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Creating Killers:

Stalin's Great Purge and the Red Army's Fate in the Great Patriotic War

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Stalin's reign was defined by rapid industrialization, warfare, and a campaign of terror which drastically altered the foundations of Soviet society in many different arenas. In particular, the terror encountered under the Stalinist regime created some of the most profound effects on the citizenry and culture of the Soviet state. Certainly, as Orlando Figes notes, the effects of the terror would never truly leave society even under Khrushchev's thaw, as it gave rise to "inter-generational trauma" that created a culture of whisperers and distrust alongside unique forms of intimacy.¹ Similarly, Martin Amis quotes the biographer Volkogonov to demonstrate how terror itself can form the basis for a society, making its removal more difficult, as "no man had ever accomplished so fantastic a success... to exterminate millions of his countrymen and receive in exchange the whole country's blind adulation."² As such, one cannot understand Soviet society or the Stalinist regime without understanding his reign of terror.

Yet while the effects of the terror were wide ranging, the resulting shifts in the Red Army would come to be some of the most significant given the conflicts which would bring the great

¹ Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers* (New York: Picador, 2007), 645.

² Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread* (London: Vintage, 2003), 127.

colossus of the Soviet state to the brink. While the reasoning behind exactly why the Red Army was a target is complicated, the history of the Red Army combined with the political goals of Stalin during this period created strong incentives for terror such as the purges. In terms of the Red Army's history, the contentious nature of the creation of the officer corps led to politicization and deprofessionalization, which, despite creating a class of ardently patriotic commanders, decimated command ability. While the lack of competent commanders did in many cases sever the connection between the commanders and the soldier, atomization of the members of the Red Army did not occur. The result of the terror created group dynamics within units which demonstrated the numerous ways in which terror creates intimate contact through solidarity, as demonstrated by the performance and accounts of the soldiers at various stages of the campaign of terror. Yet at the same time, the changes that lightened the burden of terror increased group cohesion and bonding in different, often more consequential ways.

The Great Purge of 1936-1938 was certainly the most visible of this terror, with some of the most high-profile portions of the Red Army command placed on trial. Frequently, it is described as the main cause for the initial disastrous performance of the Red Army during the conflicts which would soon befall it. The Great Purge significantly reduced the numbers of experienced, competent officers at the helm of the Red Army and led to the reintroduction of dual-command between the PUR's (Political Administration of the Workers' and Peasants Red Army, PURKKA or PUR for short) and political commissars and military commissars, making any military decisions inherently political and eliminating the final vestiges of professionalism and independence. It also reduced the number willing to work as officers, as even those who believed in the ideology often viewed it as a path to being labeled or becoming a class enemy through accumulation of wealth and privilege. One Junior Lieutenant, after being forced to live

in a dugout for months, with continual fear of being purged could barely stand his existence. As his suicide note states, “he believes in an even better future... but here there are enemies who sit and threaten every step an [sic] honest lieutenant tried to take.” This commander’s decision to end his own life, while extraordinary in nature, does at least partially reflect the general feeling by officers of terror and hatred from the regime they were serving.³

Yet, this extremely negative perspective may overstate the effect of the purges on Red Army fighting capacity and underestimates their effectiveness despite the terror. The numbers cited by Reese as the more accurate numbers (as the effect listed by the Red Army might have been overstated in an attempt to get Stalin to stop the purging of the army) are by Shadenko, who places the losses at 7.7% in 1937 and 3.7% in 1938, although those purged were disproportionately members of the officer corps and high command. Most purged were those in the PUR or leaders at division level and higher, thus placing the vast majority of the burden on the officer corps rather than the rank and file core of the Red Army. For context, 68 of the 85 members of the 1936 NKO (People's Commissariat for Defence or Narodny Komissariat Oborony) were shot, two committed suicide, and one died in prison and the Gulag. Four others were arrested but later released.⁴ The purges produced an immense effect both in terms of the culture of the Red Army and the overall civil-military relationship which surrounded it. The Red Army was already a relatively poorly run organization at the time, with rampant indiscipline, social divides between workers and peasants, alcoholism, and lack of training. Furthermore, the army was seriously struggling with officer shortages, poor training of officers, and intense politicization of officers for “crimes.” The military proficiency of the army as a whole was

³ Catherine Merridale, *Ivan's War* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), 67.

