

NOT ONE STEP BACK! THE LIFE OF A SOVIET SOLDIER ON THE EASTERN FRONT

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Zachary Determan is a junior at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, double majoring in history and political science. Inspired to write about the Russian experience after he realized he knew nearly nothing about it from his studies of World War II, Determan delved into the question of who the soldiers fighting for the Soviets were and why they decided to fight.

For the Soviet Union, World War II was a four year long ordeal that cost them over twenty-five million casualties, eight million of which were Soviet troops.¹ Despite this high cost of human life, the Soviets fought tooth and nail the entire war, snatching victory from the jaws of defeat. The most important factor in the Soviet war machine was the contribution of the individual soldiers themselves. The question of who these men and women were and why they fought as they did still remains with us today. The legend of the average Soviet soldier has been shrouded in mystery until quite recently, thanks to improved access to Soviet documents and recent scholarship.² The Soviet soldiers' motivation was not solely blind idealism to the regime; in fact few fought for that reason. Many fought for Russian nationalism, hatred for the Germans, and among other reasons, for their very homes and villages.

To understand the individual Soviet soldiers and their perspectives on the war, it is necessary to examine the major events leading up the war: the Great Purge (1937-38) and the Winter War (1939-40). The Great Purge that occurred profoundly impacted the mentality of the people living in the Soviet Union. In total, as many as 680,000 people were killed during Nikolai Yezhov's reign of terror.³ The effect these purges had on the military was devastating. Forty-five percent of all senior officers and political officials were dismissed or executed, including 720 commanders. Of the eighty-five senior officials who sat on the Military Council, seventy-one were dead by the time the Germans invaded the Soviet

¹ Alexander Kirilian, Authorities to Update Number of Soviet Casualties During WWII, *The School of Russian and Asian Studies*, Jan. 15th, 2010 http://www.sras.org/update_in_number_of_soviet_ww2_casualties 1

² Roger R. Reese, *Why Stalin's Soldiers Fought: The Red Army's Military Effectiveness in World War 2* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2011), ix.

³ Richard Overy, *Russia's War* (New York: Penguin Books 1998), 25.

Union.⁴ The psychological effect this had on the average Soviet soldier fighting in World War II was significant. The Great Purge did not help instill faith in the average soldier. Boris Gorbachevsky noted in his memoir, *Through the Maelstrom*, “In my experience, the officers who commanded by the swear word, bottle, or fist were those lieutenants and majors who had risen in the ranks during Stalin’s peacetime purges of the military.”⁵ Stalin had “adopted an almost hostile attitude toward the armed forces, particularly the officer corps,” and partly out of paranoia, had decided to purge the Red Army’s officer class to bring it under his control.⁶ Stalin also reintroduced political deputies into units above divisional strength as a further method of control.⁷

The weakened leadership that remained in conjunction with political deputies who attempted to instill rigid idealism in troops through coercion and fear, eroded the confidence Soviet troops had in their commanders. The disasters that occurred between 1939 and 1941 during the Winter War reinforced the low morale that permeated the armed forces of the Soviet Union, yet the Red Army never crumbled. The Winter War was fought between Finland and the Soviet Union from November 30, 1939 to March 12, 1940, and is widely regarded as having been disastrous for the Soviet Union.⁸ Despite the massive inequity in regards to the sizes of their respective militaries, the Soviets took almost four months to achieve victory and at the cost of high casualties. The Finns exposed the inefficiencies and weaknesses of the Soviet Union army to the world, setting the precedent for Germany’s low opinion of the Red Army. In essence, it was a prelude to what would occur in the Soviets’ war against the Germans: massive failure right from the start, a period of regrouping, and eventual victory. The initial failures of the Red Army can be traced to their arrogant approach toward fighting the Finns. The commissars of Leningrad were quoted saying, “victory over the enemy shall be achieved with little blood.”⁹ Yet the Finnish campaign was a “disaster” for the Red Army and it “exposed to the world how feeble was the offensive capability of the purged forces...”¹⁰ Some of the factors that bogged down the Soviets were their initial overconfidence, their lack of preparation for

⁴ Ibid, 29.

⁵ B. Gorbachevsky, *Through the Maelstrom: A Red Army Soldier’s War on the Eastern Front, 1942-1945* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas 2008), 91.

⁶ Reese, *Why Stalin’s Soldiers Fought*, 7.

⁷ Overy, *Russia’s War*, 32.

⁸ Reese, *Why Stalin’s Soldiers Fought*, 28.

⁹ Ibid., 33.

