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## **WHY THEY FOUGHT:**

### **Motivation, Legitimacy and the Soviet Partisan Movement**

Kenneth Slepyan  
Transylvania University



The National Council for Eurasian and East European Research  
910 17<sup>th</sup> Street, N.W.  
Suite 300  
Washington, D.C. 20006

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## **Executive Summary**

Although Soviet citizens were alienated from the Stalinist regime before World War II, hundreds of thousands became partisans, waging a bitter guerrilla struggle against the German occupation. The partisans, including Communists, former Red Army soldiers, and ordinary civilians, were motivated to fight because of political commitment, local, ethnonational and Soviet patriotism, hatred of the enemy, and a desire to avenge atrocities. Soviet propaganda linked the partisans' personal motivations to national objectives, helping to form a bond between citizen and state. The experience of partisan war confirmed important elements of the Stalinist world-view, and demonstrated the efficacy of Stalinist policies. Hence, for many partisans, shared interests with the state and the experience of guerrilla war helped to legitimate the Soviet regime.

## Introduction

Why do people fight partisan or guerrilla wars for totalitarian regimes? This question is particularly pertinent in the case of the Soviet Union during the Second World War. Recent social histories have shown that by the end of the 1930s the Soviet state had failed to fully impose its social and cultural standards on the population. In the cities, newly arrived peasant workers retained their customary work habits and social relationships, thwarting official efforts to inculcate "modern" industrial labor processes, and often interpreting Bolshevik values in ways that differed significantly from official meanings.

Collectivization subdued the peasantry but did not destroy peasant society and culture. A hybrid society emerged that combined both pre-Revolutionary and Soviet elements, quite different from the modern, urbanized, and industrialized proletariat envisioned by Bolshevik leaders. It was also a society exhausted by the upheavals and human costs of the First World War, the Revolution, Civil War, collectivization, rapid industrialization, and the great purges. These latter events undermined support for the Soviet system, and engendered much cynicism about the Party and its leaders.

So why, then, did Soviet citizens, especially many peasant soldiers in the Red Army, and ordinary civilians, who were beyond the reach of Soviet authorities, take to the woods in ever-growing numbers to fight for a state that many despised, and many others regarded indifferently?

The Germans thought they knew the answer to this question. At the beginning of the war, most German political and military leaders believed that the movement was instigated, organized, and led by Jews and Communists. This assumption, which was shared by ordinary rank-and-file soldiers, served as part of the rationalization for the genocide against the Jews, and the mass murder of Communist officials.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See for example, Hannes Heer, "Killing Fields: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belorussia, 1941-1942" in Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann eds., *War of Extermination: The German Military in World War II, 1941-1944* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), 55-79; Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

While, as we shall see, Communists did play an important role in mobilizing the movement, Jews as a self-conscious group were certainly not involved, and were even prevented from joining partisan units. German intelligence assumed that the partisans were either Communist fanatics, or that they were unwilling participants, forcibly conscripted into the bands on pain of death if they refused. This analysis was based on interrogations of captured partisans.<sup>2</sup>

What the analysts failed to note was that partisans assumed, with good reason, that they would be executed if captured. Hence they had every reason to make it seem that they were forced to become partisans. This view is confirmed by Soviet records, in which partisans reported that they had staged false drafts and arrests in order to protect the families of the “conscripted” partisans from reprisals.<sup>3</sup> The point here is an important one: German *a priori* assumptions about the partisan movement and the nature of Soviet society prevented them from understanding the movement’s composition or the motivations of its fighters. Without this understanding, the only way they could fight the guerrillas was with brute force and terror. This tactic backfired as it only led to more and more citizens joining the partisans’ ranks.

In actuality, the partisan movement included a wide variety of groups. Many shared common motivations, but they also had their own reasons for fighting, such as the political commitment of Communists, patriotism, or the desire for revenge. Nor were their interests always in accord with those of the Soviet state. Only by examining these motives in detail can we arrive at a nuanced understanding of what impelled Communists, Red Army soldiers, and ordinary civilians, to risk their lives in such an awful conflict.

This discussion raises a second and related question. Scholars generally agree that by the end of the war, the Soviet state had achieved the domestic political legitimacy that it had lacked before the war. Moreover, this previously alienated citizenry accepted the basic premises of the Soviet system, which, aside from the elimination of mass terror, remained fundamentally

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<sup>2</sup>John Armstrong et al, *The Soviet Partisans in World War II* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), 153-154.

