertaken by numerous correspondents, editors, literary personalities, as well as military and state representatives all attempting to follow the party line while cognizant of censors. Because collective memory relies on simplification, the universalization of the war experience made it that much easier for all sectors of society to eventually build a cult around it. Soviet citizens continued to rely on a version of the war crafted under Stalin in part because of the “perfect storm” 1941 came to represent. Famous and well-known authors turned into war correspondents and gave voice to an event that would touch every Soviet family and, in part, a tragedy that could not be hidden from the population or the international community. The war’s beginning could only be represented as a deceitful betrayal that Soviet citizens needed to unite over and in so doing help the Red Army and their state achieve victory. Tales of heroism and self-sacrifice became entrenched in readers’ memories, representative of the desperate situation the state found itself facing, and the portrayal of a black-and-white version of the war made it that much easier for many to internalize its narrative and make it their own. Germany’s invasion and the existential threat it unleashed created a break with the prewar period when it came to censorship that allowed a limited period of “freedom,” or what many perceived as “freedom,” and the forging of an unforgettable unity that the population had never before experienced on such a scale.

In many ways Stalin’s cult was cemented by the Red Army’s victory in the “Great Patriotic War” and the position the Soviet Union found itself in, a superpower in opposition to the Western World. As Stalin traced his status to his experiences as a

generalissimo during the war, so the war was ostensibly transformed into an object that remained outside the realm of criticism, similar to Stalin himself. After the war, veterans tried but were censured if they attempted to voice their memories. In many instances they adjusted their recollections to reflect a stylized and idealized version of the war's narrative, sanctioned and endorsed by Stalin in the immediate postwar period. The very title of "Great Patriotic War" portrayed an exceptionalism to the Soviet war experience. It was further encapsulated in a narrative that featured a lone Red Army facing the entirety of the German Wehrmacht and its allies, supported by the industrial and technological potential of occupied Europe. Finally, the celebration of Victory Day a day after the rest of Europe's main participants isolated Soviet victory from the West.

In the post-Stalin period, the Party made use of the war's history to authenticate and support needed myths. The state's control over methods of communication meant the Party dominated the transmission of public memory. Whatever the Party conveyed into the public sphere was presented as "the sole, authoritative, unquestionable truth." The end result was a "univocal account" that allowed for a modicum of fluidity when required, creating temporary "truths" that served immediate needs.¹

With Brezhnev's eventual ascent to power the Stalin cult was, in part, reconfigured as the cult of the Great Patriotic War. In late 1965 historians were urged to "render the complete historical truth" with respect to Stalin, which meant including "instances in which Stalin had held correct theoretical and political positions and had supported Lenin." Pospelov added that "Party history must be completely free of any

¹ Smith, *Remembering Stalin's Victims*, 146; James Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 85-86.

exaggerations regarding the positive as well as the negative role of Stalin in the life of our Party and our country...”² The population noticed the changes taking place. In 1969 *Pravda* published an article for Stalin’s 90th Birthday Anniversary and received numerous letters in response. This article became an outlet for reader’s thoughts on literature and history when it came to Stalin. The turn taken in the wake of Khrushchev’s ousting was evident with a reader indignantly professing that recent publications have begun to unjustly “praise I.V. Stalin” as if guilt for the “destruction of innocent” party members, “Lenin supporters,” military commanders, and a host of others was undeservedly assigned to him.³

While some opposed the Party’s move away from Khrushchev’s wholesale denunciation of Stalin, a more lenient view was reinforced by military commanders like Zhukov. His memoirs, published in 1969, commended and sometimes praised Stalin’s leadership abilities throughout the war.⁴ By the end of 1969, Zhukov’s memoirs were lauded by many as a truthful depiction of events. One reader claimed his memoirs should be entitled “[The] Truth about the Great Patriotic War.” Zhukov’s depiction of Stalin and his actions was praised, and although Stalin might have been guilty of some “mistakes and miscalculations,” the guilt needed to be spread to the Politburo and the Central Committee as well. It would not do to solely blame Stalin. Readers were conscious of how the Party often took upon itself the glory of any success achieved, but when

² Cited in Shapiro, 197.

³ RGASPI, f. 588, op. 11, d. 1414a, l. 95.