Roger R Reese, *Red Commanders: A Social History of the Soviet Army Officer Corps, 1918-1991*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 132-133.

⁴ Reese, *Red Commanders*, 122-123.

reduced, detrimentally effecting the RKKA's (Workers and Peasants Red Army) ability to go to war.

The most glaring canary in the coal mine was the Winter War of 1939. With poor intelligence about the Finnish defenses and their ability to defend for an extended period, Soviet commanders drastically overestimated their potential to defeat Finnish forces. Because of the officer corps' incompetence in allocation of resources and consideration of basic factors of winter warfare, the losses were substantially higher, at 350,000 casualties compared to the Finnish 70,000. Instead of conquering the country, Stalin had to negotiate a peace treaty. The roots of their failure lie in the "institutional incompetency" of the RKKA. The quality of the officer corps dropped drastically, while their individual decision-making authority was crippled by the reintroduction of totally inexperienced political oversight. High command gave incompetent low-level commanders tasks which they were not educated enough to handle, nor brazen enough to take strategic liberties in the sake of better outcomes. As a Ukrainian infantryman noted that December, "we're going to certain death... for every Finn you need ten Russkies." Innovations along the Finnish front by their better organized and more flexible commanders allowed for asymmetric warfare. The creation of weapons such as the "Molotov Cocktail," named for the Soviet foreign minister, allowed for cheap anti-tank warfare. The Finnish soldiers on the front line noted that they didn't "know a tank could burn that long" upon seeing it in action.⁵

As Reese notes, the difference was not in efficacy but in efficiency. The Red Army was just as effective as a fighting force but, lacking in morale, decisions made by command stifled their ability to combat the enemy. Their weapons were not winter proof, making them unable to

⁵ Merridale, *Ivan's War*, 44-45.

fire. They weren't fed enough, severely undermining morale and decreasing their efficiency in movement and taking territory. At one point during an advance, a battalion stumbled upon an abandoned Finnish camp and upon seeing how much better provisioned they were, the advance was halted just to allow them to eat the requisitioned supplies. Their uniforms also put them at a disadvantage relative to the Finns, as their muted browns and reds made them stand out against the pure white snow compared to the all-white Finnish uniforms. However, there were some understated demonstrations of ability during the Winter War. The capacity of units to learn and adapt during combat was demonstrated across the board, with many commanders realizing the need to regroup and attempt another assault once conditions were more favorable. Many officers and soldiers also showed immense bravery under fire, which proved that their motivation to fight for the regime was still strong despite their issues. Even given the eventual victory, every party involved viewed it as a resounding defeat for the Red Army. Nazi military analysts would later use their performance during this conflict as evidence of their inability to engage in sustained conflict against a well-prepared opponent. An American correspondent noted that the war "revealed more secrets about the Red Army than the last twenty years."⁶

Meanwhile, a greater conflict was just on the horizon. The Great Patriotic War would be the ultimate test of the command's organizational structure and the driving forces for morale. The commanding officer during combat was responsible for the morale of his unit. This would change in October 1942 with a decree making the commanding officer codependent with the Assistant Commander for Political Affairs. To a degree, the effect of the creation of an untrained and unprofessional officer corps brought together the men and the commanders in a form of solidarity. The officers of this generation were especially young and likely to have "proletarian"

⁶ Reese, *Red Commanders*, 139-140.

origins, allowing soldiers to relate to them more closely. Furthermore, the changing culture produced an unspoken rule that the commander should not demand more of his men than he could do himself. Furthermore, the “semi-paternalism” of the political overseers in their constant intervention and overruling of the choices and affairs of the military members of the unit created common hatred among the men and the officials, making bonding easier. However, other changes also affected the relationship between officers and soldiers. Unlike prior years, by 1941 there was an absolute distinction in rank provided by a change of quarters, privileges, and making saluting compulsory. The officers lived separately from the men, only meeting for occasional group activities. Here, the youth of the officers played against them, as their better treatment despite having little experience produced envy amongst the men. Factors such as these separated the officers from their men.⁷