¹⁰ Overy, *Russia’s War*, 56.

facing the Finnish defenses, the bad weather, and the inadequate leadership. One soldier remembered, “we were returning to our camp. . .the first thing we saw was. . .a field kitchen and a cook, stuffing snow into his pot. Someone from our group told the cook that it had been a bad idea to come so far out, that the Finns were close. ‘What Finns? I’ll get them with my scoop.’”¹¹ Such was the nonchalant, initial attitude of the Soviets until they encountered real opposition by the Finns.

The Soviet soldiers were frankly unprepared to deal with the opposition presented to them by the Finns. Within the first few weeks of fighting, several Soviet divisions were more or less obliterated.¹² Despite the demoralizing nature of the Soviet’s setbacks, it served as a testament to the character of the Soviet fighting force. The Soviet soldiers fought on despite losing 126,875 in a short four month time frame.¹³ Soviet soldiers were more likely than not to refuse to surrender to the Finns, even when in a position where surrender was the most logical decision.¹⁴ When encircled by Finnish troops, the 34th Light Tank Brigade suffered over 2,050 dead and only 58 soldiers were taken prisoner.¹⁵ In 1941, eighty thousand Soviets were taken prisoner by German forces.¹⁶ It is likely that the Soviets continued to underestimate the Finnish, believing it was still possible to break out of the encirclement. But the Soviets were hampered by the lack of experienced higher level leadership. Historian Reese argues that “based on these three major battles of encirclement...we can conclude that vast numbers of soldiers were lost due to doctrinal and command failures, not troop-level military ineffectiveness.”¹⁷

Who were the people who made up the ranks, where were they from, what did they think, and what did they feel? The ranks of the Soviet Union were made up of men and women from all walks of life. The Red Army in reality was much more diverse than how it is stereotypically portrayed. Soldiers were drafted from all over the Soviet Union, including non-Slavic minorities from Central Asia, western Ukraine and Belorussia, the Baltic States, and Bessarabia among other areas.¹⁸ While this vast array of soldiers offered the Soviet Union much needed manpower, it also

¹¹ Reese, *Why Stalin’s Soldiers Fought*, 33.

¹² *Ibid*, 33-34.

¹³ Overy, *Russia’s War*, 56.

¹⁴ Reese, *Why Stalin’s Soldiers Fought*, 35.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 36.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 79.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 81.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 96.

presented several problems to the Red Army. Due to cultural and geographic differences, many of these Central Asian soldiers not only had different customs but even different languages than the Russian troops in the Red Army. In his memoirs, Boris Gorbachevsky recalls a discussion he had with another soldier about their inability to communicate with the Uzbek troops and how much trouble it caused.¹⁹

In fact, it was difficult to get the ethnic minorities of the Soviet Union to enlist at all. The opposition from ethnic minorities to conscription extended from their alienation from Russia geographical and its brutal regime. According to Reese, it was a combination of geography and politics that played into the opposition to conscription. Reese notes that the social and economic lives of the ethnic minorities were “located primarily outside the Russian-oriented mainstream. . .besides feeling little or no attachment to the Soviet state, the men of Central Asia and the Caucasus doubted the Soviet government’s ability to enforce conscription, and they were willing to test it.”²⁰ Reese attributes the resentment the satellite nations felt toward the Soviet Union to their lack of independence, forced collectivization, and antireligious campaigns. Further, the areas from where the ethnic minorities came were not immediately threatened by the German armies. The ethnic minorities of the Soviet Union had plenty of reasons not to want to fight and, predictably, a majority of them did not fight.

There existed an image, though, of the stereotypical Soviet soldier: a young, urban, Russian soldier prepared to fight off the invading fascists. Many Russian youth volunteered for the army out of a sense of nationalism or idealism at the beginning of the war. These Russian urbanite youth made up the bulk of the Soviet army, having been raised on nationalistic movies during the 1930, which depicted war as inevitable.²¹ Their service was attributed to idealism and loyalty to the state. However, many went to battle to defend their country, not the regime. In many cases, soldiers fighting for the Soviet Union had been victims of persecution by the government, but they fought anyway. One soldier in particular stated, “In all honesty, I did not want to go to war and fight. . .I would not do any favors for the Soviets. . .in 1941 my uncle was arrested. . .however, later I decided that Kremlin bastards come and go, but the Motherland stays forever.”²² It was exactly this mindset that convinced many young Russians to go to war; not to fight for their government and communism, but to fight for their country. This is contrary to the

¹⁹ Gorbachevsky, *Through the Maelstrom*, 73.

