

## 8. The USSR in the Second World War, 1941–1945

### 22 June 1941

Regardless of their significance, the aim here is not to describe the twists and turns of Soviet development between 1938 and 1941. The USSR was still a country far from mastering the problems posed by its own economic and civilizational revolution, nor was it able to benefit from the economic and civilizational progress attained internationally. It remained an unreliable partner to England and France, which did not trust the country's intentions. On the eve of the new world war, the USSR was thus isolated, unprepared for the conflict with Nazi Germany.

With this in mind, there is no point in looking back to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939 and subsequent agreements between the USSR and Nazi Germany. These profited from the mutual distrust between the USSR and Western states. But in our opinion, it was Great Britain's policy which went furthest in enabling Nazi Germany and its allies to act aggressively. Not only did Britain's policy aim at 'reconciling' with Germany. It also weakened the position of France in continental Europe and particularly in the east of Central Europe. The policy contributed to the restoration of Germany's military power, culminating in the September 1938 Munich Agreement, which saw the Czechoslovak Republic handed over to Hitler and Nazi Germany gazing eastward toward Poland, which inevitably became its first victim.

Nazi Germany's attack on the USSR came on the night of 21 June 1941, and it came as a surprise in spite of frequent warnings from the intelligence services and from some foreign politicians. The Soviet leadership was thus not caught off guard by a lack of information. It has been suggested that the attack would indeed come in May or June 1941, but Stalin's reaction was inadequate. It is likely Hitler's intentions were not yet clear enough to him.<sup>228</sup> Hitler's failure to crush Britain in an era war might have led Stalin to believe that Germany's war might be lacking, and that Hitler would not be willing to face a war with two fronts.

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228 *Voyennaya razvedka informiruyet: Dokumenty Razvedupravleniya Krasnoy Armii. Ianvar' 1939–1941.* Ed. Gavrilov V., Moscow, MDF, 2008, pp. 622–714; also see Gorodetsky G., *Rokovoi samoobman: Stalin i napadenie Germanii na Sovietsky soiuz*, Moscow, ROSSPEN, 2008, pp. 333–339.

Nor can it be forgotten that Stalin had hoped to postpone the Soviet German conflict until 1942 or 43; he was certainly aware that his country was not ready for war, and a later start could only improve the USSR's position.

We are not of the opinion that Hitler attacked to forestall a Soviet push against the German forces in Poland.<sup>229</sup> It is therefore worth going into greater detail about the clues that indicate Stalin was considering entering the war at a later point in time. In 1940, Britain had been pushed off the map of continental Europe, and was hardly able to return by its own power. At that point, the United States of America was not yet taking a direct part in the European war. Before the fall of France in June 1940, Stalin had probably incorrectly sized up the course of the war. He believed that, in many ways, it would follow the same course as had World War I before it, and this is testified to by comments in Soviet periodicals of the time. Stalin must have remembered what happened in that war very well; England and France provided good reason for trepidation by the way they led what has become known as the 'Phony War' against Germany until spring 1940. The outcome of the agreement between France, the Czechoslovak Republic and the USSR was also fresh in memory, as were Soviet negotiations with diplomats and military delegations from Great Britain and France in 1939. It is thus easy to imagine why Stalin wished to join the war at a moment and under conditions he himself could dictate. British and French negotiators probably did not believe Stalin would make an agreement with Hitler. The animosity between the regimes seemed insurmountable. When it came, then, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was a profound shock to Western politicians.

A look at Soviet periodicals from 1939–41 show that, originally, the Soviets reacted to the outbreak of war with relative calm. Only in May and June 1940, when the British evacuated to England after their defeat at Dunkirk and France capitulated, did things change and the Soviet leadership likely realize the consequences of its isolation. It began rapidly enlarging and reinforcing the Red Army command, increased demands were placed on workers, and diplomatic actions aimed at regulating the relationships between the USSR and Germany were intensified, as well. The Soviet leadership decided the new conditions warranted openly seizing the Baltic states, and the government of Romania was also given an ultimatum to sign over Bessarabia and North Bukovina to the USSR. The Soviets also tried to reinforce their presence in the Balkans, what irritated

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229 See, e.g., Suvorov Viktor, *Ledokhod: kto nachal vtoruyu mirovuyu voynu*, Moscow, Novoye vremya, 1992; also Suvorov V., *Den - M, kogda nachalas' vtoraya mirovaya voyna*. Moscow, Vse dlya vas, 1994.