<sup>3</sup>Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii (hereafter cited as RGASPI), f. 69, op. 1, d. 1077, l. 2; Institut istorii akademiia nauk otdel rukopisnykh fondov (hereafter cited as IIAN ORF), f. 2, raz. II, op. 4, d. 75, l. 1; op. 6, d. 54, l. 3

unchanged until the demise of the USSR. When the extraordinary human and material costs of victory are taken into account, including a staggering 25-27 million Soviet dead, this general acceptance of the regime whose policies were so disastrous, becomes even more remarkable.

I argue that the nature of the war experience itself, along with the regime's success in linking these motivations to the national defense, gave credence to Stalinist values, such as the need for constant vigilance against internal and external enemies, the necessity of physically destroying opponents, and the centrality of state-imposed discipline, hierarchy, and order on society. The regime not only successfully tapped into popular sentiments, but the very nature of the war gave credence to the Stalinist worldview. In other words, the war brought reality and Stalinism closer together, giving the latter a new lease on political life.

This paper is divided into three broad sections. First, I examine the state's efforts to develop a partisan movement, despite the leadership's deep ambivalence about the partisans' reliability. Second, I investigate the motivations and experiences of the partisans themselves, including Communists and non-Party activists, former Red Army soldiers, and ordinary civilians. An important part of this discussion is the relationship between partisan motives and state propaganda as an indication of the convergence of state and personal interests. The final theme focuses on the partisans' role as intermediaries between Moscow and the local population. Although the partisans' actions towards civilians often echoed the callousness and brutality of the prewar Soviet state, they nonetheless managed to gain the necessary popular support, without which they were unable to operate. How this support came about illuminates the internalization of Stalinist values that occurred within both partisans and civilians.

Finally, this discussion of partisan warfare has relevance beyond the Soviet Union. The coalition forces in Iraq today face a relatively low-scale insurgency campaign involving a variety of social and political elements. I suggest a better understanding of why and how the disparate groups that fought in the Soviet partisan movement came to support the repressive Soviet regime may help us gain insights into the possible development of guerrilla warfare allied to the repressive regime of Saddam Hussein.

## Motivations and Experiences of Soviet Partisans

When considering the experiences of the Soviet partisans in World War II, one must never forget the central role the state played in both facilitating and attempting to define the partisan forces. Unlike other nations that employed guerrillas, the Soviet Union's government and armed forces remained unconquered and continued to exert a powerful presence. Whereas other resistance movements arose more or less spontaneously, the Soviet regime organized the partisan movement in the first weeks of the war as part of its desperate efforts to slow down the German invasion. By the middle of 1942 a full-fledged partisan administration had been established to coordinate operations throughout the occupied territories.

Ironically, despite the government's central role, Soviet leaders had deep suspicions about partisans and partisan warfare. Much of this distrust came from the leadership's experiences during the Russian Civil War. The Red partisans were famous not only for their dashing, romantic exploits (which later became enshrined in novels, songs, and films), but also for their lack of discipline, military unreliability, political unorthodoxy, extreme localism, and general contempt for Bolshevik hierarchy. Soviet leaders referred to these behaviors pejoratively as *partizanshchina* (partisan actions).

Fear of *partizanshchina*, as well as the innate abhorrence to what eminent military historian John Erickson has termed the "organized dissidence" inherent in partisan warfare were important reasons for the regime's decision to dismantle its fairly extensive guerrilla warfare program in the late 1930s. Bases and weapons caches were destroyed, and thousands of instructors were either shot or sent to the Gulag. Much of the hard-learned lessons about partisan warfare were lost with them.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>John Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad: Stalin's War with Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 241; Seweryn Bialer, ed.: *Stalin and His Generals: Soviet Military Memoirs of World War II* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984), 71; Colonel I. G. Starinov, *Over the Abyss: My Life in Soviet Special Operations*, translated by Robert Suggs (New York: Ivy Books, 1995), 56.

