

WWII Soviet Experience

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The Soviet Experience in World War Two

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Overview

Americans have little conception of the Soviet Union's experience in World War II. No cities in the United States were besieged, not a single bomb was dropped by an enemy airplane on any of our 48 states, no part of our population was enslaved, starved or murdered, and not one village, town or city was completely destroyed or even heard a shot fired in anger.

About the only way we can begin to understand is through imagination. The distance between Moscow and Berlin is about the same as that separating New York City and Atlanta. Imagine twenty million people being violently killed between those two American cities in four years. The Eastern Front in the war wound like a serpent from Sevastopol on the Black Sea to Leningrad on the Baltic. Including the twists, bulges and turns of the line of battle at the height of German penetration, November 1942, the line would have stretched from Baltimore to Cheyenne, Wyoming. In place of Leningrad, can you fathom Chicago under bitter siege and constant shelling for 900 days? Is it possible for us to mentally picture thousands of dead bodies lying on the frozen streets between Lake Shore Drive and Evanston? Could we endure seeing a million people die, mostly from starvation, during the Chicago siege or begin to fathom our own citizens engaging in cannibalism for profit? At the same time of the Chicago siege think of Cincinnati becoming a battleground such as Stalingrad where not a single structure was left habitable and several hundred thousand soldiers killed each other in the process of leveling the city. Mentally switch names such as Smolensk, Karkov, Minsk, Kiev and Rostov for American cities and picture them destroyed and silenced. If such images are possible for us to even conceive, we can begin to understand why Americans refer to the conflict as World War Two, but the Russians universally refer to it as the Great Patriotic War.

The Numbersⁱ

The populations of the United States and the USSR were about the same, 130,000,000, when both nations went to war within six months of each other in 1941. To Americans, we were sending our boys to fight a foreign war that we'd never experience. To the Soviets, it was an up front and personal war of monumental savagery. America would lose slightly more than 400,000 soldiers (killed or missing) and almost no civilians during World War II and the USSR, depending on which historian you believe, would lose at least 11,000,000 soldiers (killed and missing) as well as somewhere between 7,000,000 and 20,000,000 million of its civilian population during the Great Patriotic War.

Looking only at Anglo-American forces engaged against German soldiers on our two fronts, northwest Europe and Italy, the United States lost 139,380 soldiers (killed and missing) during the conflict. General Eisenhower had just over 3,000,000 men under his command, with about a third of them safely in England, and faced a German Army of less than 1,500,000 of which our forces killed 834,314. At the same time, Soviet armies in excess of 20,000,000 soldiers were fighting German armies totaling 5,700,000 at their strongest and killed 2,415,690 of them as they fought their way out of Russia and on to Berlin.

These are the numbers that make Russians bristle when they hear Americans say to each other that we won the war in Europe. For every American soldier killed fighting Germans, eighty Soviet soldiers died fighting them. On the other hand, Americans deeply resent Soviet textbooks telling their children their version of history with passages such as:

"In June, 1944, when it had become obvious that the Soviet Union was capable of defeating Hitler's Germany with her forces alone, England and the USA opened the second front.

"On 6 June, 1944, the Allied forces, commanded by General Eisenhower, landed in Normandy (Northern France). The Anglo-American forces met with practically no opposition from the Hitlerites, and advanced into the heart of France"ⁱⁱ

Studied without bias born of the Cold War, one can understand the Soviet description of the facts. Some historians of World War II suggest that by mid 1944 the USSR was strong enough to defeat Germany eventually, without any Anglo-American second front. With respect to the "practically no opposition" propaganda phrase it is also true that the Soviets, who routinely faced battles involving several hundred thousand soldiers on both sides, did not regard the 67,000 Germans defending Normandy on June 6th as serious opposition.ⁱⁱⁱ To the Soviets, fighting 390,000 Germans in the area of a single city (Stalingrad) was meeting serious opposition

The Savagery

Beyond the quantifiable numbers of people killed and missing, the Great Patriotic War was a much different war than that experienced in the West.

