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## The People's War: A Chronological Look at the Great Patriotic War Through the Lens of Soviet Propaganda

Nick Ellis  
*Santa Clara Univeristy*

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**The People's War:  
A Chronological Look at the Great Patriotic War  
Through the Lens of Soviet Propaganda**

**Nick Ellis**



*“Glory to the Soviet troops, who hoisted the banner of victory over Berlin!”*

Soviet propaganda during the Great Patriotic War was necessary to rally not only troops, but also the entire population in order to combat the advancing German forces. Propaganda was presented in many different forms: posters, music, policies, speeches and declarations, and even fighting tactics. Though some

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propaganda was ineffective, wartime propaganda and policies played an integral part in holding the Soviet Union together during the Great Patriotic War and had lasting effects on public memory of the conflict.

### **Setting the Stage:**

#### **Pre-War Propaganda and Operation Barbarossa**

Before Operation Barbarossa began in June 1941, Stalin led the Soviet Union in a massive attempt to industrialize and modernize the country in order to compete with western capitalist nations and potentially fend off any attacks from the West. During this time, Stalin also enforced his unpopular policy of collectivization and conducted purges against potential political enemies and “enemies of the people.” Stalin’s prewar policies greatly affected the Soviet Union’s initial response to German invasion in three major ways: the military was ill-managed, Soviet citizens were already fighting a war of preparation, and the collective was emphasized over the individual.

When Wehrmacht forces invaded the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, it was not much of a surprise that war had come. Stalin expected Hitler to invade for some time, which may have led him to use Poland as a buffer state in earlier years. During the war of preparation, propaganda alerted citizens to be ready “if tomorrow brings war.”<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the biggest shock when war broke out was how the Red Army responded. Troops were mismanaged and many fled when they heard about the German blitzkrieg. According to Red Army soldier Samoilov, “We were all expecting war ... but we were not expecting *that* war.”<sup>2</sup> During Stalin’s purges, many experienced officers were removed, and a culture of scapegoating and lying developed in response. This left

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<sup>1</sup> Choi Chatterjee, Lisa A. Kirschenbaum and Deborah A. Field, *Russia's Long Twentieth Century: Voices, Memories, Contested Perspectives* (London; New York: Routledge, 2016), 133.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945*, (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), 88.

the army with mostly inexperienced and irresponsible officers who had not developed the leadership skills necessary to respond. As a result, the Red Army was disorganized and scattered across the western border allowing the Wehrmacht to advance rapidly, take many prisoners, and destroy much of the Soviet Union's infrastructure and supply lines.

Despite the Red Army's striking losses, many Soviet citizens, men and women, patriotically enlisting in the Red Army to respond to the imminent, threat largely thanks to the emphasis on the collective and the war of preparation. A secret police report noted, "The workers feel a profound patriotism. There have been significant numbers of applications to join the army from young people from the cities and the farms."<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that many of these enthusiastic volunteers were often ethnically Russian. Many ethnic minorities, such as Ukrainian nationalists, saw the German invasion as a chance to escape Soviet collectivization, and often welcomed German soldiers early on. This is not meant to diminish the role ethnic minorities played in the Great Patriotic War, but to show that not everyone was enthusiastic about joining the Red Army.

As a result of Stalin's pre-war purges, collectivization, and the state's brutal emphasis on the war of preparation, the Soviet Union suffered major tactical losses when the Germans invaded. At the same time many citizens seemed to experience a sudden surge of patriotism despite the demoralizing defeat. Years of exposure to collective Stalinist propaganda seemed to train scared citizens to look to Stalin for leadership and work harder to defend their motherland against the Soviet Union's arch-nemesis, fascist Germany. Even so, much of the Red Army had lost its morale and the Soviet Union was left in shock as German troops rapidly gained more ground.

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<sup>3</sup> Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945*, 88.