Germany.<sup>230</sup> Other rash actions taken by Soviet politicians at that time include an attempt to expand the territory of Leningrad at Finland's expense. This was accompanied by an effort to install a 'people's government' in Finland, which prompted the League of Nations to expulse the USSR and led to the deterioration of Soviet relationships with its potential allies Great Britain and France. In the end, the Soviet attack on Finland turned into the several-months-long 'Winter War' of 1939–40. The USSR achieved the change of borders it had wanted, but at the cost of a high number of casualties and a substantial blow to its prestige.

The efforts of the Soviet leadership to reinforce the country's position against Germany were therefore counterproductive, and the same applies to Stalin's efforts to compromise with Hitler. Hitler had decided to wage war against the Soviet Union as early as the summer of 1940. He believed that by defeating it quickly, he would open the door to defeating or neutralizing Britain. Molotov's attempts in autumn 1940 in Berlin to postpone the conflict came up empty-handed. In mid-1940, Hitler formalized his decision to attack the USSR in a guideline labelled 'Operation Barbarossa', and German troops began to concentrate in the area of Poland and the Balkans.<sup>231</sup>

We have noted the contradictory information Stalin had received from intelligence services. In April 1941, Winston Churchill warned Stalin that he had heard from a reliable source the Germans would attack. Stalin did not trust Churchill: he suspected mischievous motives. This distrust was supported by the 'escape' of Rudolf Hess to Britain, where Stalin considered an attempt to negotiate a British-German agreement.<sup>232</sup>

There are a number of clues that suggest both Stalin and the Soviet General Staff overestimated the Red Army's abilities. Their plans counted on a potential German attack, but not on extensive military operations within the USSR.<sup>233</sup> Oxford historian Gabriel Gorodetsky states that Zhukov and Timoshenko, like Mikhail N. Tukhachevsky before them, believed the Red Army would be able to withstand the strike and return a counteroffensive. Soviet war plans also incorporated grave miscalculations. They thought the German army would strike South of Brest-Litovsk in the direction of Ukraine, and it is here they concentrated the key Red Army troops. They were to respond in a counterstrike in the direction of Lublin and Cracow. Another contingent of Soviet troops was to

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230 Bojko O./Gonec V., *Nejnovější dějiny Ukrajiny*, pp. 139–141; *Istoria Rossii XX vek 1939–2007*, ed. A. B. Zubov, Moscow Astrel'/AST, 2000, pp. 18–20.

231 Gorodecky G., *Rokovoy samoobman* (pp. 100–106).

232 Rauch G.v., *Geschichte der Sowjetunion*, pp. 353–354.

233 Erickson J., *The Soviet High Command*, pp. 575–577.

protect the Baltic area and Leningrad and counterstrike in the direction of East Prussia. Its positioning, though, did not allow adequate protection of the central front, the key target for the attacking Germans. Nor did Soviet plans count on the rapid deployment of German troops, being based instead on Stalin's careful mobilization measures and troop transfers toward the borders so as not to give the other side an excuse to start the war.

Soviet troops in the direction of Minsk, Smolensk and Moscow were weakened, as they were to the northwest in the Baltics and Leningrad. Troops were transferred to the border zone but were not placed at combat readiness, and they were not ready to provide stalwart resistance against the enemy from the very first moment.<sup>234</sup> Adding to the difficulties were problems mobilizing and transferring Soviet troops for the border. Approximately 3 million Soviet soldiers were concentrated at the border, but at the beginning of the war, the Soviet army consisted of 4.8 million soldiers, with another 900,000 in special units.<sup>235</sup> The German army, by contrast, had not only been mobilized and transferred to the border, it had acquired the experience and self-confidence it needed from prior battles in Europe. The Soviet leadership tried to mitigate these disadvantages by forming a second line of defence in the hinterlands for both freshly mobilized troops and those retreating from the first line.<sup>236</sup> But many of the newly created units were deployed at the shifting front, and they suffered significant losses without having had the opportunity to seriously impact war operations.

German troops thus moved rapidly forward, surrounding large military units and even entire battalions on the front. In October 1941, they advanced to the immediate environs of Moscow, occupied the Baltics, and encircled Leningrad in a blockade. Near Kiev, they surrounded a large portion of the Soviets' southwestern front, and the Soviets suffered the irreversible loss of 615,000 soldiers,

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234 Gorodecky G., *Rokovoy samoobman*, pp. 154–156; Abaturov V., Morozov M., Portugalsky P.: *Strashnaya tsena pobedy: Neizvestnyje tragedii Velikoy Otechestvennoy*. Moscow, Yauza-EKSMO, 2010, pp. 12–15.

235 See *Rossiya i SSSR v voynah XX veka*, 245; According to Hildermeier M. (*Die Geschichte der Sowjetunion*, p. 602), the Germans and their allies entered the war with 4.2 million soldiers compared to 2.9 million Soviet soldiers at the front.