⁴ G. K. Zhukov, *Vospominaniia i razmyshleniia* (Moscow: Novosti, 1969).

something went wrong it was Stalin and his cult who received the blame.⁵ A reader of Zhukov's memoirs, in an undated letter, wanted to extend a "big thank you" to Zhukov for "objectively" writing the "whole truth" about Stalin. No matter the negative connotations associated with Stalin's activities after his death, the author claimed "Stalin remains for all of us Soviet people, a great, outstanding public and political figure, recognized and beloved leader of the Soviet people and the international communist movement."⁶ Khrushchev's indictment of Stalin was viewed by another reader of Zhukov's memoirs as "unjust" and he claimed Khrushchev "slandered the most sacred for us, which the Soviet people believed, loved and valued."⁷ There was no question about the cult's existence as a reader commented that "Yes, the cult existed. We created it, and first and foremost, those who throughout the years were close to Stalin."⁸

Others, however, attacked Zhukov's memoirs, claiming they praised Stalin and descriptions of the Soviet leader as a talented military organizer went against the Party's previous resolution, which "rejected Stalin's command abilities" and recognized his ideas as originally the "military-theoretical work" of Lenin (which were supposedly "suppressed" and left unpublished during Stalin's lifetime). While Zhukov's memoirs promised a "deeply objective" look at the war years, hopes for such a text were not

⁵ RGASPI, f. 588, op. 11, d. 1414a, l. 73-74. Letter by I. A. Burtsev, written to *Pravda*; RGVA, f. 41107, op. 1, d. 136, l. 173; d. 144, l. 102. Undated letters written by V. Kholadovskii and Iu. Kurts to Zhukov. See also RGVA, f. 41107, op. 1, d. 131, l. 65, 125; d. 130, l. 65; d. 140, l. 2; d. 141, l. 28; d. 145, l. 45.

⁶ RGVA, f. 41107, op. 1, d. 130, l. 77.

⁷ RGVA, f. 41107, op. 1, d. 144, l. 171-172. Undated letter by Ivan Vasil'evich, written to Zhukov.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

justified by the assessments Zhukov offered.⁹ In general, historians who drew too much attention to Stalin's cult, and "overemphasized" his "errors and shortcomings," were criticized while memoirs published by high ranking commanders portrayed Stalin "as an outstanding military leader."¹⁰

The six-volume history added to a conversation on the role of the Soviet Union in the Second World War and the war's place in Soviet history. The war entered the public sphere through an official channel in the USSR and throughout the Eastern bloc.

Consequently, under Khrushchev, what became the official history of the war was soon coopted by Brezhnev and enshrined in a continuous flow of texts and another official history (a twelve-volume set) on the war effort. Although the war's official history was only one of many publications under Khrushchev, it set a standard that Brezhnev could build on with respect to the continued presence of Stalin and the transformation of his cult into the cult of the Great Patriotic War, which continues to this day. Brezhnev thus continued in Khrushchev's footsteps as the Party took credit for the war's victory, with the population reminded annually by parades on Victory Day.

War veterans continued to dominate the Party and Soviet society until the 1980s when Mikhail Gorbachev's generation came into power. The hold the cult of the Great Patriotic War had on the Party and society can in part be explained by the casualties sustained by the population and army during the war. There were simply no other options for leadership positions as an entire generation made the ultimate sacrifice.

⁹ RGASPI, f. 588, op. 11, d. 1414a, l. 97-99. Letter by S. B. Nesterov, written to *Pravda*.

¹⁰ Shapiro, 197; Kirschenbaum, "Nothing is Forgotten," 73.

With Brezhnev in power, the initial period of the war was never objectively examined due to the perceived harm it would cause the Soviet state at home and abroad. Soviet writers were urged to portray the darkest period of the war in 1941 as the first step toward Germany's eventual defeat. Any attempts to concentrate on the tragedy of the first days meant taking attention away from Red Army victories. Aleksei Epishev, the head of the Political Administration of the Army and Navy, only allowed historical studies that would be advantageous, failures were hushed up as defeats were turned into victorious episodes on the Red Army's inevitable march toward Berlin. State censors went to work and in analyzing narratives that dealt with the war's initial period they seemingly followed in old footsteps that portrayed the entire war as one whose victory could be dictated from day one.¹¹

This view became enshrined in memorial complexes like that of Brest Fortress, which altered perceptions about the war experience. By 1971, one visitor saw the memory of Brest transformed as a site that formerly housed "a modest exhibition of photographs and newspaper clippings" into a home for "Rows of granite graves, photographs of the 'heroic defenders' of the fortress, an eternal flame, immense statues, the works!" A "tragic defeat" was reshaped "into an exploit of heroic defense" with the Party leading the people. "It was incredible."¹² If Red Army defeats could no longer be portrayed as part of Stalin's larger plan to defeat Germany outside the Soviet capital, then they would become representations of selfless Red Army heroism.