Furthermore, the connection between the officer corps and the rank and file soldiers were further tested by the terror, often bringing them together. For failures of command, Stalin frequently sentenced the entire regiment to the penal battalions, punishment units that were frequently given the most dangerous missions and assignments. As such, they had to fight or die together, and even bad commands had to be faithfully executed to avoid group punishment. Order 227, otherwise known as the “Not a step back!” doctrine, dictated that any man deemed to have retreated or deserted without cause was to be “filtered” (sent to penal battalions, to the gulag, or shot) by the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) along with their entire family. More specifically, the order was that military councils of the front should eliminate retreat battle plans and ensure propaganda that states that retreat is impossible. Furthermore, the order was read in all companies, cavalry squadrons, batteries, squadrons, commands and

⁷ W. Victor Madej, *Red Army Order of Battle, 1941-1943* (Allentown: Game Publishing Company, 1983), 194-197.

headquarters, ensuring that all knew that retreat would mean severe punishment. In November 1944, Stalin sentenced the entire 214th Cavalry Regiment to the penal unit for not fighting to the end to secure their regimental flag in battle. As a result, the 8th and 10th Guard's Airborne Regiments were nearly annihilated, officers and all, trying to defend their flag. One soldier, Aleksandr Bodnar, remembered how, upon leaving his tank following it catching fire, it suddenly stopped burning making it seem as though he abandoned a working tank, meaning he "lie there, thinking about the responsibility for an abandoned tank, what will become of [him]." This soldier's example illustrates the effectiveness of these motivational tactics at ensuring they attacked with fervor.⁸ This terror would also produce some of the greatest mistakes of the conflicts, with the inability to make independent, adaptive decisions stemming from both commander's inexperience and the fear of political backlash from such acts. For example, the preventable death of Kiriponos, who would not surrender Kiev without an order, and was annihilated along with his 400,000 strong unit. Furthermore, the creation of the "Political Sections" made sure that all soldiers were aware that their families' names were on record should they retreat or otherwise become traitors, driving them to strong avoidance of appearing to dissent. In fact, some would come to describe the Stalinist regulation of informational leadership of the SMERSH (SMERt' SHpionam) division, a chekist-style informant agency within the Red Army, as "terrorism dressed up in an Army uniform." SMERSH's name literally translates to "death to spies," signaling that those who were placed on their blacklist were to be designated traitors to the people for acts such as retreating.⁹

⁸ Roger Reese, *Why Stalin's Soldiers Fought* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 164-167.

⁹ Dimitri Panin, *The Notebooks of Sologdin* (New York: Harcourt, 1973), 108-109.
 Reese, *Why Stalin's Soldiers Fought*, 159-160.

For those placed into the penal battalions, life was extremely difficult. These commanders were “stripped . . . of their decorations, placed . . . at the most dangerous sectors of the front and ordered . . . to atone for their guilt with their blood.” A large portion of their ranks were initially filled by those who had disobeyed orders, but later became more heavily populated with former prisoners of war who had been “liberated.” Oftentimes, these battalions were the last to receive needed supplies such as ammunition and food. Furthermore, they were frequently assigned some of the most dangerous missions and given very few resources needed to accomplish tactical objectives. Yet despite this, many served with relatively high morale and valor during the combat, even earning their freedom through recommendations. Alexander Pyl’cyn’s memoirs note that during a raid in which they lacked ammunition and other supplies, the battalion still managed to take the objective, resulting in commendations which freed the *shrafniks* (or penal soldiers) from their obligations. This codependence and shared suffering, in which the brutal conditions required absolute trust from one’s unit while the commander held the likely key to liberation, brought the two groups together. Pyl’cyn repeatedly notes examples of where the “shrafniks . . . tried their best to preserve the lives of their commanders.” For an example, when Senior Lieutenant Ivan Yanin, a commander who inspired his troops with bravery despite the conditions, was wounded, his penal battalion dragged him out of the line of fire and found him cover, tending to his wounds. This degree of care for their commanding officers was mirrored throughout other non-penal battalions on the front, demonstrating the tendency for terror to paradoxically create group intimacy rather than factionalism.