Hitler's occupation of countries such as Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium, and France was harsh, but was not aimed at inflicting widespread depopulation (with the exception of the Jews) on those nations. The Germans looted huge amounts of raw materials, machinery, art, gold and even wine from their European conquests, but they left the people with enough food to prevent starvation and saw to it that some form of the civilian rule of law remained in force in those countries during the war. Almost all the French, English

and American soldiers captured by the Germans were housed and fed at or above the subsistence level and repatriated after the war. The same was true of German soldiers captured by the Allies. In the west, most of the putative "rules of war" were observed at some level.

The war in the east was entirely different. The results of Hitler's beliefs concerning the Jewish populations is widely known because of the Holocaust, but his dark convictions concerning peoples he called Slavs are much less well known in the west. Every reputable biography of Hitler and his own writings and speeches confirm that he regarded them as subhuman. He saw everything east of Poland as the ideal place to provide extra living space for the Aryan race and all that was necessary to provide it for them was to push the "Slavic subhumans" out or exterminate them if they failed move. Unlike his earlier conquests, Hitler ordered his generals in 1941 to conduct the war against the USSR as one of annihilation rather than capture and coercion. He wanted the populations out or dead. The German invasion of the Soviet Union was the only attack during the war employing the concept of Einsatzgruppen (tasks forces) which followed just behind the attacking forces with specific orders from Hitler to kill, "... all potential leaders of society (meaning to wipe out the intelligentsia), all communists, Jews, Gypsies, guerrillas, saboteurs and those capable of resistance."^{iv} This written policy of annihilation was also given to three million German soldiers just before the attack on June 22, 1941.

When his troops marched into Russian territory that June they were often greeted as liberators by village populations weary of Stalin's rule. That soon changed as the people began to witness the treatment inflicted on them by the Einsatzgruppen. The Germans emptied the land and moved on. All communists, everyone with an education and the Jews were murdered. Grain, farm animals, equipment and anything of possible value were stolen or sent back to Germany. Villages and homes were torched. Objecting civilians were slaughtered and the rest left to starve. This was not just the looting of art or precious metals that went on in Europe; this was stripping the land for depopulation by starvation.

One little known aspect of the massive effort to perform what today might be called ethnic cleansing, concerned Wehrmacht (German Army) horses. The typical infantry division table of organization included 12,352 officers and men and 4,656 horses.^v The vast majority of German artillery and supplies were horse drawn. Although much has been made of the notion of Blitzkrieg (lightening war) the fact of the war was that no German army could move faster than its horses could pull its equipment behind it. Depending on the weather and distance traveled, each division needed up to 55 tons of feed per day.^{vi} During the invasion of the nations of northwest Europe, feed for the horses was generally carried with the army or taken to it by supply trains from Germany. The Wehrmacht made few such plans for its invasion of the USSR. There were more than 750,000 horses in the attacking force in June of 1941 and they required 16,350 tons of feed per day, much of which was to be confiscated from the Russians. As the towns and villages experienced murder and the torch, their granaries were emptied and their horses stolen for replacements. The mass starvation of peasants in the coming winter was attributable, in fair measure, to the empty grain bins between the Volga and Moscow. Like everything else about the Great Patriotic War, the scale is difficult to conceive. The German army causality losses during the 1941-45 period exceeded 6,700,000 horses (26,000

of which were eaten by starving German soldiers during the battle of Stalingrad^{vii}) and no one can calculate the number of Russian lives lost because the horses consumed the grain that could have supported human life.

As the conquered people began to understand their apparent fate, the stronger of them began to form Partisan groups. These organizations did not necessarily come together out of loyalty to Mother Russia, but out of desperation to stay alive and of hatred to revenge the butchery of their relatives.

Contrary to popular myth, the Partisans were never strong enough to affect the movement or combat readiness of the German armies. As they increased in numbers they robbed German supply trains and brutally murdered any small enemy unit they could catch. Word of mutilated dead comrades to their rear spread both terror and hatred throughout the advancing German armies and increased their willingness to inflict even more violence on the populations they encountered. By early 1942, the civilians and soldiers knew that the invasion had become a dreadful life or death struggle for everyone on both sides. Becoming a prisoner of either side provided little hope of survival. The Germans captured more than 3,500,000 Soviet soldiers during their invasion and sent them all to slave labor camps where most eventually died from malnutrition or unattended disease. The Soviets captured about 90,000 German soldiers at Stalingrad alone and less than 5,000 made it back to Germany after the war.^{viii}