## **Repairing the Broken Propaganda Machine of 1941**

Although there was a notable movement towards greater participation in the war by citizens, early Soviet propaganda seemed to be ineffective in conjuring much of this support. At the time, Soviet propaganda generally consisted of calling for defense of the Soviet Union and obedience to Stalin – the kind of propaganda citizens were used to hearing. In fact, many Red Army troops and civilians had grown skeptical of state reports on the war because they had already lost trust in the state due to the paranoia of the purges and forced collectivization. Instead of fighting explicitly for the Soviet Union or for Stalin, many soldiers often fought out of fear of execution by a politruk or the NKVD, anger at the world, the need to prove their masculinity, or for the love of their hometown. Many Red Army troops also chose to fight to the death instead of being taken captive after hearing about the fates of the Wehrmacht's prisoners.<sup>4</sup> At the time, state propaganda did not address these motives for fighting and its propaganda often did not have the desired effect. Outside of state propaganda, a tactic that did work for boosting troop morale was their signature “Urah!” shout during charges. This not only struck fear into the hearts of the enemy, but also worked to unify and excite Red Army troops as they shouted together.

The state had to reform its propaganda's focus and strategy if Stalin was to succeed in his propaganda war. According to Merridale, “Over a thousand writers and artists joined the campaign to report [on] the front ... Their work was controlled by yet another new body, the Sovinformburo.”<sup>5</sup> The state soon learned their overuse of terror was losing its effectiveness. Though many troops still fought fearing punishment, others simply did not care as they already considered themselves dead. Early on, many officers either refused to execute soldiers out of fear of losing numbers or executed too many soldiers which brought Red Army

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<sup>4</sup> Chatterjee, *Russia's Long Twentieth Century: Voices, Memories, Contested Perspectives*, 137.

<sup>5</sup> Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945*, 189.

morale to a dangerous low. As a result, the state focused more on building their troops' morale up instead of forcing them into battle. Much of this reform came from loosening Stalin's grip on military leaders (something Hitler could have learned from) and increasing freedoms in general. By granting military leaders more autonomy, they were able to better execute their own strategies without being micromanaged directly by Stalin and the state. In a sense, this allowed "the experts" to handle their affairs more effectively. Much of the Red Army's morale was also boosted when they were allowed to worship and even receive religious blessings.<sup>6</sup> For many, this increase in freedoms signaled that perhaps the state would end collectivization in due time. Regardless of when collectivization would end, this brought more hope to Soviet civilians and Red Army troops.

In addition to loosening Stalin's grip, Soviet propaganda began emphasizing the Motherland over the Soviet Union and Stalin. This was the start of the Russian-centric image of the Soviet Union that would prioritize stories of pre-Bolshevik and Russian Civil War heroics and continue to grow in the post-war years. The use of "Motherland" is strategically interesting because "calling her children to war, *rodina-mat'* stood on the blurred border between spontaneous defense of home and family and obedient service to the Stalinist state."<sup>7</sup> Essentially, by creating a parental figure (*rodina-mat'*) to represent the Soviet Union, Father Stalin could indirectly manipulate citizens to sacrifice for the Motherland. To represent a more aggressive nationalism, slogans like *Pravda's* masthead, "Proletarians of all lands, unite!" were changed to "Death to the German invaders!"<sup>8</sup> Songs like "The Sacred War" were also written to emphasize unity in defending

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<sup>6</sup> Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945*, 132.

<sup>7</sup> Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, "'Our City, our Hearths, our Families': Local Loyalties and Private Life in Soviet World War II Propaganda," *Slavic Review* 59, no. 4 (Dec 1, 2000), 846.

<sup>8</sup> Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945*, 132.

one's homeland against the Germans. Author of the song, Lebedev-Kumach wrote:

“Rise up enormous country  
Rise to the struggle of life and death  
Against the fascist forces of darkness,  
Against the cursed horde!  
Let the noble fury  
Boil up like a wave,  
The people's war has begun,  
The holy war!”<sup>9</sup>

This song reflected an additional focus on stirring up emotions of anger and unity against the Germans. Anger, revenge, and Russian excellence were also reflected in new military machinery. The BM-13-16 multiple rocket launcher was a weapon famously dubbed “Katyusha” or “Stalin's Organ” for the panic-inducing sound it made and the fear it struck into German troops.<sup>10</sup> The name “Katyusha” comes from the Russian folk song about a woman who is waiting for her beloved soldier to return home. The Katyusha rocket launchers directly reflected the rage that Red Army troops felt towards the German invaders: hot anger loudly and chaotically overwhelming the enemy position. Perhaps this was why the Katyusha rocket launchers were incorporated into Soviet propaganda and became legendary.