²⁰ Reese, *Why Stalin’s Soldiers Fought*, 141.

²¹ *Ibid*, 105.

²² Quoted in Reese, *Why Stalin’s Soldiers Fought*, 107.

stereotype of the fearless Soviet soldier going to war to fight the fascists due to a sense of duty to the state and communism. In reality, there was little loyalty to the state or communism. Rather, it was a hatred of German atrocities and love for their country that inspired Russians into joining the military to fight off the invaders.

However, insufficient numbers of Russians volunteered to fight for their country. Many were either coerced into service by peer pressure or conscripted into the battle. Volunteerism tapered off near the end of 1941, as people realized that the war with Germany would not be as short or easy as many of the young idealists had first believed.²³ Peer and societal pressure supplied much of the motivation once idealism proved to be too superficial to motivate sufficient numbers. Former Soviet soldier Vladimir Shliakhterman recalls that “in August 1942, when the Germans were tearing at Stalingrad, I got the notion that I needed to fight in order to be able to comfortably answer the question, ‘What did you do during the war?’”²⁴ The simple question of, ‘what did you do during the war?’ would be enough to send many to the local recruiter to avoid being labeled as unpatriotic or a coward. Soon the Soviet soldiers, volunteer or conscripted, idealistic or jaded, found themselves on the front, facing a determined enemy in the invading Germans.

The German operation Barbarossa began on June 22, 1941. It was the largest military operation in history, involving over three million Germans and their allies.²⁵ The invasion came as a shock to Stalin, despite repeated warnings from spies that a German invasion was going to occur. Stalin ignored information up to the day before the invasion, when a German soldier crossed into the Soviet Union warning of the impending invasion; Stalin ordered the soldier shot.²⁶ The first year of the war was a disaster for the Soviet Union. The Germans rapidly advanced, destroying everything in their path. Over 1,200 airplanes were destroyed and 200 ammo dumps captured out of 340.²⁷ It was in this demoralizing context that Stalin issued Order No. 270, which decreed that there would be harsh penalties for deserters and repercussions against their families. One soldier from Leningrad, Josef Finkelshtein, recounted an execution that occurred in October, 1941. “There were three deserters. . . ‘shoot the

²³ Reese, *Why Stalin's Soldiers Fought*, 121.

²⁴ Ibid, 111.

²⁵ Overy, *Russia's War*, 72-73.

²⁶ Ibid, 71.

²⁷ Ibid, 76.

traitors of the motherland,' commanded the senior officer."²⁸ Such

draconian measures were taken throughout the war to ensure the loyalty and obedience of the Soviet troops. In wake of the high increase in violence against Soviet troops by their officers, Stalin eventually issued Order No. 391, which attempted to curb the excessive violence practiced by the officers.

The prevailing mood of the Soviet soldier at this time was certainly one of pessimism. Order No. 270 instilled a deep fear in Soviet troops of being labeled as deserters or cowards. The penalty for desertion would either be the gulags or execution along with a threat to the deserter's family. Order No. 270 was not the only thing that Soviet soldiers had to fear from their own side. On June 27th, 1941, General Zhukov and Marshal Timoshenko signed Directive No. 35523, which authorized the use of blocking detachments, which became infamous in 1942.²⁹ By the end of 1941, it was looking grim for the Red Army and the Soviet Union. Leningrad was under siege, the Germans were on the verge of taking Moscow, and Soviet forces had taken heavy losses. Despite these signs of imminent defeat, the Red Army managed to hold together and continue to fight the Germans, holding off what would have been inevitable destruction. Desperate determination kept many of the Soviet soldiers going. Hatred of the Germans was another motivating factor. Inciting such hatred was not a particularly difficult task for the Soviet Union propaganda machine. The factors of Soviet hate stemmed from both anti-Nazi propaganda due to the differing ideologies and the simple fact that the Germans had just invaded the Soviet Union. Poet Ilya Ehrenburg commented that "for us the German soldier with a rifle in his hand is not a human being, but a Fascist. We hate him."³⁰ For those who didn't want to fight for socialism, Stalin, or even the Soviet Union, they fought to destroy fascism. Nazi atrocities against the Soviet citizens were exactly what Stalin needed to invoke this sentiment of hatred against the Nazis in his troops.³¹

By the beginning of 1942, Moscow was experiencing momentary reprieve, but over three million soldiers had perished and another three million were captured.³² With the entire military still reeling from the blow dealt by the German invasion the previous year, the Soviet Union found itself in a position of vulnerability. It was this year that Stalin issued Order No. 227, the infamous 'Not One Step Back' order. This directive

²⁸ Quoted in Reese, *Why Stalin's Soldiers Fought*, 161.