236 Two lines (echelons) were expected to be spread 100 km deep and reserves from 150–400 km deep, see Geller M. / Nekrich A., *Utopia u vlasti*, p. 405; also. Rzeshevsky O. A / Suchodeyev V. V., *Marshal A. M. Vasilevsky i delo vsei yego zhizni*, in: *Novaya i novejschaya istoria*, No 3/2005, 5.

with total losses amounting to 700,000 people.<sup>237</sup> The Germans occupied Kiev, Kursk, Belgorod, Kharkov, the south-western portion of Donets and a large section of the Crimea, and blocked navy fortresses in Odessa and Sevastopol, the key base of the Soviets' Black Sea navy. By 4 December 1941, Soviet casualties had exceeded 3.5 million men, 2.6 million of them irreversible, and the situation was becoming hopeless.<sup>238</sup> Approximately 45% of USSR residents, 55 to 85 million people, lived in the occupied territory or territories under immediate threat of occupation. One-third of industrial production, 62.5% of coal mining areas, two-thirds of metallurgical production, and 60% of aluminium production were based in these territories. And the Germans held up to 47% of the arable land and 41% of the railway track. It is no wonder that Britain and the United States did not believe the USSR could withstand the Nazi attack, and the Soviet leadership was not so sure about it either.<sup>239</sup>

## Consolidation of the Soviet Leadership and Command

The rapid progress made by German troops within Soviet territory prevented the Soviet leadership and its military command from gaining a clear view of developments. Prior to the war, Stalin had practiced an offense-based war mentality. He was shocked by the rapid inroads the Germans were making. When, after a week of fighting, it became clear that the General Staff did not have reliable data on the war, Stalin is said to become depressed, making his celebrated statement, 'Lenin left us a great heritage and we, his successors, have let it turn to shit.'<sup>240</sup> A five member State Defence Committee (GKO) was proposed by V. M. Molotov and L. P. Beria, consisting of themselves, G. M. Malenkov, and K. Ye. Voroshilov

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237 Irreversible losses include the dead and captives; total losses also includes people who could not be redeployed due to mutilation or serious injury.

238 See *Rossiya i SSSR v voynah XX veka*, pp. 249; 249 and 265 – indicate two different types of losses; Yu. Polyakov (in: collection *Lyudskie poteri SSSR v period vtoroy mirovoy voyny: Sbornik statey*, St. Petersburg, Blic, 1995) refers to the significant difference between Soviet and German data on the number of captives (p. 14).

239 Erickson J., *The Soviet High Command*, 628; Utkin A. N., *Vtoraya mirovaya voyna*, Moscow, Algoritm, 2002, pp. 194–195, 198–200 and 227. Later statistics indicated fewer urban dwellers in the unoccupied territory of the Russian Federation (see *Naselenie Rossii v XX veke*, Vol. 2, p. 82).

240 Khrushchev N. S., *Vospominaniya: Izbrannye fragmenty*, Moscow Vagrius, 1997, p. 239; also see Mikoyan, Anastas: *Tak bylo: Razmyshleniya o minuvshem*, Moscow, Vagrius, 1999, 390.

in addition to Stalin. K. Voroshilov was later replaced by A. Mikoyan.<sup>241</sup> Thanks to this committee, the initial disorientation was overcome and unified control of the state was insured.<sup>242</sup> This became even more true when Stalin took over command at Headquarters. He did not have the knowledge needed to manage combat operations, and heavy losses of both territory and troops in the first months of the war were said to result from his incompetent interference. But the fact that a unified will drove both the army command and the leadership of the country was key. It allowed the war to be managed in a more flexible way, and backup positions began to be constructed.

These changes were also influenced by Stalin's lack of confidence in the reliability of his officer corps. We have spoken of the heavy losses suffered by the Soviet armed forces during the purges of the 1930s. During these purges, Stalin renewed the institution of political commissars to mind the officers' trustworthiness. The institution was later abolished. But after the crushing defeat of 1941, it was brought back to life and, in various forms, it controlled all levels of the military command. Commissars were subordinate to the political administration of the army, which operated as a department of the VKS/b Central Committee and, on higher levels, were subordinate to the party leadership and directly to Stalin himself.

After the 1937–38 purge, the army felt an acute lack of experienced, stable commanders. Commanders were being chosen from people whose only combat experience was in the Far East, or in the Spanish civil war, or the 'Winter War' with Finland in 1939–40. They included the generals Georgy K. Zhukov, Aleksandr M. Vasilevsky, Nikolai F. Vatutin, Semyon K. Timoshenko, and a number of military district chiefs. These people did respect Stalin as the highest authority in the country, but they did not have past ties to him and hadn't had the opportunity to show their mettle.<sup>243</sup> Initially, Stalin appointed the 'old road warriors' from the civil war—K. Ye. Voroshilov, Semyon M. Budyonny, and Semyon K.