Partisan troops behind enemy lines helped local villagers and farmers with their daily work to gain their loyalty and trust. Partisans also worked to fight German propaganda by destroying it and distributing Sovinformburo propaganda in its place. To “remind people of the joys of Soviet life,” partisans would also hold party meetings and celebrations. The role of the partisans is often overlooked – partisan fighters played an important role in

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<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin!: Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 159.

<sup>10</sup> Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945*, 110.

creating chaos behind enemy lines as well as maintaining Soviet power in occupied regions.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the strategy change in the propaganda war, the NKVD still continued to purge potential political opponents, defeatists, and ethnic minorities it deemed untrustworthy. The propaganda reforms that took place after the stunning defeats of the Red Army began to reflect more accurately what soldiers were feeling: rage at the German invaders and concern for their homeland and families. Regardless of the focus on Russian contributions, propaganda attitude and public opinion moved towards viewing the Great Patriotic War as the people's war for the homeland.

### **The Defense of Moscow and Propaganda Leading Up to Stalingrad**

As the German Army Group Center approached Moscow in the fall of 1941, Soviet propagandists and strategists worked to raise morale and support for the defense of the city. Morale reached a dangerous low as Red Army troops continued to give ground to the Wehrmacht. Much of the Soviet Union expected a bloody defeat as the Germans approached Moscow. Leningrad was already under siege and suffering greatly, and now Moscow was next. As troops were rallied to defend Moscow, many citizens in the area were also conscripted to build city defenses such as trenches and tank traps. Some citizens volunteered to join the Narodnoe Opolcheniye hoping to quickly deter the Germans. Yet due to low morale, some citizens did not jump at the opportunity to do this, so the NKVD used force to coerce participation. Though NKVD coercion seemed to contradict the loosening of the state's grip, it remained constant throughout the war. Regardless, having citizens working side by side to defend their capital certainly reinforced the concept that this was a people's war. Stalin himself remained in Moscow during the defense, "rekindling many

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<sup>11</sup> Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945*, 144.



people's hope."<sup>12</sup> Having the leader of the Soviet Union remain with his people to defend Moscow, showed Stalin in a new light – certainly a more positive light than during the 1930s. In addition to these efforts to defend Moscow, Stalin learned that Japan was not interested in fighting a war with the Soviet Union which allowed him to call in reinforcements from eastern regions. Regardless of individual motivations for fighting, the fact that the *capital* was under attack contributed to both Red Army morale and citizens' participation. The defense of Moscow was not only a key event in the war, but also one in which the Soviet Union decisively changed its style of propaganda to one reflecting the idea of a people's war instead of Stalin's war and focused more on cultivating emotions of rage towards the Germans.

Moscow's defense through the muddy and icy winter of 1941-1942 was used as a massive morale booster for the Soviet people. State propagandists did not let this opportunity go to waste and took full advantage of the pride in defending the capital of the Motherland. Indeed, "many military historians consider the German retreat from Moscow – just days before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor – the turning point of the war."<sup>13</sup> By the summer of 1942, the Germans were gaining substantial ground in the south near the Caucasus oil fields and by Stalingrad. State propaganda had a greater sense of urgency that could be noticed in Stalin's public speeches. In July of 1942, Stalin released his famed Order No. 227 which said, "Every officer, every soldier and political worker must understand that our resources are not limitless. The territory of the Soviet state is not just desert, it is people – workers, peasants, intellectuals, our fathers, our mothers, wives, brothers, and children."<sup>14</sup> The urgency and frankness of the General Secretary's words played to soldiers' and civilians' concerns about their families and hometowns. It personified the

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<sup>12</sup> Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945*, 119.

<sup>13</sup> Chatterjee, *Russia's Long Twentieth Century: Voices, Memories, Contested Perspectives*, 133.