²⁹ Ibid, 169.

³⁰ Quoted in Reese, *Why Stalin's Soldiers Fought*, 179.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Overy, *Russia's War*, 154.

was met with mixed reactions by the Soviet troops. Boris Gorbachevsky recalls the fateful day and the reactions hearing this order. "Listening to the strange lines of the order, everyone froze on the spot, and I could see how the faces of the men in the formation paled. . .this order, it seems to me, is the most revealing and honest document from Stalin during all the years of the war."³³ Gorbachevsky revealed that the order received mixed reactions of men in his unit, with some praising it while others cursed it. This order certainly showed the desperation Stalin felt in only the second year of war with Germany.

Indeed, this year saw both the beginning of the Stalingrad campaign and the inability of the allied forces to open a second front to relieve some pressure off the Soviet Union. Hopelessness was widespread. Gorbachevsky speaks of this late in 1942, noting that "the conviction is widespread that our people. . .never lost hope in ultimate victory. That isn't so. In actuality, confidence in victory over the enemy began appearing only in 1943---after the battles of Stalingrad and Kursk."³⁴ It was during this time before Stalingrad and Kursk that desertion to the enemies was a substantial problem for the Soviet army. This was due to the consistent losses, the seemingly uncaring attitude of the officers and High Command toward the frontline troops, and enemy propaganda. It was not hard to imagine the thoughts racing through the heads of Soviet soldiers. Death at the hands of the Germans or death at the hands of their own government; there was little relief or comfort for the demoralized army. Between 150-200 Soviets across the entire front went over to the German side a day, which adds up to close to 6,000 men a month; the equivalent of an entire Soviet interior division lost solely to desertion on a monthly basis.³⁵ Despite these demoralizing figures, the tide was about to turn for the Soviet army and the determination of the Soviet troops would be reignited and fuel them all the way to Berlin.

The Soviet campaign in 1943 started out with a stunning victory in Stalingrad. In early January, General Paulus' men had become encircled in Stalingrad by Soviet troops. On January 31, 1943, Paulus was forced to surrender to the Soviets, who took 91,000 prisoners after inflicting over 147,000 casualties on the German forces within Stalingrad.³⁶ This is commonly seen as the major turning point of the war

³³ Gorbachevsky, *Through the Maelstrom*, 97.

³⁴ Gorbachevsky, *Through the Maelstrom*, 176.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 177.

³⁶ Overy, *Russia's War*, 185.

on the Eastern front, as the Soviets now had a real reason to believe that they could actually defeat the Germans. Poet Ilya Ehrenburg summed up the current mood best by stating, “Up till then one believed in victory as an act of faith, but now there was no shadow of a doubt: victory was assured.”³⁷ The Soviets now saw that the German army was, in fact, beatable. The morale and confidence of the Red Army soared with this victory. It is also important to note that the Western allies began Operation Torch in February of that year, which may have helped to relieve some pressure on the Soviet Union. It was not the scale of relief that a second front in Western Europe would have created, but it was helpful to the Soviets due to the timing of Operation Torch relative to the victory at Stalingrad. The outcome of the Battle of Kursk, which occurred between July and August of 1943, sealed the fate of the Germans on the Eastern Front. The Battle of Kursk was crucial to both the Soviets and the Germans. On the Soviet side, 1,336,000 men, 3,444 tanks, 2,900 aircraft, and 19,000 guns were pitted against 900,000 German troops, 2,700 tanks, 2,000 aircraft, and over 10,000 guns. The Red Army had about 40% of its manpower and 75% of its armored taking part in this single battle.³⁸ On the morning of July 12, the largest tank battle of the war took place between the Soviet army and the German army, involving more than 1,450 combined tanks on both sides.³⁹ By the 15, the German tank army had suffered too many losses to break through the Soviet defenses. This victory was exactly what the Soviet troops needed to boost morale and all but ensure in their minds that victory was at hand. Indeed, the Battle of Kursk was seen to have ended any hope of German victory on the Eastern front.⁴⁰

By the end of 1943, the tides had turned on the Eastern front. The German army was now on the defensive, being driven back by a Red Army that was growing more and more confident with every victory. While desertion was still a problem among Soviet troops, it would never be what it was in the first two years of the campaign. Now the soldiers had confidence in themselves and their leaders as well as confidence in their ability to survive and be victorious. However, the Soviets paid a high price in 1943, with 470,000 lost at Stalingrad and 70,000 at Kursk.⁴¹ Despite the losses they suffered, the Red Army continued the push west, driving the Germans back. As Overy notes, “the mood throughout Russia

³⁷ Quoted in Overy, *Russia's War*, 185.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 201.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

was one of growing elation.”⁴² The people were behind the soldiers and

with growing support from home, the troops grew more determined and steadfast in their commitment to defend their Motherland from the Germans. Their time had come to drive out the invaders by the end of 1943.