This connection produced by terror is demonstrated by Grossman’s account of the Battle of Stalingrad and the workers’ battalions. For these inexperienced soldiers, the shock of battle often proved to be too much, requiring severe NKVD crackdowns with blocker units. The

political officers told stories of how these measures steeled their soldiers' resolve, with one instance where a "soldier shot his comrade who had been carrying a wounded man back from the battlefield and had raised his hands in surrender" demonstrating that the soldiers themselves had a no-retreat mentality (likely because one's retreat could mean group reprisal). This oppression drove a greater mentality of either dying as traitors in a retreat, or dying together on the front, giving them a greater sense of forced investment in each other. To soldiers, it was inescapable, "once you are here, there is no way out... everyone knew that those who turn and run would be shot on the spot. This was more terrifying than Germans." This sentiment was mirrored by Soviet high command. In the meetings with Stalin to discuss the defense of Stalingrad, the conversation was as frank as possible. As is reported by General Vasily Chuikov, the interview with Yeremenko and Khrushchev regarding his defense of Stalingrad forcefully asked "Comrade Chuikov, how do you interpret your task?" Chuikov responded "[w]e will defend the city or die in the attempt." Yeremenko and Khrushchev then told him that he had understood his mission perfectly. Furthermore, even in the worst conditions, the soldiers tried enjoying all they could before their perceived inevitable end. As Grossman overheard from two other soldiers, a batch of reinforcements on the Volga "like an easy life, they hurry to live" their lives before their time in Stalingrad. This approach to life and existence portrays the response to the stress of the battle. In the hellish landscape of Stalingrad, they took pleasure in each other's company and made as much as they could out of their short remaining lives. Yet far more poignant than the feelings of connection were the "wild anger, an inhuman anger towards Germans" produced by the place that soldiers described as "ten times worse than hell" itself. Rather than accepting their

conditions and despairing, they worked in a rage against the Germans, boosting morale, especially given their own government's poor supply of their efforts.¹⁰

However, despite the connection produced by situational terror, the role of the commander as judge and executioner drove a deadly wedge between them and their soldiers. Frontline officers were often ordered to shoot subordinates by superiors. One example is Lieutenant Gol'braikh, who, following a failed assault overheard an exchange between the division commander and the regiment commander. The division commander asked if he had shot any of his officers for the failure, to which he replied no, garnering the response "Then get to shooting! This is not a trade union meeting. This is war!" Later that night, the company commander was executed in front of the other officers of the battalion. Commanders had the duty of killing subordinates for failures, ensuring that there was distrust in the relationship. Once Stalin gave the order to shoot those who were retreating or attempting to be captured, there were a number of incidents (although quite rare) in which the officers were shot by their own men to allow their capture by the Germans.¹¹ This demonstrates the fundamental divide between the officers of the war and the soldiers, but also their commonality. Both were repressed by the regime, with the threat of execution of themselves and everyone they know hanging over them always. Yet the differing responsibilities that could bring about such a fate brought about a distinct difference in the solidarity and behavior of both groups. Officers would prefer to be nearly annihilated given that they survived as it would save their family and preserve their position. However, in the early stages of the war, soldiers preferred to be captured especially given the effectiveness of Nazi propaganda regarding the conditions of their prisoners. This

¹⁰ Vasily Grossman, *A Writer at War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 145-148.
Alexander Pyl'cyn, *Penalty Strike: The Memoirs of a Red Army Penal Company Commander, 1943-45* (Solihull: Helion and Company, 2006), 97.

¹¹ Reese, *Why Stalin's Soldiers Fought*, 168.

would change as the war went on, and knowledge of the brutality with which the Nazis treated their prisoners became known, causing them to fight to the death rather than risk capture.¹² As Merridale puts it, “death was probably a better fate... than capture for Red Army troops,” which is confirmed by the account of Lev Mekhlis, a Stavka representative during World War II who was responsible for five to seven Soviet fronts. He noted that “they say there’s no shelter, no water... people are treated like slaves, shot for the slightest misdemeanor... or for just a kind of fun.” Soviet high command realized the value of the horrific treatment of the prisoners for motivation. As a nameless Soviet colonel said in 1942, “it’s a horrible thing to say, but by ill-treating and starving our prisoners to death, the Germans are helping us.”¹³ Yet this experience was not without its concurrent cost in terror. It was “categorically prohibited to become a prisoner of war” as the soldiers were then considered “a traitor to the fatherland, with all this implied as consequences for his family.” Given the immense losses on the front, these captured PoWs were often reintegrated or sent to penal battalions through filtering by the NKVD.¹⁴

In many respects, terror was largely counterproductive both as a deterrent and as a means of creating greater fighting efficiency. The most severe punishment, the firing squad, was utilized primarily to prevent desertion. Yet the result was not a lesser occurrence. Rather, the increasing demoralization, especially in the early stages of the war when things seemed bleakest, resulted in massive waves of desertion on the front. Once the death penalty rules became standard, the soldiers more frequently would deliberately surrender to the enemy, especially following the extreme effectiveness of the Nazi propaganda surrounding the treatment of their

¹² Roger R Reese, "Surrender and Capture in the Winter War and Great Patriotic War: Which was the Anomaly?," *Global War Studies* 8, no. 1 (2011): 87-98.