<sup>14</sup> Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945*, 155.

vast expanses of territory that had become occupied by the German invaders. He continued by announcing the disciplining of troops, which was famously summarized into the slogan “Not a step back!”<sup>15</sup> Though this is now an incredibly famous order, many Red Army troops felt that it was repetitive and stated the obvious. However, by Stalin explicitly calling for no retreats, it instilled a new degree of confidence in many Red Army troops as they felt that Stalin himself was urging them to fight for the Motherland, especially after Moscow. In a way, the Father of the Soviet Union was saying, “This is it, make it count.” This policy acted very effectively as propaganda to tie the Soviet Union together leading up to the Battle of Stalingrad and onward.

At about the same time, Red Army troops had begun to develop a new sense of professionalism, which was recognized by the state and publicized to the populace via propaganda, public art, and new medals. Perhaps this professionalism was due to the large numbers of defeats or the relaxing of Stalin's and politruks' control over military strategic affairs. Troops and their leaders now began to function more as resourceful and “self-reliant fighters.”<sup>16</sup> As a result, troops took more pride in their skills as they were rewarded for proficiencies and not political allegiances. Military leaders were no longer kept on such short a leash and were able to conduct operations the way they saw fit (with of course, no retreating). Encouragement for this way of thinking was expressed not only in the Red Army, but also in propagandized public art, such as the play *Front!* by Aleksandr Korneichuk. A review of the play said that it showed how “nothing in the Soviet land will sustain an ignorant or unskilled leader – not the personal courage, not honors from the past.”<sup>17</sup> The play echoed the attitude of the Red Army and spread the spirit of pride in one's work to the rest of the Soviet Union.

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<sup>15</sup> Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945*, 156.

<sup>16</sup> Chatterjee, *Russia's Long Twentieth Century: Voices, Memories, Contested Perspectives*, 138.

<sup>17</sup> Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945*, 161.

Similar to the Red Army's focus on skills, civilians might have also been inspired to work harder than they already were to churn out more tanks and armaments. As a result of the increase in weapons and armaments, the Red Army's confidence was boosted. The state used additional methods to improve morale such as awarding more medals to Red Army troops in recognition of exemplary skills and achievements, and refurbishing troops' military gear. Many women were recruited to clean the soldiers' uniforms and improve the Red Army's look which also proved successful in improving the Red Army's self-image. As one officer wrote, "Nina, don't worry about our uniforms. ... We dress better these days than any commander from the capitalist countries."<sup>18</sup> As a result of the "self-reliant" fighting style, increase in awards, and refurbished image, Red Army soldiers were not only instilled with greater confidence than before, but also re-energized in a way that prepared them for the Battle of Stalingrad.

The state also often used women and their stories in propaganda to inspire more women to get involved and increase civilian morale within the Soviet Union. The myth of a young woman named Zoia Kosmodem'ianskaia was featured in *Pravda* for sacrificing her life. The story read, "Standing under the gallows, she tries to rouse the villagers, shouting, 'Why are you sad? You should be courageous, you should fight, you should beat the fascists, you should burn them and poison them!'"<sup>19</sup> Women participated in the war far more than just in production or cleaning uniforms.

The Soviet Union recruited women starting in the summer of 1942 initially as medics, but soon after as pilots, snipers, tank crewmembers, and other positions as well. Many women were excited to join the front in fighting the German invaders and felt a duty to do so just as much as men. While women's participation itself was used as propaganda to improve recruitment and civilian

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<sup>18</sup> Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945*, 162.

<sup>19</sup>Anja Tippner, "Girls in Combat: Zoia Kosmodem'ianskaia and the Image of Young Soviet Wartime Heroines," *The Russian Review* 73, no. 3 (July 2014): 383.