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241 See Reiman M., *Poválečné konflikty a rivalita na sovětské špici: Sovětské dějiny v nových dílech ruských autorů*, *Soudobé dějiny* 4/2000, pp. 547–552.

242 Gor'kov Yu., *Gosudarstvenny komitet oborony postanovlyat*, pp. 19–20.

243 The rapid rise of Andrey A. Vlasov, who did well during the fight for Kiev and at the defence of Moscow, may serve as an example. He was appointed commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army who was to break the siege of Leningrad. When his army was surrounded, Vlasov gave up. He became the commander of the so-called RLA (Russian Liberation Army) and was executed in the USSR after the war. See Richter K., *Případ generála Vlasova*, Prague, Panorama, 1991; also Geller M. / Nekrich, A. *Utopia u vlasti*, pp. 475–480.

Timoshenko, making them the chief commanders in charge of the three basic strategic directions: the northwest, the centre, and the southwest.

Characteristically, the lack of success in the war found reflection in Stalin's repressive acts. He blamed his generals for his own mistakes and failures. The best-known case, from 1941, was the trial of General Dmitry G. Pavlov and members of his staff, who were charged with failure to act and wilfully freeing positions for the enemy. The verdict was death. Also arrested and tortured was General Kirill A. Meretskov. He had been Commander of the Soviet General Staff in 1940–41, and later, during the Great Patriotic War, was a leading commander at the front.

General Pavlov's case centred on a diversionary tactic by a German commando which resulted in commanders at the front losing contact with their units on the very first day of the war. Pavlov and his staff had no choice but to try to restore the cohesion of the front by renewing the front lines.<sup>244</sup> Doing so made him inaccessible to Stalin and the General Staff in Moscow. But Pavlov was not able to control the situation; most of his units were surrounded at Minsk, with 341,000 irreversible losses, amounting to roughly 55% of the total combat force, with total losses of 415,000.<sup>245</sup> But the real issue was not a series of isolated mistakes by Pavlov and his staff. Rather it was that the General Staff did not precisely estimate the position of the front nor what action should be taken there. And this was not the only such case. Stalin caused a large section of the south-western front to dissolve at Kiev because timely information was not provided about leaving positions that could no longer be defended. Most commanders in the Soviet air force found themselves in a similar situation when they failed to receive orders to act against the attacking German air force.<sup>246</sup>

But neither overcoming Stalin's military and strategic mistakes nor consolidating the relationships between generals and the High Command were decisive for the war turning in the country's favour. Of key importance was the fact that Hitler and his generals were unable to force the USSR to capitulate. This German failure occurred not only because of the growing resistance of Soviet troops, but also because Stalin and his circle decided to hold their ground. In the autumn and winter of 1941, German army reserves in Moscow shrank significantly and

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244 Danilov V. D., *Stalinskaya strategiya nachala voyny: plany i realnost'*, in: Rossija XX vek ed. Afanasjev Yu. N., (pp. 144–155), *ibid* the text of the corresponding document (pp. 175–183).

245 *Rossia i SSSR v voynach*, pp. 267–268.

246 Pechenkin A. A., *Poteri sovietskogo generaliteta v period Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyny* (22.6.1941 g.–9.5.1945 g.), in: sb. *Lyudskie poteri SSSR v period vtoroy mirovoy voyny*, pp. 101–102.

the short term blitzkrieg was transformed into a long-term war. Major roles were played by the quality of troops and technology, as well as by transport conditions, the weather and the terrain. Hitler had also overestimated the dislike of the USSR's citizenry for the Stalinist regime. The people were repulsed by Hitler's racism and the brutal way it was reflected in the war and the Nazis' relationship to civilians. There was also a strong patriotism factor in Russia, Belarus, and eastern and southern Ukraine. Even in the first year of the war, which the Germans prosecuted very successfully, their loss of troops and materiel was substantial.<sup>247</sup> The German troops around Moscow did not possess the numerical or technological superiority to ensure their victory, and they lost three times as many troops here as in Western Europe and Poland combined. 27,000 were lost in the German officer corps, a figure that, in 1941, was five times the loss suffered in 1939–40.<sup>248</sup> The German attack on Moscow was postponed for approximately a month in favour of an action aimed at destroying the Soviet positions at Kiev. This gave the Soviet leadership time to move its Siberian divisions to Moscow. At this point, the severe Russian winter, with temperatures oscillating around -30°C, set in. The Red Army was naturally more adept at dealing with these conditions, and did so more successfully than the Wehrmacht.