What separates the battle histories of the war east of Berlin from the war west of it is the level of savagery. In the major western battles, such as Falaise and The Bulge, the Anglo-American generals used tactics designed to encircle and capture their adversary. In the eastern battles there was mainly direct frontal attack with brute force that didn't stop short of annihilation. Even the numbers reflect the difference. In the west, the 3,000,000 man Allied army killed 834,314 German soldiers and, through the strategic bombing campaigns, about 250,000 civilians. In the east, where neither side had a strategic bombing force, less than six million Germans killed eleven million Soviet soldiers and at least seven million civilians ... all of it face-to-face and on the ground. Even General Eisenhower, no stranger to war-damaged towns and cities, was appalled by the extent of depopulation and wrote in his memoir:

"When we flew into Russia, in 1945, I did not see a house standing between the western borders of the country and the area around Moscow. Through this overrun region, Marshal Zhukov told me, so many numbers of women, children and old men had been killed that the Russian Government would never be able to estimate the total."^{ix}

The best that most historians have been able to do in telling the tale of war on the eastern front has been to simply say that the level of mass barbarity was indescribable.

Some Major Differences Between The War in the East and the West

- In Europe Hitler's goal was to conquer and subjugate populations. In the USSR his written goal was annihilation of everyone suspected of being capable of resistance and depopulation of the rest by starvation.
- For every American soldier killed fighting the Germans, eighty Soviet soldiers died fighting them.
- The USSR was the only theatre of war in which Einsatzgruppen task forces were used to follow the combat troops and kill civilians.
- People, measured in the millions, were forced to starve because their livestock was sent to Germany and their grain was used to feed the 6.7 million horses needed to transport Wehrmacht artillery and supplies.
- In the west, prisoners were generally fed and housed by both sides. In the USSR both sides killed their prisoners by forced labor, malnutrition and unattended disease.
- In the west, the generals, on both sides, usually tried to use tactics of encirclement with the goal being to capture the enemy. In the war in the east the tactics were predominately frontal assaults on the ground with the only goal being to kill the enemy.
- Many historians, from Liddell Hart to Harrison Salisbury, have speculated that the unprecedented savagery of the war fought in the USSR between 1941 and 1945 led to the national paranoia-the "never again" mentality. For those who remembered the war, any cold war policy that would repel any future aggressor on their soil- or discourage any group of nations from contemplating it-was an acceptable sacrifice. It was not until the first-hand memory of the Great Patriotic War had faded among the ruling elite that the country was capable of contemplating perestroika and a new strategy for integrating a new Russia into the international community.

Footnotes

ⁱCasualty numbers on all sides are taken from tables presented in; Ellis, John, *World War II, A Statistical Survey*, Facts on File, New York, 1993.

ⁱⁱLyons Graham (ed.), *The Russian Version of the Second World War*, Facts on File, New York, 1976, translated by Marjorie Vinson (quotation on page 69).

ⁱⁱⁱVon Rundstedt's Western Army numbered just over 700,000 soldiers, but they were spread throughout France and the Low Countries and all along the 2,500 mile coast. For an account of German soldiers actually in place in Normandy on June 6, 1944 see: Samuel W. Mitcham, Jr., *Rommel's Last Battle: The Desert Fox and the Normandy Campaign*, Stein and Day, New York, 1983 pages 12 and 21.

^{iv}Fest, Joachim C., *HITLER*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1973 (Slavic people as subhumans and Einsatzgruppen see pages 676-677).

^vIbid, Ellis

^{vi}Addington, Larry H., *The Blitzkrieg Era and the German General Staff 1865-1941*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey 1971 (page16).

^{vii} DiNardo, Richard, L., *Mechanized Juggernaut or Military Anachronism? Horses and the German Army of World War II*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1991 (Page 60)

^{viii}Pointing, Clive, *Armageddon: The Reality Behind the Distortions, Myths, Lies and Illusions of World War II*, Random House, New York, 1995 (see index for several sections on prisoners and treatment).

^{ix}Eisenhower, Dwight D., *Crusade In Europe*, Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1948 (page 469).

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