morale, propaganda and state policies also attempted to boost the morale of female soldiers already serving. Since this was the first time such a large number of women served in combat – 800,000 – Red Army leaders were not prepared to deal with the different needs of women, such as properly fitting uniforms and hygiene products. Male troops also had a difficult time assessing how they should treat the female soldiers. Bella Isaakovna Epstein wrote, “When we arrived at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Belorussian Front, they wanted to have us stay at division headquarters. Meaning: You’re women, why go to the front line? ‘No,’ we said, ‘we’re snipers, send us where we’re supposed to go.’ Then they said, ‘We’ll send you to a regiment where there’s a good commander, he takes care of girls.’”<sup>20</sup> These conditions often made life on the front lines difficult for women which affected morale. One attempt made by the state to boost female troop morale was to provide 43 mobile front-line tea shops each equipped with hairdressers, small cosmetics counters, and supplies of dominoes and checkers.<sup>21</sup> Many women became famous because of their service and were recognized publicly, such as the women of the 588<sup>th</sup> Night Bomber Regiment or “Night Witches” as German soldiers called them out of fear. Many snipers, such as the famed Roza Shanina, were also recognized publicly for their skill and contributions to the war. The stories of units like the Night Witches and many famed snipers were publicized to increase recruitment numbers and improve Soviet citizens’ confidence. Unfortunately, women’s efforts as a collective were never addressed and largely omitted from post-war propaganda, unjustly erasing their large contributions from the Soviet memory of the Great Patriotic War.

In the period from 1941 to 1943, Soviet propagandists learned to change their tactics from primarily employing coercion and promoting the image of Stalin’s Soviet Union to building up the Red Army’s confidence, stoking their fury, and promoting a

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<sup>20</sup> Svetlana Aleksievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II* (New York: Random House, 2017), 191.

<sup>21</sup> Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945*, 165.

people's war based on many soldiers' actual fighting motives. Many policies such as the relaxation of the state's grip, Stalin's Order No. 227, and the recruitment of women were also propagandized and played a key role in boosting the Soviet Union's faith in victory over the German invaders.

### **The Battle of Stalingrad and Onward to Berlin**

The hard-fought Soviet victory in Stalingrad created a massive morale boost for the Red Army and the rest of the Soviet Union which helped them drive the Germans all the way back to Berlin. After their defeat in Stalingrad, the Wehrmacht ceased to gain ground and were now fighting a largely defensive war as the Red Army continued to push back with growing fury, supplies, and numbers. Soviet propaganda had played a large part in rousing Red Army troops' emotions and pride. The combination of Stalin's Order No. 227, the realization that the Soviets were against the wall now, and the re-framing of the war as the people's war worked to turn the Soviets into "some kind of cast-iron creatures," as one German put it.<sup>22</sup> Stalin's slightly loosened grip allowed Marshal Zhukov to devise strategies such as the encirclement of General Paulus's Sixth Army within the city. Ironically, Paulus's predicament was largely due to Hitler's micromanagement of military forces and refusal of Paulus's request to break out.<sup>23</sup> Soviet propagandists also used stories of valiant acts during the battle to rouse soldiers' strength and show the rest of the Soviet Union the dedication of the Red Army. One such story told of a "man in flames leap[ing] out of the trench ... run[ning] right up to [a] German tank, and smash[ing] the bottle against the grille of the engine hatch. A second later an enormous sheet of flame and smoke engulfed both the tank and the hero who had destroyed it."<sup>24</sup> With regards to the Red Army's rage, Soviet propaganda

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<sup>22</sup> Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945*, 176.

<sup>23</sup> *World War II in HD Colour*, "Ep 4: Hitler Strikes East." Television Documentary, directed by Jonathan Martin (World Media Rights, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945*, 176.

only worked to stoke the flames that were already present and helped it grow stronger. Many movies were made showing soldiers' valiant acts with the press explicitly encouraging the killing of Germans. Many poets, artists, and writers also published works that depicted Germans being slaughtered and used humor to encourage German killings.

Ignoring the Red Army's self-developed proficiency and existing rage, the Soviet state took credit for the Red Army's successes as proof that those in the Red Army were loyal to the Party and dedicated to Stalin. Since Stalingrad was "the end of the most difficult period of the war for the Soviet Union, the press resurrected the prewar convention of attributing success to the party bureaucracy and to Iosif Stalin personally."<sup>25</sup> This shift back in propaganda style was the early stages of what would eventually become the celebration of Stalin's victory instead of the people's victory. Regardless of who took the credit, the victory at Stalingrad worked to destroy the myth of German invincibility and supremacy and reinforced the idea that the Soviet Union could still be successful in destroying the German invaders.