## The 1943 – Turning Point of the War

The turn in the war's course that took place in Moscow in early December 1941 caught the German leadership off guard. It had been preceded by the Soviet army's debacle at Kiev, as well as at Vyazma and Bryansk, where German troops surrounded the forces of the Soviet Western and reserve fronts. Soviet losses amounted to sixty-four infantry divisions, eleven tank brigades, and fifty tank artillery regiments. As many as 660,000 Soviet soldiers were captured, with the total loss of life approaching one million.<sup>249</sup> The path to Moscow seemed wide

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247 For detail see Boog / Förster / Klink / Müller / Ueberschär, *Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion*, pp. 246–268.

248 Utkin A. N., *Vtoraya mirovaya voyna*, pp. 248–250.

249 Soviet sources (see *Rossia i SSSR v voynach XX veka*, p. 273) indicate losses related to the Moscow defence operation as follows: (30.9–5.12.1941): irreversible – 514,000 (41.1% of soldiers), health damage – 144,000, a total of 658,000. But losses in the Smolensk operation are separate, with irreversible losses at 486,000 (83.6% of soldiers), out of a total 760,000 (pp. 271–272). Viz. also Roberts G.: *Stalin's War: From World War to Cold War, 1939–1953*, Yale Univ. Press 2008, pp. 80–81.



open and on 15 October 1941, Stalin ordered the city evacuated.<sup>250</sup> Foreign embassies hastily moved to Kuybyshev (now Samara) along with the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet and the government of the USSR.<sup>251</sup> In Moscow, a state of siege was declared and General Zhukov took over command of the city's defences.

The outlook seemed grim. But in early December 1941, Soviet troops were ready to launch a counteroffensive. They succeeded in pushing the Germans back 160–320 km, sparing Moscow from immediate danger.<sup>252</sup> This significantly improved the mood of the Soviet leaders. The success after previous hard defeats lulled Stalin and some Soviet generals into overestimating their own potential. A directive written by Stalin to the army councils at the fronts in early 1942 claimed the new situation made it possible to drive the Germans 'relentlessly' westward, forcing them to exhaust their reserves, and opening the way for 'completely crushing Hitler's troops before the end of 1942.'<sup>253</sup> The letter was based more upon wishing that upon a sober assessment of the balance of forces. A try was made to break through the Leningrad blockade but failed, as did an attempt to reconquer the Crimea, where the Red Army lost up to 175,000 men at Kerch alone. The Germans were able to conquer Sevastopol and the Crimea in its entirety in early July 1942.

But that was not the end of it. In mid-May 1942, the Red Army began an offensive in the South aimed at conquering Kharkov. But as it began, the German command was preparing its own operation at Kharkov, and was thus able to surround and scatter three Soviet armies, which suffered total losses of 280,000, 170,000 of those irreversible.<sup>254</sup> But in a queer twist of fate, the Kharkov conflict proved useful for the USSR, delaying German progress in the march to the Volga and the Caucasus and giving the Soviet command time to ready its defensive line at Stalingrad.<sup>255</sup> The Soviet command was also able to prevent German attacks in the densely populated northern, central Russian and the central Volga regions, sparing these economically important areas. Soviet brigades retained

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250 Rauch G.v., *Geschichte der Sowjetunion*, pp. 365–367; Saul N. E., *Friends or Foes? The United States and Soviet Russia, 1921–1941*, Univ. Press of Kansas, 2006, pp. 379–389;

251 Geller M./Nekrich A., *Utopiya u vlasti*, pp. 417–419 *Vestnik Arkhiva Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii, Vyjina: 1941–1945*, ed. Kudrjashov S., Moscow 2010, p. 82.

252 *Vestnik Arkhiva Prezidenta, Voyna: 1941–1945*, doc. 33, 82.

253 Geller M./Nekrich A., *Utopiya u vlasti*, p. 420.

254 See *Rossia i SSSR v voynach; XX vieka*, p. 278.

255 Rauch G.v., *Geschichte der Sowjetunion*, p. 374.

their strength to the north of the progressing German units and later surrounded the German troops at Stalingrad.