¹¹ Jones, "Between Post-Stalinist Legitimacy and Stalin's Authority," 364-366; Svetlana Gerasimova, *The Rzhev Slaughterhouse: The Red Army's Forgotten 15-month Campaign against Army Group Center, 1942-1943* (Solihull: Helion, 2013), 177.

¹² Tumarkin, *The Living and The Dead*, 145.

Soviet school children were ingrained with an appreciation of what their fathers and grandfathers accomplished and a connection to the war was passed down by parents to their children. A veteran's son commented that his father "shared his experiences with me in great detail to the point where I sometimes would think that all this happened to me rather than to him." The war experience was ritualized and became a constant companion for Soviet citizens from "cradle to grave" as they were turned "into ex post facto participants."¹³ A former Soviet citizen recalled how during her childhood "War and hunger are the two words we hear everywhere: in our classrooms, in our news, in the conversations of babushkas on the benches of our courtyard. They are nonspecific and worn out, something that happened not to individuals but to the entire country."¹⁴

Consequently, if under Khrushchev the official history of the war lacked any mention of failed military operations, then under Brezhnev all failures that could be mentioned were cloaked in an aura of victorious sacrifice. All actions were once again part of a greater plan to defeat the Germans – conflating Stalin's narrative with Khrushchev's as the Party assumed Stalin's role as "master manipulator" of events.

During *perestroika*, debates about history were simultaneously linked to contested political issues. But the "frankness" over past events in the 1980s did not mean an objective or more truthful history was finally produced. The Stalinist period was a polarizing topic that cared little for the "truth" but rather relied on attacks against or a

¹³ Raleigh, 23; Tumarkin, *The Living and The Dead*, 133; Weiner, *Making Sense of War*, 20.

¹⁴ Elena Gorokhova, *A Mountain of Crumbs* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 64-65.

defense in the name of Stalin.¹⁵ Often controversies, bordering on the sensational and masquerading as historical fact, ignited new debates and research on the initial period of the war. Regrettably, this meant historians began to engage in discussions with journalists and amateurs who were more interested in unearthing scandalous material than contextualizing historical information.¹⁶

Unfortunately, the further removed the events of the war became the more contested issues that should long ago have been put to rest appeared. Sergei Kudryashov comments that in discussions during the 1980s and 1990s it became apparent that people with no real way of knowing the truth about the Panfilovtsy continued to vehemently defend the original version of the myth they were already so familiar with: there were precisely twenty-eight defenders opposing the German advance.¹⁷ The war narrative's entrenchment in the minds of veterans and the continued exposure of Soviet and today's Russian citizens to the heroic and self-sacrificial collective memory of the war has resulted in the defense of a history based on socialist realist ideals and emotions rather than facts and research.

Under Yeltsin, Russia initially moved away from its Stalinist past as his administration never proclaimed a distinct position when it came to the history and

¹⁵ R. W. Davies, *Soviet History in the Gorbachev Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 187; Bruce W. Menning, "A Decade Half-Full: Post-Cold War Studies in Russian and Soviet Military History," in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 2, no. 2 (2001): 343-344.

¹⁶ Bruce Menning traces the publication of Viktor Suvorov's (Vladimir Rezun) *Icebreaker* as the reason for enhanced access to TsAMO (Central Archives of the Ministry of Defense). Menning, 343-344, 349; Suvorov, *Icebreaker: Who Started the Second World War?*; M. I. Mel'tiukhov, "Disputes Over 1941: An Attempt at Critical Interpretation of a Debate," *Russian Studies in History* 36, no. 2 (1997): 7-8.