Throughout the rest of the war, Soviet propaganda worked on cultivating the image of the ravaging German and constantly reminded the Red Army troops of the atrocities committed against their people. It was a propaganda strategy that would begin with rage, continue onto dehumanization, and end in the mass-rape and murder of countless Berlin civilians as well as any Germans caught along the way. Soviet propaganda's greatest contribution at this stage of the war was to strengthen the rage and desire for revenge that propelled many Red Army troops forward. Soviet propagandist, Ilya Ehrenburg, wrote, "Not only divisions and armies are advancing on Berlin, ... all the trenches, graves and ravines with the corpses of the innocents are advancing on Berlin."<sup>26</sup> Images of comrades killed in battle and of mass graves

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<sup>25</sup> Kirschenbaum, "Our City, our Hearths, our Families': Local Loyalties and Private Life in Soviet World War II Propaganda," 826.

<sup>26</sup> Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945*, 302.

found on the way to Berlin reminded the Red Army of what the Germans had done to them and why they desired revenge. In fact, signs in Germany read: “Red Army Soldier: You are now on German soil; the hour of revenge has struck.”<sup>27</sup> Signs and propaganda explicitly encouraged Red Army troops to take their revenge any way they liked. This was the first stage along the road of propaganda that would lead to the Red Army committing atrocities in Berlin. All that was needed to mix with this fiery rage was dehumanization of the enemy by developing a hostile collective identity.

While returning to a focus on Stalin’s Soviet Union, Soviet propaganda worked to instill a morality that would allow and attempt to justify the violence encouraged. Troops were led to believe that “a soldier washed his neck to sluice the lice, but a Communist was on a cleansing mission that would end with the whole world.”<sup>28</sup> This language led troops to associate the German enemy with lice and encouraged good Communists to cleanse the world of such fascist lice. This accomplished two things in Red Army minds: the dehumanization of Germans, and the collectivization of Germans as a single body of lice that must be removed. Therefore, when troops encountered Germans, they did not see an enemy soldier or enemy civilian but the manifestation of Nazi Germany – the hostile collective identity. This is how such savage serial-rapes were able to occur. According to Merridale, “It did not matter, either, if the women were young or old, for the women themselves were not the main object. The victims of the gang rapes were just meat, embodiments of Germany, all-purpose *Frauen*, recipients for Soviet and individual revenge.”<sup>29</sup> It was the Sovinformburo and Soviet propagandists that helped lead Red Army troops to commit these acts. Propaganda images included one depicting “a German soldier swinging a baby, torn from its

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<sup>27</sup> Chatterjee, *Russia's Long Twentieth Century: Voices, Memories, Contested Perspectives*, 143.

<sup>28</sup> Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945*, 303.

<sup>29</sup> Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945*, 311.

mother's arms, against a wall – the mother screams, the baby's brains splatter against the wall, the soldiers laugh.”<sup>30</sup> Images stayed in Red Army troops' minds and justified for them the serial-rapes as a sort of revenge for what the Germans had done.

As Red Army troops stormed the Reichstag, the symbol of Hitler's power, they defeated the defense forces and planted a Soviet flag at the top of the building. The next day, a photographer would immortalize the moment the Red Army defeated Germany in Berlin. Soon after, the Red Army celebrated the surrender of Nazi Germany and looked forward to returning home to their families as they had all hoped. Many did not return to their families for months as they were transported to the East to defeat Japan. Whether or not they knew it, their people's war had now become Stalin's war and the people's victory had become Stalin's victory.

### **Post-War Propaganda and the Soviet Memory**

Almost immediately after the conclusion of the Great Patriotic War, Stalin re-tightened his grip on the Soviet Union and sent many troops and ethnic minorities he deemed as traitors to gulags or had the NKVD execute them. According to Zubkova, “Stalin tried ... to direct the process into the channel that he needed. He removed himself from the society of we, moved into a kind of solitude, preserving for himself the right of orchestrating the process of marking sociopolitical boundaries.”<sup>31</sup> By now, state propaganda had shifted back to promoting the Soviet Union and Stalin, however now state propaganda promoted Russia and its contributions more than other nations or regions within the union. Many ethnic minorities such as the Ukrainians and those living along the western border were deemed traitorous and diminished in the credit they received for participation in the war. Stalin had re-established his reign, which could be seen in propaganda posters

<sup>30</sup> Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945*, 313.