The immediate consequences of the defeats the Soviets suffered in the spring and summer of 1942 were nevertheless burdensome. Although Germany had lost the opportunity for offensive operations along the entire length of the Soviet-German front, in the South, the Soviet front began once again to fall apart. Men abandoned their positions and deserted. The leadership reacted once again by exacting heavy punishments. But for most inhabitants of the Soviet Union, particularly those of Slavic origin, it became clear that it was more than just the regime whose existence was threatened. Also endangered was the country's very statehood and its national life. This perception was exacerbated by the ruthlessness of Nazi policy in occupied areas. Soviet anti-German propaganda also left its mark: the Soviet leadership involved the Orthodox clergy and strived to revive the traditions of Russian statehood and Slavic solidarity.<sup>256</sup> People in the cities and those in industrial occupations worked from dawn to dusk and usually through the night, as well. The key factor reinforcing their patriotism was not propaganda, though: it was the mobilization of 36 million people in the army. Most Soviet families therefore had members on the front, feared for their lives, and were willing to do their utmost.<sup>257</sup>

Negative aspects of the war mobilization were the acts of repression carried out against those who had panicked and allowed the front to disintegrate. Stalin's Order Number 270, dated 16 August 1941, forbade both commanders and soldiers from retreating from their positions on their own prerogative, and ordered both the military and governmental agencies not to leave anything behind that might be used by the enemy. Commanders were ordered to fight 'until the last man'.<sup>258</sup> The order, also signed by G. K. Zhukov expressly ordered the elimination 'by all ground and air means' of any captured Red Army commanders or soldiers, and ordered their families be deprived of support.<sup>259</sup> The logic was that

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256 Werth N., *Istoriya sovet'skogo gosudarstva, 1900–1991* (translated from the French), Moscow, Progress–Akademiya, 1994, pp. 319–320.

257 According to *Istoria Rossii XX vek* (Zubov) (p. 61) 34.4 million men and 1.2 million women were mobilized: a total of 36 million. Men aged 14–65 and women aged 16–55 were mobilized for industry unless drafted into the army.

258 See *Nashe otechestvo*, Vol. 2, pp. 402–403, Summary report NKVD dated 9 October 1941 indicated that up to 657,000 soldiers had been caught behind the front see *Lubyanka: Stalin i NKVD–NKGB–GUKR “Smers” 1939–mart 1946. Dokumenty.* (ed.) Chaustov et al., Moscow, MFD, 2006, pp. 658–660 and 317–318.

259 *Istoriya Rossii: XX vek 1939–2007*, (ed.) A. B. Zubov, 103.

being captured, regardless of the circumstances, was a military betrayal, and the families of missing soldiers became hostage to the 'lapses' of the captives. But the saddest thing about these decisions was that fallen soldiers in rapidly retreating Soviet units who remained unburied were frequently registered as 'missing', another words, as captives. NKVD members assigned to individual units were an important element in permitting acts of repression on the front. They functioned as counterintelligence agents and were later (in April 1943) singled out to form a special unit labelled Smersh, a combination of the Russian words Smert and Shpionam (death to spies).

After the Red Army's defeats of summer 1942, these repressive measures by the Soviet leadership against deserters or those who left their units were applied once again under the new Order Number 227. New penalty squads and battalions were created and deployed where conditions left little hope of survival for their members. When soldiers panicked and chaos ensued, the task of the so-called 'barrier troops' (*zagraditelnyye otryady*) was to stop any escape by all possible means, including shooting and the executions of the perpetrators.<sup>260</sup>

Political repression also underwent significant development during the war. At its beginning, numerous executions were carried out of political prisoners who might fall into the hands of the enemy. Gulags prisoners numbered 2.3 million at the time, 1.5 million of which were political prisoners. The highest number arrested were seized in 1942, likely influenced by the collapse of the front in Ukraine and southern Russia. The total number of political prisoners had not increased by the end of 1944; in fact, it was reduced during the first, the third and the fourth years of the war. The gulags were no longer able to accommodate the prisoner counts they had previously—the mortality rate was 22–25% per year.<sup>261</sup> This motivated the Supreme Soviet to release up to 600,000 prisoners from the camps and prisons, 175,000 of whom were then drafted. In the two years following, another 725,000 prisoners were let go from the camps and other prisons, and more sophisticated, i.e., more moderate, forms of imprisonment began to be used at Beria's initiative, including research institutions and construction bureaus. The

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260 Cf. Barsenkov / Vdovin, *Istoria Rossii*, p. 328. In every army corps, three to five barrier units of 200 men each were established. See *Istoriua Rossii:XX vek 1939–2007*, ed. A. B.Zubov, pp. 125–126. See also a study by V. S. Christoforov in *Novaya i noveyshaya istoria* No. 5/2010, p. 45.