¹⁷ Sergei Kudryashov, "Remembering and Researching The War: The Soviet and Russian Experience," in *Experience and Memory: The Second World War in Europe*, eds. Jorg Echternkamp and Stefan Martens (New York: Berghahn, 2010), 101.

experience of the war years. Military parades were abolished as the war became less prominent in media outlets. When it made a return to the public sphere, it was accompanied by the disappearance of the Party's role in the war, however, "the thesis surrounding the people's unity remained in place," supported by the Orthodox Church rather than the Party.¹⁸

Under Vladimir Putin, the government turned to the Second World War for a ready source of patriotism. In 2000 the wartime Soviet anthem was restored as the new Russian anthem and in 2003 a textbook critical of Stalin's role in the war was removed from circulation. Stalin was still intertwined with the war's history thanks to a narrative that continued to link him to the victory achieved by the Red Army and Soviet Union in general.¹⁹ The presentation of Stalin under Putin came to represent a contradiction. The image of Stalin and his regime as "criminal" stood in stark contrast to the victory achieved in the Great Patriotic War under his leadership.²⁰ The Mayor of Moscow, Gavriil Popov, argued against such a simplistic binary in 2010. He commented that to "overcome Stalin" did not mean exposing his "falsifications," but rather to take a middle ground – leaving aside the question of whether an objective middle ground was even a possibility – and "see the whole war differently than how he wanted to impose it on us."²¹

¹⁸ Ibid., 102.

¹⁹ Geoffrey Hosking, "The Second World War and Russian National Consciousness," *Past and Present* 175, no. 1 (2002): 162; Stephen M. Norris, "Memory for Sale: Victory Day 2010 and Russian Remembrance," *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 38 (2011): 209-210; Susan Corbesero, "History, Myth, and Memory: A Biography of a Stalin Portrait," *Russian History* 38 (2011): 59.

²⁰ Arseny Roginsky, "The Embrace of Stalinism," *Open Democracy*, December 16, 2008, accessed September 1, 2013, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/email/the-embrace-of-stalinism>.

²¹ Gavriil Popov, "Pobeda. Stalin. Nomenklatura. Rossiia," *Sovershenno sekretno* №5/252 (May 2010), accessed February 12, 2016, <https://www.sovsekretno.ru/articles/id/2484/>.

The memory of the war under Putin became a “memory of Victory,” similar to Brezhnev. Most recently another official history of the war, a twelve-volume set, was published.²² Putin’s administration fixated on a mythic event that underlined national unity, struggle, and perseverance – a narrative that many were already familiar with. For Putin, as well as every family in Russia, an attack on the memory of the war was transformed into “a personal insult, a sacrilege” since all lost someone in the war.²³ In 2009, Dmitrii Medvedev announced the creation of a commission to battle the “falsification of history.” More recently, Putin praised Russian journalists in their fight against “falsifiers,” highlighting that “victory in World War II came at a huge cost...no one has the right to revise its results and lessons.”²⁴ Thus, the dead continue to serve the needs of the living as today’s remembrance of the war is dictated by a polished national memory – “the destiny of the dead” – based on a deceased majority of war veterans. The general narrative continues to revolve around the themes of Russian exceptionalism, selfless heroism and victimization at the hands of belligerent enemies.²⁵ Unfortunately, the portrayal of the war in a stereotypical black and white binary, initially evident during the war, continues to influence Russian historians and inhibits a more nuanced

²² Roginsky, “The Embrace of Stalinism.”; V. A. Zolotarev et al., *Velikaia Otechestvennaia voina 1941-1945 godov. V 12 tom* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 2011-2015).

²³ Elizabeth A. Wood, “Performing Memory: Vladimir Putin and the Celebration of World War II in Russia,” *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 38 (2011): 174, 188.

²⁴ James Rodgers, “Russia acts against ‘false’ history,” *BBC News*, July 24, 2009, accessed February 2, 2016, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8166020.stm>; “Putin Praises Russian Journalists for Countering Falsification of History,” *The Moscow Times*, June 10, 2015, accessed February 2, 2016, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/putin-praises-russian-journalists-for-countering-falsification-of-history/523381.html>.