¹³ Merridale, *Ivan's War*, 122-123.

¹⁴ Nick Baron, "Remaking Soviet Society: The Filtration of Returnees from Nazi Germany, 1944-49," In *Warlands*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 89-116.
Panin, *The Notebooks of Sologdin*, 109.
Reese, *Why Stalin's Soldiers Fought*, 168-169.

prisoners of war. Those who ended up in front of the firing squads were often men dazed and shell-shocked with little understanding of the act they had committed. Given the nature of the battles this is understandable. Grossman describes soldiers slowly losing their ability to think during the battle for Kursk, as “people’s faces were completely black... no one thought of sleep... the nerves were strained.” This is not to say that the soldiers at the Battle of Kursk were demoralized across the board, as their performance was ferocious, however, this description of the conditions of a battle demonstrates how some soldiers may end up dazed and confused. Due to these problems, soldiers tended to view the concept of cowardice very differently than their commanders, and punishments could carry a steep price in morale. Many viewed the punishments as disproportionate, arbitrary and indiscriminate. Using blocking battalions as a part of Order 227 meant that otherwise sound decisions could result in severe punishment and filtration. Grossman notes that a brigade commander, facing certain death during the battle for Kursk, yelled “we won’t retreat, we’ll stay here to die!” knowing the punishment that would befall him should he take one step back. Although the significance of the blocking detachments declines as the Soviets went on the offensive, ultimately culminating in their disbandment in 1944 from an NKO decree, their significance during the first years of the war is definite.¹⁵

In terms of creating productive views of soldiers’ missions during the early years, propaganda and party loyalty played a role in both the officer corps and their soldiers. A sizable portion of the Red Army were at least receptive to the idea that they must be fighting for a greater cause, as the vilification of the enemy was practically a given based on their task. A notable development in this propaganda was the creation of Ehrenberg’s May 1942 article on

¹⁵ Alexander Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 358. Grossman, *A Writer at War*, 235. Reese, *Why Stalin’s Soldiers Fought*, 230-234.

hatred which was a foundational work in the ideological opposition to fascism in the Soviet Union. He posited that rather than being an alternative model of socialism, fascism was instead a capitalist phenomenon, and counterrevolutionary. In contrast to the Soviet goal of an inevitable communist utopia, “Fascism is a monumental attempt to halt the course of history” meaning reversing that progress. This expanded the nature of the ideological motivator from simply a nationalist goal of protecting the state to protecting the very flow of history itself. This message was built on Stalin’s idea that the German’s were “reactionary feudal barons.” This seemed intuitive to Stalin as “only liars can assert that the German fascists, who have introduced slave labor... and resurrected serfdom... are champions of the workers and peasants.” However, despite the strong message, the rapid shift in 1940 between the idea of the Nazis as a peaceful friend that the Soviet state must coexist with to them being a group of warmongering marauders caught many by surprise. As such, the propaganda machine had the arduous task of creating a dehumanizing mold for the German forces. They began by calling the enemy “Fritz” or “Hans,” and the Soviet forces, not realizing they were German personal names, used the names for the “Italian Fritz” or the “Romanian Fritz.” However, GlavPUR (Central Political Office of the Soviet Armed Forces), functioning as the war propaganda ministry, failed to convince many that the poor performance they had witnessed on the battlefield was actually better than they thought. As a result, many rejected wholesale all news from the ministry, regardless of merit. Furthermore, GlavPUR did not find the allies it hoped for in the commanders, despite their political backgrounds, as many times they were as demoralized as the soldiers with regards to the progress of the Red Army. The main informative report from the 43rd Army group on the effect of propaganda notes that while few found it convincing, making them prone to rumors and Nazi

propaganda, they frequently consumed it and wrote about it in letters home. Thus, the exact effect of propaganda on the nature of overall Soviet morale is difficult to ascertain.¹⁶