By 1944, the Soviet army was slowly but surely pushing the German forces out of Russia, reaching the National Border in 1944. Gorbachevsky recounts this momentous occasion, stating, “Everybody rushed to embrace each other. Some fell to their knees, raising their arms toward the sky.”⁴³ It was pure jubilation felt by the front line troops at finally freeing their Motherland from the grips of the German army. Now, it was time for the Red Army to rush into foreign lands and avenge the last three years of German occupation. With every freed village on their minds, Soviet soldiers’ determination for retribution grew. By August, Soviet forces were penetrating deep into Poland, on the outskirts of Warsaw and the pro-German government in Romania fell.⁴⁴

By 1945, as the German army was in disarray and fighting a two front war, the Soviets pushed forward with fire in their hearts and hate in their minds. As the Soviets marched into East Prussia in January of 1945, violence occurred on a massive scale. Gorbachevsky recalls one account of violence that occurred in the first German city his division took. “Unexpectedly, a tall, hale old man hopped out of a partially destroyed building. . .he rushed to meet our column. One of the Red Army soldiers. . . stepped out of the column and with all his might, smashed the German’s head with his rifle butt.”⁴⁵ This brutal murder of a German citizen, who happened to be a member of the Communist party, is a testimony to what sort of vengeance the Soviet soldiers handed out to the Germans who they associated with the brutalization of their homeland. Gorbachevsky recalls how soldiers would break into houses and destroy everything in a furious rage.⁴⁶ This outright violence against the Germans was not condemned by Soviet officers at first. It is likely that even if the officers had attempted to crack down on such violence against Germans by Soviet soldiers it would have been very difficult to halt the atrocities. The Soviet soldiers had had three and a half years of propaganda and had suffered considerably during the German campaigns on Soviet soil. Gorbachevsky’s account confirms

⁴² Ibid, 211.

⁴³ Gorbachevsky, *Through the Maelstrom*, 328.

⁴⁴ Overy, *Russia’s War*, 250.

⁴⁵ Gorbachevsky, *Through the Maelstrom*, 359.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 359.

that he and his unit were influenced by the propaganda and the feelings of vengeance, remarking that “the elements of hatred and revenge had by the end of January 1945 become a raging, inundating river.”⁴⁷

In April of 1945, the Red Army encircled Berlin and by May 2, the Germans unconditionally surrendered Berlin to the Soviets and the Western Allies. The Soviet Union had finally claimed victory over the Germans. Gorbachevsky recalls the feelings he and his comrades had when they found out the war had finally ended: “without any orders, in a single bound we officers and soldiers, who had been standing by our vehicles, spontaneously rushed to meet our comrades and exchanged celebratory hugs and kisses with them.”⁴⁸ Joy and happiness were pervasive amongst the Soviet soldiers.

The answers to who the Soviet soldier was and for what reasons he fought are complex. The Soviet soldier came from men and women of all walks of life. They were primarily Moscow youths, but they also consisted of Ukrainian farmers, Uzbek peasants, and every corner of the Soviet Union. While problems may have arisen initially due to the vast differences among the troops, this also made the Red Army one of the most diverse armies in World War II. In spite of cultural differences that existed between the soldiers of the Red Army they fought and died for one another in battle.

The motivations these soldiers had for fighting is even more complex than who they actually were. Some joined out of idealism and loyalty to the state and Stalin. Some volunteered out of a sense of nationalism to Russia and the need to protect the Motherland. Some joined due to an intense hatred of fascism and a burning desire to seek vengeance against those who had invaded their nation and inflicted so much damage to their homeland. Some joined out of societal peer pressure, hoping to have a good answer when confronted with ‘what did you do during the war?’ Some soldiers didn’t even join voluntarily, but were conscripted into service in the Red Army. Despite the varying degrees of commitment and the different sources of motivation, the Red Army persevered and was eventually victorious against the Germans in 1945 – thanks to the common soldier. Even in the darkest days of the war for the Soviet Union, the Red Army soldier fought on and forced a victory out of what had seemed to be certain defeat.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 363.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 391.