²⁵ Timothy Snyder, “Memory of Sovereignty and Sovereignty over Memory: Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine, 1939-1999,” in *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*, ed. Jan-Werner Müller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 50-51; Wertsch, 106.

understanding of the war's events or the ability to engage in debates about an event that's treated as sacrosanct.²⁶

In 2010, by the 65th anniversary celebration of Victory Day, Russian views on the war's history as a defining moment were even more noticeable. Vladimir Dolgikh, a former Central Committee member who chaired the council on veterans for Moscow in 2010, was able to convince Moscow's mayor, Iuri Luzhkov, that Russia's Second World War veterans wanted their former leader associated with the victory. Stalin was brought back into the celebrations and out of 2000 posters he was set to appear on 10 that were "officially-approved" throughout Moscow. The decision, according to Luzhkov and the Moscow Committee, rested on "historical accuracy" – a similar idea to one expressed during the production of the war's history when some noticed Stalin's name was consistently missing. Stalin was head of the Soviet Union during the war, so posters with his image pointed out his position and did "not necessarily...endorse his policies."²⁷

The increasing popularity of 9 May speaks to how the war has continued to resonate with the population.²⁸ The war offered inspirational examples for an "apathetic populace" that struggled with national identity and elderly war veterans were reinvigorated with self-esteem.²⁹ However, the disappearance of veterans is making it

²⁶ Mel'tiukhov, 7.

²⁷ At the time, President Dmitrii Medvedev also participated in this debate and banned Stalin posters and stated "unequivocally" that "our people won the war, not Stalin and not even our military leaders." Norris, 210-211, 214, 215.

²⁸ The former holidays of November 7 and May 1 were partly discredited as they were appropriated by the Communists and excluded other groups. Corbesero, 78.

²⁹ Nina Tumarkin, "The War of Remembrance," in *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia*, ed. Richard Stites (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 197.

more difficult for the government to continue to propagate a positive image of the war. Some, it appears, have taken it upon themselves, either with help or of their own volition, to continue the tradition. As early as 2012, Russian bloggers drew attention to fake veterans walking around Moscow and observing the Victory Day Parade on Red Square among top officials and the military by the Mausoleum. A woman dressed as a colonel in 2010 was dressed as a general in 2011.³⁰ While the U.N. General Assembly has marked 8 and 9 May as days for “remembrance and reconciliation,” Russians continue to treat 9 May as a national holiday representative of Victory while the government continues to utilize the date as an occasion to fan the flames of “nationalist hysteria.”³¹

Celebrations of Victory Day are reinforced by a heroic narrative many are acquainted with and continue to favor. In a conversation between a librarian and a veteran who liked “to read about the war” the librarian asked “But why? You yourself were a soldier in the war. Wasn’t that enough?” The veteran replied, “Oh, what kind of war was that? I like to read about a real war that has heroism and brave deeds.”³²

Similarly, Soviet families developed strong connections with the memory of the war and its stylized narrative. A “Soviet baby boomer” claimed that “I don’t want to know or to hear that Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya’s feats never happened. The war was always a sacred topic in my family. I continue to believe that the people fought for justice...and that the country and the people were united like never before. For me the war is sacred,

³⁰ Evgenii Arsiukhin, “U Mavzoleia zasekli fal’shivogo veterana,” *Komsomol’skaia Pravda*, May 12, 2012, accessed March 30, 2016, <http://www.kp.ru/daily/25881.5/2844529/>.

³¹ Yuri Zarakhovich, “Why Putin Loves World War II,” *Time*, May 8, 2007, accessed February 12, 2016, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1618531,00.html>.

³² Musya Glants, “Images of the War in Paintings,” in *World War 2 and the Soviet People*, eds., John Garrard and Carol Garrard (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 111.

and I don't want to subject this to reexamination."³³ Undoubtedly the "sacredness" of the war was entwined with the numerous representations of heroic self-sacrifice that so many became familiar with. Breaking away from those memories and feelings disconnected many with a nostalgia for a time of "freedom," which featured a heroic history that had become the cornerstone of their understanding of the value and worth of the USSR's accomplishments during WWII; the only event all can confidently celebrate.