261 *Istoriya Rossii: XX vek 1939–2007*, ed. Zubov A. B., pp. 124, 125. See too: *Rehabilitaciya*. Vol. 1, Moskow 2000, pp. 76–77.

perversity of the Stalinist prison system was clear in the appeals made to the patriotic feelings of prisoners. Some were even decorated for their performance in construction or other key areas.<sup>262</sup>

This development is key, because in many places the USSR's state and economic structure was not only militarized, but also interconnected to the criminal prosecution system. The latest data show approximately 7.7 million blue-collar and white-collar workers were punished between 1941 and 1945. In agriculture, the number of those convicted reached 8.5 million, 2 million of whom were imprisoned.<sup>263</sup>

By interconnecting administration, manufacturing, ideology, and repression, the Soviet leadership developed a wide-reaching tool for its use during the war and utilized it to mobilize society in an extraordinary manner, one that compensated for potential errors in combat operations and often also for the regime's own inability to resolve the issues faced. Testimony to this is a comparison of the war losses suffered by the USSR versus Nazi Germany. Prior to the Germans' defeat at Stalingrad, the USSR's total losses amounted to 11.16 million people, 6.15 million of those irreversible. These numbers were approximately double the number of troops Germany and its allies had sent to the USSR in June 1941—5.5 million soldiers.<sup>264</sup> Under normal conditions, casualty numbers like these would ensure the Soviet Union's loss. But in addition to the concentration of power, geography and weather conditions also played a key role. Shortly after the Moscow counteroffensive, the Soviets managed to increase war production, and by late 1942, the USSR's production significantly exceeded that of the Germans.<sup>265</sup>

The forms taken by Stalin's repression included POW camps, work deployment, and the punishment of captives for war crimes committed in occupied areas. Members of special units such as the SS and the Gestapo were essentially presumed guilty from the outset. The number of captives from the German army or armies of Germany's allies increased from the time of Stalingrad, culminating at the end of the war. Prisoners were usually deployed to repair wear damage done to companies, housing units, and roadways. By the end of the war, German experts in production and in-demand technology were also actively sought.

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262 See *Nache otechestvo*, Vol. 2, pp. 418–419; in more detail G. Ozerov, *Tupolevskaya sharaga*, Frankfurt/M, Posev-Verlag, 1971.

263 *Rossija: XX vek 1939.2007*, A. B. Zubov (ed.), p. 124.

264 *Rossija i SSSR v voynach XX veka*, p. 219 and 263.

265 Werth N., *Istoriya sovetского gosudarstva, 1900–1991* (translated from the French *Histoire de l'Union soviétique. De l'Empire russe à la Communauté des États indépendants, 1900–1991*) p. 311; cf. *Rossija i SSSR v voynach XX veka*, pp. 471–472.

Noteworthy is the fact that the Soviets treated German captives much better than the Nazis treated Soviet captives, which is remarkable given the atrocities to which the Soviets subjected their own citizens. 85% of German captives returned home, and the same holds true for captives from Germany's allies. Approximately 14.9% died in captivity. Out of the 4.5 million Soviet captives (some sources indicate more than 6 million), only 1.83 million, 40%, came home. Up to 2.5 million—55%—died in captivity.<sup>266</sup>

## Stalingrad and Kursk

Despite the fact that until late 1942 it seemed certain the Red Army would continue to suffer defeat, the turnaround that came certainly cannot be written off to chance. The Soviet command was able to maintain its army at approximately 6.6 million soldiers, while the Germans had approximately 6.2 million on the Soviet front, and their numbers were shrinking. Once abandoned enterprises had been retooled to suit, Soviet industry was able to rapidly produce the materials needed to wage war. In the second half of 1942, the Red Army outdid Germany and its allies in the number of heavy weapons it had available. For the time being, though, the ratio of forces favoured the Germans in south-eastern Ukraine and southern Russia to a greater extent than the information above would indicate.<sup>267</sup>

Combat operations in early 1942 were strongly impacted by the Soviet generals' continued lack of experience and mistakes. After the Kharkov operation in June 1942, the Soviets anticipated the Germans would attack from Orel, continuing through Tula towards Moscow, or from Kursk and Voronezh northwards, with the intent of surrounding Moscow.<sup>268</sup> But the actual attack unfolded otherwise. The Soviet front was broken the Don and Seversky Donets rivers, and the German troops and their allies—the Italians, Romanians, and Hungarians—attacked Stalingrad. This wedged open the Soviet front and Soviet troops retreated. It was then that Stalin issued the Order Number 227 noted above, and simultaneously made changes to the command staff at the front.

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266 *Rossiya i SSSR v voynah XX veka*, p. 511: approximately 180,000 Soviet captives remained abroad after the war.

267 Barsenkov/Vdovin, *Istoriya Rossii*, p. 629. The situation in industry is detailed on pp. 333–334; Geller/Nekrich (*Utopiya u vlasti*, p. 425) indicate approximately two million soldiers on each side of the Stalingrad conflict. Weapon balance: tanks and mobile artillery 1.4:1, canons and mortars 1.3:1, airforce 1.1:1 – mostly in favour of the RA (p. 437).