However, the main failure was in convincing the Red Army that complete victory could be had, as doubts about the complete capitulation of Germany would persist until as late as January 1945. Where the propaganda appears to be more successful was in the ideological campaign for Communism and the appeal to nationalism through Russian poetry and song. By tapping into the personal heritage of the soldier, at least the ethnic Russian soldiers, the GlavPUR succeeded in making the Nazi assault appear to be an assault on Russian heritage itself. Vasily Grossman, in his work as a war correspondent, witnessed the power of nationalism amongst the ethnic Russian troops, remarking that “at war, a Russian man puts on a white shirt. He may live in sin, but he dies like a saint... we Russians don’t know how to live like saints, we only know how to die like saints. The front [represents] the holiness of Russian death.” The spirit of sacrifice in the name of the Russian people amongst the soldiers was immense and extremely visible to Grossman in his work on the front lines.¹⁷ In reality, truth of the matter is that the propaganda was hardly necessary once the Nazi forces had reached far enough into Soviet territory. The Soviet soldiers were painfully aware of their singular position as the only force left fighting the Nazis on the ground as well as their chronic supply and command problems. This was only reinforced with the spreading of atrocities committed by the Nazi invaders in 1942-1943. Viewing the Nazi war crimes firsthand, they knew that their fight, regardless of their position on the leadership of the Soviet Union, was one for the survival of the nation. Grossman recounts the horror told to Soviet soldiers by the remaining residents at the “killing grounds of Berdichev.” A kosher butcher was forced to slaughter and dismember his neighbor’s children at

¹⁶ Reese, *Why Stalin’s Soldiers Fought*, 190-195.

¹⁷ Grossman, *A Writer at War*, 95.

gunpoint as a “joke” by a German commander who “wanted to see his work.” When Jews were forced to jump into a toxic vat at a tannery “Germans thought the execution funny: they were tanning Jewish skin.” Women were forcibly drowned in “swimming contests” where the Germans would give false hope of survival if they made it across the river and then shot those that did. In the face of such horrors, the Soviets came to the obvious conclusion that it was to fight or endure a fate worse than death.¹⁸

In terms of positive incentives, one commonality between the commanders and the soldiers is that they both received medals and commendations for their actions should they succeed. Medals were still relatively new as the revolutionaries of the Soviet Union tended to largely view them as a sign of the bourgeois elite prior to the Great Patriotic War (although some medals did exist and were awarded, the practice was nowhere near as widespread). As a motivational tactic, it seems that their effectiveness was mixed. While there is strong evidence of the desire to work for medals given the privileges and status it would afford their families at home, the system was quite arbitrary, causing distrust of being rewarded for harder work. The medals were “given out based on distribution lists, and not for actions.” The accounts of a soldier named Natalia Peshkova are especially illustrative of the Soviet approach to medals. Few received medals for their actions, and many simply took them from dead comrades. Yet the act of taking them from their comrades demonstrates that they did have some value to these soldiers, for one does not carry unnecessary items in a war zone. For the commanders too, this could end up driving another wedge between them and their soldiers. When Peshkova’s Lieutenant was asked why he had not recommended anyone for a medal following a victory, he replied “I wasn’t

¹⁸ Grossman, *A Writer at War*, 256-258.
 Merridale, *Ivan’s War*, 3.
 Reese, *Why Stalin’s Soldiers Fought*, 192-195.

recommended and I'm not recommending anyone." This bitterness displayed by their commander created a feeling of general hatred as it deprived the soldiers of their medals due to their commander's selfishness. Given these caveats to the forms of positive motivation, it is difficult to discern the net effect of these awards in terms of group morale.¹⁹

One theme that continues to appear is the effect of poor leadership on the group morale and the ability of commanders to inspire their soldiers. Given the ineptitude of the commanders, especially in the early stages of the war, soldiers rapidly lost respect for officers, causing mass disobedience. The most prominent issue was that many of the commanders lacked the knowledge of how to inspire the troops during combat. During the siege of Kiev, one commander, Lieutenant Cherkasov, ordered the troops to hastily counterattack against an entrenched German position by getting out of cover and yelling "for the Rodina, for Stalin!" Only five of his ninety men followed. Rather than going over to curse them out, as was the norm, Cherkasov went back to his men and explained the plan and their steps. They retook the position and despite losses, the men were well motivated. This strategy was the exception rather than the rule and demonstrates how ineffective many of the commanders were in leading forces. Part of the reason these failures spread was that infractions could oftentimes not be reported as they would reflect badly on the commander, allowing the men to go free for failures of courage. By forcing their men to charge on suspected suicide missions, they lost the ability to effectively demand their soldiers to follow them readily. While these missions decreased as the war progressed, it characterized a significant portion of the conflict.²⁰

¹⁹ Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 347.