<sup>31</sup> Elena Zubkova and Hugh Ragsdale, *Russia After the War: Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945-1957* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 30.



that depicted Stalin leading the Soviet Union to victory. The concept of the people's war was dead now and had been replaced by Stalin's war.

In addition to non-Russians, women as a collective were erased from the record of contribution and reduced to just a handful of famous individuals. Women were not allowed to take part in the Victory Day parades. In fact, the first time female troops marched in a Moscow Victory Day parade was in 2016.<sup>32</sup> Jewish veterans experienced incredible violence and hatred at the end of the war. As the Great Patriotic War ended, Soviet views on Jewish people took an oddly racialized stance. Many newspapers depicted Jewish people with stereotypical body features (reminiscent of Nazi propaganda) and a book called *Judaizm Bez Prikras* was published demonizing Jews and spreading the rumor that they could not do manual labor.<sup>33</sup> Such anti-Semitism grew from the Soviet move to not recognize Jews as a specific group that was persecuted in the Holocaust because that would promote "hierarchical heroism." Instead the state said that the Nazis persecuted *all* Soviets regardless of ethnicity or religion. Also, Jewish soldiers serving on the front lines often hid their identities so as not to be immediately executed if captured by Nazis. This led many other soldiers on the front line to believe that there were no Jewish contributions to the war.<sup>34</sup> Soviet propaganda further strengthened anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union by omitting any recognition of collective Jewish contribution – similar to what happened to women.

Many war crimes were also forgotten with time or omitted from the records, such as the mass rapes in Berlin and NKVD mass executions near Poland. After they won the Great Patriotic War,

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<sup>32</sup> Mikhail Fishman, "Victory Day in Moscow: 'Yes, we can do it again!,'" *The Moscow Times* 2016. (Online.)

<sup>33</sup> Amir Weiner, "When Memory Counts: War, Genocide, and Postwar Soviet Jewry," in *Crimes of War: Guilt and Denial in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Omer Bartov, Atina Grossmann and Mary Nolan (New York: New Press, 2002), 196.

<sup>34</sup> Weiner, "When Memory Counts," 204.

state propaganda worked to reestablish Stalin's sole rule over the Soviet Union and establish a twisted racialized communism that excluded non-Russians', women's, and Jewish contributions from the Soviet memory of the war. Instead it was replaced by Stalin's outstretched arm, leading the way to victory.

### **Conclusion: The Role of Soviet Wartime Propaganda**

Soviet propaganda during the Great Patriotic War initially did not seem to work well, but after adjusting strategies to fit the idea of a people's war, it became more appealing and often underscored Soviet citizens' fears and angers. Soviet propaganda and policies, though seemingly ineffective, often painted the environment in which Soviet citizens and Red Army troops observed and thought about their conditions during the war. For instance, though the Red Army was on the brink of defeat in Stalingrad, Soviet propaganda managed to instill confidence in troops, and Stalin's Order No. 227 gave troops a sense of urgency that this was the "end of the line." Without propaganda's focus on cultivating the rage of the Red Army and trumpeting the victory of Stalingrad, the Red Army might not have made it to Berlin due to low morale. Though contributing to the Red Army's victory over the Nazis, propaganda often also had negative implications as well. A major example is the level of rage and dehumanization that was developed and ultimately culminated in state-sanctioned mass-rapes in Berlin and other war crimes. However, positive or negative, it is evident that the use of Soviet propaganda was effective in getting the results Stalin and the state wanted when applied properly. In fact, propaganda applied during and directly after the war still affects the way the former Soviet Union remembers the war today. Though Soviet state propaganda was incredibly important, it does not and should not diminish the essential role millions of Soviet men and women played in defeating Nazi Germany and securing victory in the Great Patriotic War.