Even limited changes in everyday life, as experienced by those living in the Soviet Union during the war, resulted in at least the perception of freedom and a hope for future change. Realizing promised changes to Soviet rule would not take place in the immediate aftermath of the war, Soviet citizens grasped onto the only "freedom" they had left, a history of the war crafted in a space that many perceived as unrestricted, even though in the aftermath of the limited changes witnessed in 1941 obstacles to actual freedom were consistently encountered. No wonder the historian Mikhail Gefter commented that "Strange as it may sound, 1941 was more of a liberation than was 1945."³⁴ Veterans around the world recall their time at war as the "happiest of their lives," and states utilize that nostalgia and appropriate their memories for their own needs as they emphasize "national glory and national interest." One can also point to what Olga Kucherenko has called a "popular inertia," arising from below, that has sustained many of the myths created during the war, through the Cold War, and to the present day.³⁵ The

³³ Raleigh, 285.

³⁴ Tumarkin, *The Living and The Dead*, 64-65.

³⁵ Mosse, 6; Olga Kucherenko, "'Their Overdue Landing': A View from the Eastern Front," in *D-Day in History and Memory: The Normandy Landings in International Remembrance and Commemoration*, eds. Michael Dolski, Sam Edwards, and John Buckley (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2014), 244.

ideas established by correspondents and the mass media have been passed down through popular opinions and collective memory and have sustained themselves on real and invented sacrifices of Soviet citizens.

Veterans preferred a familiar and idealized historical narrative. The author Vasil Bykov commented on the attitude of war veterans in a letter in 1996: “No country in the world has such remarkable veterans as our native and beloved USSR. Not only are they not promoting the truth and justice of the war, but on the contrary – they are most concerned with hiding the truth, most eager to replace it with mythologizing propaganda, in which they appear to be heroes and nothing else. They like this inflated role of theirs, and would not tolerate any attempt to challenge it.”³⁶ The living, it seems, needed the lies. By entwining their wartime experiences with that of Stalin’s Soviet Union meant that invalidating the legitimacy of one risked nullifying the other. The courage, heroism, and sacrifice of their generation would be left in the dustbin of history together with the “Soviet experiment.”

Another author, Viktor Astafiev, in 1999 reflected how “everything connected with” the war “has been so confused, that in the end the ‘made up’ war eclipsed the real one.” When he decided to leave the theme of war behind he commented that “it is difficult and pointless. The young cannot understand, hardly anyone understands, and older folks don’t want to be reminded. If you must write about the war, it should be about the one that was made up, where they look heroic, where it wasn’t the Germans

³⁶ Cited in Oleg Budnitskii, “Jews at War: Diaries from the Front,” in *Soviet Jews in World War II: Fighting, Witnessing, Remembering*, eds. Harriet Murav and Gennady Estraikh (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2014), 59.

beating them, but them beating the Germans.”³⁷ Thus the original narrative of the war, crafted in its fires and blood, continued to resonate and displace efforts to offer a more nuanced and objective account.

In a 2015 *Kommersant* interview with the Director of the Russian Federation’s State Archive, Sergei Mironenko, the interviewer, Viktor Khamraev, questioned Mironenko about the 28 Panfilovtsy and the veracity of their heroic actions. Mironenko commented that the original *Krasnaia zvezda* article was a fabrication that was repeated by many others. Khamraev replied that “since my childhood I have considered them heroes, and I do not want to think otherwise.” In turn, Mironenko stated that he did not care what Khamraev wanted. “There are historical facts, there are documents, which confirm” that the story of the 28 heroes was nothing more than a Soviet journalistic creation. A BBC article commented how despite a historical “debunking,” many Russians continue to believe the myth.³⁸

The inability to separate Stalin from the war also means that, following in the steps of post-Stalin leaders, Putin’s treatment of the war serves as a foundation for his attitude toward Stalinist policies, both foreign and domestic, in general.³⁹ With today’s Russians defining themselves by the victory achieved in the Second World War, the

³⁷ Cited in Angela Brintlinger, *Chapaev and his Comrades: War and the Russian Literacy Hero Across the Twentieth Century* (Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 215, 218.