Reese, *Why Stalin's Soldiers Fought*, 208-209.

²⁰ Reese, *Why Stalin's Soldiers Fought*, 203.

To understand the changes that would truly revolutionize the structure and morale of the Red Army, one must look to the Battle of Stalingrad. During a fight to the death, one has no time for complex political maneuvering. As a result, the commanders promoted from within tended to be those whose merit was well known. Furthermore, in the course of the battle traditional methods of command were impossible given the fragmented nature of combat in a destroyed urban environment. As a result, the small groups (called “Storm Groups” by the Red Army) with independent command decisions over combat took precedent over the otherwise heavily bureaucratic nature of the Soviet command structure.²¹ Units were often left to fend for themselves, creating greater unity between the smaller units through more intimate ties. Soldiers on the front lines like Mansur Abdulin openly fought with the idea of “why am I safe and sound in this hell, when most of my comrades are dead and wounded.” Through logics of commonality and group bonding, soldiers fought harder with higher morale in these smaller and more intimate groups than they did in other larger and more impersonal groupings. Furthering their distance from the command structure, soldiers found themselves utterly unlike the nature of the well-prepared, disciplined soldiers their commanders aspired for them to be. Abdulin was “covered in soot” but thought that even though “[their] commanders wanted them to be clean... they could not make us” because their small groups had control over enforcement. The soldiers laughed at these demands, demonstrating a form of intergroup cohesion that was independent of the commanders and openly critical of the top-down structure that categorized much of the early stages of the war.²²

This motivation from intimate connection is referred to as Primary Group Theory, which means that going through hardship with the same people tends to form group bonds that can

²¹ V.E. Tarrant, *Stalingrad* (South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword, 1992), 77.

²² Mansur Abdulin, *Red Road from Stalingrad* (South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Books, 2004), 38.

compel action. Many battalions described themselves as family and bonded based on shared circumstance. Semion Chumanev, a *frontovik* or front-line soldier, described his platoon as “like one family. We not only fought together, but also loved to sing and had some ‘problems of the heart.’”²³ This group mentality created greater group adaptability and willingness to fight for their comrades. Furthermore, unlike other motivators, group cohesion was a bonding force between the commanders and their soldiers. The reasoning behind this was simple, as the case of Viktor Leonov demonstrates. When his commander fell in battle, he demanded to be shot to lighten their load, but the soldiers refused. This was to prevent the logical subsequent thought among the rank and file soldiers that “if we’ve abandoned a commanding officer, I would be abandoned for sure.”²⁴ Due to these assumptions, the group ideal was extended to the commanders despite their role as the extender of discipline. This phenomenon is what Grossman calls the “Stalingrad Academy,” creating a system of group cohesion through trial by fire. As subsequent engagements occur, soldiers begin to trust both their commanders and each other.²⁵

Furthermore, the nature of the war itself changed the morale and willingness to fight until the very end. As Abdulin put it, “there is no pleasure in killing...but why did the Germans invade our home? Did they expect us to give up without a fight?” For the soldiers, to take a step back was to allow the Germans to seize their home territory, something which would demand them to surrender the very core of their spirit. As such, even in these conditions, morale was higher than one might expect from a group of starving, outgunned soldiers. Unlike in the Winter War, they were not fighting for an objective simply because high command had designated it as important, but rather because their own families and people were at risk. The Luftwaffe bombs

²³ Reese, *Why Stalin's Soldiers Fought*, 219.

²⁴ Reese, *Why Stalin's Soldiers Fought*, 220.