268 Geller/Nekrich, *Utopiya u vlasti*, 425; A. Utkin, *Vtoraya mirovaya vojna*, pp. 383–384.

The outcome was also decided by Hitler's gross miscalculations in the war. He shifted the German offensive to the southeast, thereby allowing the Soviet command to regroup forces and move them to the Volga. At the same time, he enfeebled the march toward Stalingrad when he sent some of the troops south to create an opening to the Baku oil fields. The Caucasus was a very formidable natural obstacle. Had the Germans crossed the Volga at Stalingrad, it would've opened an extensive area in the South Volga Basin, territory that was difficult both in terms of transport and militarily, and that had little economic potential. Any attempt to direct the army to the north and northeast into the densely populated area of the Volga region would come face-to-face with the regroup Red Army. The German offensive at Stalingrad and the foothills of the Caucasus would, then, in any event likely have been doomed to failure.<sup>269</sup>

It was probably this German offensive that gave the Soviet command the idea of encircling the Germans at Stalingrad, a plan that began to take shape in mid-November 1942, on the threshold of another frigid Russian winter. The Soviet armies positioned to the north and south of Stalingrad defeated the Germans at the front on 19 November. Within five days, they had encircled twenty-two German divisions comprising 330,000 German soldiers. General Friedrich Paulus, put in command of the encircled army by Hitler, received the order to continue to fight for Stalingrad, but after weeks of hopeless battles, the Germans at Stalingrad had no choice but to surrender. Of the original 330,000 soldiers, 100,000 went into Soviet captivity. The German army and its allies have lost approximately 800,000 men at Stalingrad; the Soviets recorded half a million irreversible losses.<sup>270</sup> The victory at Stalingrad expanded the Soviet offensive to take in the entire area of southern Russia and Ukraine, with Soviet troops conquering Rostov, Voronezh, Kursk, Belgorod, Kharkov and the greater part of the Donbas. At Leningrad, Soviet troops occupied Shlisselburg and opened a ground corridor door that allowed supplies to be shipped to Leningrad. At the central front, they pushed all the way forward to Smolensk.<sup>271</sup>

The defeat of the Germans at Stalingrad was thus a watershed event. The Soviet military command gained self-confidence and valuable experience of war.

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269 Werth N., *Istoria sovietskogo gosudarstva*, Moscow, Progress-Akademia, 1992, pp. 307–308; Rauch, G.v. *Geschichte der Sowjetunion*, pp. 374–376 Geller / Nekrich, *Utopiya u vlasti* (p. 436) indicates that a victory at Stalingrad would have meant a victorious end of the war for Germany.

270 *Rossia i SSSR v voynah XX veka*, pp. 279–280.

271 Werth N., *Istoria sovietskogo gosudarstva*, p. 309; Rauch G.v., *Geschichte der Sowjetunion*, pp. 378–379 Geller / Nekrich, *Utopia u vlasti*, pp. 437–438.

The loss in human life and materials was excessive, but not as excessive as before. And the Soviet army, as opposed to the Germans, could replace manpower, which allowed broad-based offensive operations to be planned.

The situation was, however, not yet stable. The German command conceived a broad plan to encircle a large number of Soviet units at Kursk. Thirty-six divisions were located there, along with significant numbers of tanks, cannon and aircraft. But the plan was no secret. Members of the British intelligence got access to key information and passed it on to the Soviets, who then concentrated their forces at Kursk. In the battle that began on 5 July 1943 the Germans failed, and their losses were extraordinary.<sup>272</sup> Immediately afterwards, Soviet troops began an offensive in the direction of Orel-Kursk-Belgorod. The Germans were forced to withdraw from Dnepropetrovsk and their situation in the Crimea became critical. In early November, the Soviet army conquered Kiev, and the fate of Hitler's eastern quest was sealed.<sup>273</sup>

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272 Barsenkov / Vdovin, *Istoria SSSR*, p. 332 and Geller / Nekrich (*Utopia u vlasti*, p. 440) indicate that this conflict involved a total (for both sides) of 2.225 million soldiers, 6,000 tanks and more than 4,500 aircraft. Soviet sources indicate 1,272,000 Soviet soldiers were deployed there. Irreversible losses amounted to 70,000 and total losses to 178,000. See *Rossiia i SSSR v voynah XX veka*, p. 285.

273 Barsenkov / Vdovin, *Istoria SSSR* (p. 333) indicates 46% of the territory occupied by the Germans, with 41 million inhabitants, was re-onquered from November 1942 until December 1943.