³⁸ “Razoblachenie fal’sifikatora i izgotovlennoi im falyshivki neizbezhno,” *Kommersant*, April 20, 2015, accessed on May 30, 2015, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2712788>; Tom Balmforth, “Russian Archive Chief Out After Debunking Soviet WWII Legend,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 18, 2016, accessed March 18, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/content/mironenko-state-archive-chief-removed-from-post-panfilov-legend/27619460.html>; Mikhail Poplavskii and Ol’ga Alisova, “28 geroev-panfilovtsev: pochemu mif populiarnее real’nosti?,” *BBC*, July 9, 2015, accessed on April 6, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/russian/society/2015/07/150709_tr_panfilovs_myth_demise.

³⁹ Shapiro, 181-182.

memory of the war creates conditions by which not only is Stalin's regime partly or wholly legitimized but also justifies Stalinist methods and excesses. This includes collectivization, industrialization, and the purges while relegating the history of the Gulag to being a "minor episode in a heroic Soviet history."⁴⁰

The memory of the war produces a myopic vision of the past that does not allow for the idea that alternatives might have existed both for the Soviet Union's evolution and how it waged war. The city of Rzhev was witness to some of the most costly and disastrous operations conducted by the Red Army during the Second World War. According to Svetlana Gerasimova, numerous individuals, including regional authorities, petitioned to have the Battle of Rzhev commemorated "by awarding the city with a title, if not the title of 'Hero city', then the title 'City of Military Glory.'" Veterans of the fighting and local historians protested claiming "it was impossible to call what happened at the Rzhev – Viaz'ma salient 'glorious'" but they were ignored. This movement to honor Rzhev and the soldiers that fell in battle marked a convergence of numerous leftover customs and practices of the Soviet regime. The tools and collective memory of the war at the disposal of regional authorities only allowed them to treat the battle as a "glorious" episode that needed to be honored. The only way they knew how to recognize such Red Army heroism was through Soviet-era commemoration that inevitably clashed with definitions of "victories" like that of Stalingrad and Kursk. In a repetition of what happened at Brest, once again a defeat was celebrated and commemorated.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Dina Khapaeva, "Historical Memory in Post-Soviet Gothic Society," *Social Research* 76, no. 1 (2009): 368; Jonathan R. Adelman, "Introduction," in *Contemporary Soviet Military Affairs: The Legacy of World War II*, eds. Jonathan R. Adelman and Cristann Lea Gibson (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 8-9.

⁴¹ Gerasimova, 183. Titles of current popular publications on the first year of the war in and of themselves offer a look into the contested memory of the Soviet experience at the beginning of the Second World War.

It might very well be that with the death of the last veteran the collective memory of the war, as well as remembrance and commemoration, will be defined in new ways. However, steps have already been taken to address this inevitability. In 2012 the “immortal regiment” parade was instituted during Victory Day celebrations as Russians, including Putin, parade around holding photographs of their deceased veteran relatives, in essence taking their place within the memory of the war.⁴² In such a way, political expediency meets public emotional needs and each supports and reinforces the other in a cycle repeated thanks to regular public celebrations and commemorations.

Russians today continue to grasp at a historic victory that was, is and will continue to be entwined with their Stalinist past. Latching onto the memory of the war allows a generation of Soviet citizens who were never themselves victims to compete for historical victimhood.⁴³ Currently, the war continues to play a prominent role in Russian memory as wartime and postwar rhetoric is recycled to meet new threats and reinforce

In several texts Red Army “victories” are the lens through which the authors have chosen to view the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Vladimir Daines, *1941: God Pobedyi* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2009); Vladislav Goncharov et al., *1941: Zabytye pobedy Krasnoi Armii* (Moscow: Iauza Eksmo 2009). Conversely, others have continued to portray the Red Army’s early defeats and retreats as “tragedies,” “bitter lessons” and “bloody” “circles of hell.” Mikhail Mel’tiukhov et al., *Tragediia 1941: Prichiny Katastrofy* (Moscow: Iauza Eksmo, 2008); Dmitrii Khazanov, *1941: Gorkie Uroki* (Moscow: Iauza Eksmo, 2006); Valentin Runov, *1941: Pervaia Krov’* (Moscow: Iauza Eksmo, 2009); Alexei Isaev, *1941: Piat Krugov Ada* (Moscow: Iauza Eksmo, 2008).

⁴² Fred Weir, “At Russia’s Victory Day, a brighter spotlight on USSR’s ‘immortal regiment,’” *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 9, 2016, accessed May 12, 2016, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2016/0509/At-Russia-s-Victory-Day-a-brighter-spotlight-on-USSR-s-immortal-regiment>.