²⁵ Grossman, *A Writer at War*, 154-156.

had burned alive thousands of women and children right in front of their eyes in the first two days of the battle. It did not take much convincing to believe that they were fighting the embodiment of savagery in warfare, despite their own qualms. This was reflected in the posters around the city for the militias, which begged the people of the town to “take vengeance on the Germans... for every atrocity committed, for the bloodshed and the tears of our children, our mothers, our wives.” The people of the city came together, building a system of barricades overnight that would prove critical to the outcome of the battle. The fighting strength of basically untrained militia units was also admirable. Although they inflicted few casualties, they held their positions for a long enough time that the main corps of the Red Army was able to set forth defensive positions, quelling the bloodletting of the blitzkrieg a period of time.²⁶

The regime did not entirely rely on coercion but was not so naïve as to believe that they could get by on rote patriotism alone. They proclaimed the need for commander-based leadership but made little effort to ensure that the commanders received adequate discipline to achieve this. Military honors and pride helped, alongside the cohesion of the primary group, however fractured and fluctuating. The morale and overall motivations of both the soldiers and their commanders is not uniform, but in most cases their effectiveness in the worst possible conditions is admirable, especially under the continual threat provided by political sections, informants, and the Chekist threat from SMERSH and their military tribunals. As Captain Sergei Kournakoff notes, writing during the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet high command had divided soldiers’ justifications for morale into three categories: fatalistic morale, team morale based on comradeship, and ideological morale. Fatalistic morale is characterized by its tendency to relate to that in the mind of soldiers, they have no choice given the punishments, and as such had no choice to say

²⁶ Tarrant, *Stalingrad*, 56-57.
Abdulin, *Red Road to Stalingrad*, 55.

simply “Kismet!” (what happens is fate) signifying that they were faced with no option but to rely on faith. Especially during the Great Patriotic War, what the soldier defends is “near and substantial” and thus even if death is largely inevitable, it becomes a moral choice to fight till their last breath. On the other hand, the more favored alternative was the esprit de corps based on a group bond forged through trials, wherein the defense of one’s regiment drives a stronger desire to fight. And finally, the ideological morale was the ideal situation although, as Kournakoff notes, this is difficult to achieve given that the men must already believe in the justness of the cause to believe their ideology is functioning correctly. This analysis of the morale factors of the Red Army was backed by both German and American analyses of the situation.²⁷ However, Kournakoff’s notes along with high command’s interpretation of morale is deeply flawed. Rather than relying on any of these three forms of morale alone, many found interrelated and intrinsic sets of motivation. For example, Kournakoff myopically states that there is no division between the commanders and their soldiers as they are all of one class. The historical evidence demonstrates what form of naïve idealism this statement portrays. Distrust between the soldiers and their commanding officers was rampant to the point of being nearly institutionalized. Frequently, soldiers would combine all of these forms of morale. One could recognize the futility of fighting back while still being motivated by the need to protect their family and comrades.²⁸

By the end of the Great Patriotic War, the timeline of the creation of the terror within and external to the Red Army reveals the true nature of the continual effect of terror on inter-soldier and commander cohesion. Through the systematic de-professionalization of the Red Army and the forced political subservience, the Red Army inevitably became a target should it challenge

²⁷ Madej, *Red Army Order of Battle, 1941-1943*, 193-197.

²⁸ Sergei Kournakoff, *Russia’s Fighting Forces* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1942), 94-97.

Stalin in the political arena. Given the continuous nature of the terror, as *chistki* began with the first years of Stalin's ascent to power, Stalin's campaign against the Red Army drastically changed its culture of adaptability and meritocratic norms while reducing its efficiency as a fighting force. By institutionalizing the undertraining and overpromotion of commanders, the overall ability of commanders declined precipitously, despite some exceptions, causing splits between commanders and their soldiers. Furthermore, given that the campaign of terror continued into the first years of the Great Patriotic War, the effects could not be remediated in time for the efficiency deficits to be corrected. Thus, the divisions produced among the officers would have detrimental effects in all major military encounters during this period of Stalin's reign. Despite the common bond produced by units under fire, commanders were often isolated from the intimacy experienced between soldiers which drove them through much of the war. As a result, the primary drivers of morale became group cohesion between soldiers, propaganda and ideology. In discussing the effect of the terror on morale, some results demonstrate that while the effect of terror was the destruction of certain types of intimacy, overall causality runs in the opposite direction, as when the terror and restrictions decreased, group cohesion increased. This outcome indicates that the intimacy created as a part of terror was more of a strategy to survive and make the most of the world of terror, rather than a driver of morale and intimacy itself. Thus, the Soviet high command's decision to decrease the campaign of political control, punishments, and filtration elicited stronger group cohesion than terror by allowing for a freedom of action that facilitated stronger interpersonal bonds.

About the author

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