⁴³ Lovell, 11-12. Lev Gudkov comments that “at present, people who lived through the war make up no more than 6–7 per cent of the population, they are mainly elderly and little educated women, most of whom have neither the means, opportunities, nor, most importantly, any motivation for transmitting” their “experiences” within and throughout the public sphere, rather, they are placated that their former cause is once more a part of public discourse. Lev Gudkov, “The Fetters of Victory: How the war provides Russia with its identity,” *Eurozine*, May 3, 2005, accessed September 2, 2011, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2005-05-03-gudkov-en.html>.

Russian needs with respect to bordering nations.⁴⁴ The conflict in neighboring Ukraine has emphasized the fact that “memory wars” continue with no clear end in sight. Most recently, Anatolii Torkunov, the rector of the Moscow State Institute for International Relations, commented that “the demonization of Russia’s history [by its neighbors] is a challenge to national security.” As a response, at the third all-Russian congress of teachers of history and social studies, attended by more than 500 teachers, government officials claimed “that teaching history in schools is a matter of national security.”⁴⁵

The divisive nature of the Soviet past perpetuates an atmosphere where a genuinely “integral picture” is unable to “coalesce” around any other memory aside from “the war,” and even that collective memory is constantly being challenged by Russia’s neighbors on the international arena.⁴⁶ Throughout Eastern Europe, Soviet history is presented as “false” and claims and counterclaims of “victimhood” continue to reconfigure memory so it fits into the “evolution of contemporary political identities.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Andrew E. Kramer, “Demands That Jews Register in Eastern Ukraine Are Denounced, and Denied,” *New York Times*, April 17, 2014, accessed February 12, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/18/world/europe/efforts-to-register-jews-in-ukraine-are-denounced-and-denied.html>.

⁴⁵ Aleksandr Chernykh and Anna Makeeva, “Predmet natsional’noi bezopasnosti,” *Kommersant*, April 5, 2016, accessed April 7, 2016, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/2956716>.

⁴⁶ Ferretti, 68. In 2008 the European Parliament adopted a resolution designating August 23 a day of remembrance for victims of Stalinism and Nazism. An Op-Ed piece in *The Jerusalem Post* worries that such a commemoration was a slippery slope that would make reduce and erase the exceptionalism of “Holocaust Remembrance Day,” conflating the Holocaust with Stalinist crimes. “Annual European Day of Remembrance For Victims of Stalinism, Nazism,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 23, 2012, accessed February 2, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/content/europe-day-remembrance-victims-of-stalinism-nazism/24685533.html>; Efraim Zuroff, “A Combined Day of Commemoration for the Victims of Nazism and Communism?,” *The Jerusalem Post*, July 12, 2009, accessed February 2, 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Op-Ed-Contributors/A-combined-day-of-commemoration-for-the-victims-of-Nazism-and-communism>.

⁴⁷ Finney, *Remembering the Road to World War Two*, 20; Pers Anders Rudling, “‘The Honor They So Clearly Deserve’: Legitimizing the Waffen-SS Galizien,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 26, no. 1 (2013): 131; Roginsky, “The Embrace of Stalinism.”

Consequently, while Russia receives much of the attention, bordering nations are carrying on their own internal campaigns with respect to the collective memory of the war within their borders, often to the detriment of minorities as well as their relations with Russia.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ For instance, see Omer Bartov, *Erased: Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present-Day Ukraine* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007); Alex Duval Smith, "Polish move to strip Holocaust expert of award sparks protests," *The Guardian*, February 13, 2016, accessed February 14, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/14/academics-defend-historian-over-polish-jew-killings-claims>; "Nazi atrocities: Implying Polish guilt to become crime," *BBC*, February 15, 2016, accessed February 16, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35581708>; Josh Cohen, "The Historian Whitewashing Ukraine's Past," *Foreign Policy*, May 2, 2016, accessed May 19, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/02/the-historian-whitewashing-ukraines-past-volodymyr-viatrovych/>; Jared McBride, "Ukrainian Holocaust Perpetrators Are Being Honored in Place of Their Victims," *Tablet*, July 20, 2016, accessed July 27, 2016, <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/208439/holocaust-perpetrators-honored>.

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