The national emergency brought on by Operation Barbarossa, however, required that all resources of the nation had to be employed. Overcoming their distaste for guerrilla warfare, in the first weeks of the war the Party's Central Committee and the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom) instructed Party and government organizations in the regions affected by the fighting to form partisan units in the enemy's rear.<sup>5</sup> However, the regime extended very little material assistance to the nascent partisans, and did not provide any coordination of their activities at the national or republican levels.<sup>6</sup>

Initially, Soviet authorities were particularly concerned about the composition of the movement. Local Party officials were told to select leaders and even ordinary recruits from only the "staunchest" members of the Party, Komsomol (Communist youth organization), and other state organs, as well as non-Party citizens who had already proven their dedication to the Soviet cause. Thus, popular loyalty to the regime was not assumed; rather individuals had to have demonstrated it in their past public actions. The ordinary citizen who had led a non-political public life, yet had internally accepted the Soviet state, or who simply wanted to defend his or her homeland was not wanted.

The leadership's ambivalence towards popular participation in the movement is striking. Despite official proclamations calling for an "all-people's war" (*vsenarodnaia voina*), which generated images of a mass, spontaneous, national uprising,<sup>7</sup> these early directives envisioned a movement organized and led by the Party, conforming to its administrative boundaries and hierarchies, whose membership was to be limited to Party members and recognized non-Party activists.

Public claims that ordinary citizens desired to resist the enemy were contradicted by official instructions to recruit only those who had already overtly displayed their loyalty to the Soviet state. These restrictions reflected official fears that the partisans would be uncontrollable

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<sup>5</sup>See the documents cited in *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, #6, 1991, pp. 218-220, and *Izvestiia KPSS* 7, (1990): 217-218.

<sup>6</sup>*Izvestiia KPSS* 7, (1990): pp. 217-218 (the document is cited in full)

<sup>7</sup>Alexander Werth, *Russia at War, 1941-1945* (New York: Avon Books, 1964), 168; *Pravda* 15 July 1941; Richard Overy, *Russia's War: Blood Upon the Snow* (New York: TV Books, 1997), 205.



if not restrained by the Party's discipline. This tension between the public discourse of mass popular participation and the leadership's desire for political reliability was never fully resolved. This assumption of mass unreliability and disloyalty was a natural continuation of its prewar distrust of unsanctioned popular action, despite the extreme change in circumstances brought about by Barbarossa.

In the spring and summer of 1942, the Soviet government came to two realizations that dramatically transformed its policy towards guerrilla warfare. First, it recognized that a formal, centralized administration was needed to direct and coordinate partisan operations. After several fits and starts, the Central Staff of the Partisan Movement was established in late May 1942 under the leadership of Communist official P.K. Ponomarenko. The Central Staff enabled the government to have far more control over the partisans and by mid 1943 it directed operations comprising hundreds of simultaneous strikes involving tens of thousands of partisans against the German rail net. The creation of the Central Staff, with its more rigorous control mechanisms, also gave Soviet authorities the confidence to accept the numerical expansion of the movement, making possible a broader popular base.

The second epiphany centered on the political and military benefits the regime would gain by expanding the movement's popular participation. Beginning in the spring of 1942, recruits trickled into the movement. Soon they were flooding the partisans' ranks. As we shall see, they joined for a variety of reasons, but in any case, this expansion destroyed the government's initial plan to keep the movement's size limited.<sup>8</sup> By late summer it had become clear to Stalin and other Soviet leaders that a true all-people's war could be used to demonstrate the regime's popular legitimacy.

Since partisans were not compelled to fight, their participation "proved" their loyalty to the Soviet system, their love of the Party and motherland, and their burning hatred of the enemy. In September Stalin issued a new order calling on all Soviet citizens who were able to join the

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<sup>8</sup>In June 1942 there were 70,000 accounted partisans. By February 1943 this number had increased to over 120,000; RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 65, l. 22.

partisans.<sup>9</sup> The partisans were now a political weapon as well as a military instrument: a mighty piece of living propaganda of Soviet citizens who “voted with their feet” to defend the Soviet cause. Although many fought for reasons that had little to do with defending the system, this depiction would later prove essential to the development of wartime and post-war mythology so critical to the USSR’s postwar legitimacy.

### **State and Personal Interests in the Partisan Movement**

The reaction of most citizens to the German invasion was “wait and see.” This response in itself should not necessarily be regarded as a sign of widespread opposition to the Soviet regime. First, the speed and power of the opening German onslaught was such that many felt simply overwhelmed by its literal “shock and awe.” Second, with little evidence at the time that the Soviet state would hold against the enemy, few saw any reason to risk their and their family’s lives in a futile resistance. This paralysis was a common phenomenon throughout occupied Europe. Others did feel joy at being “liberated” by the Germans, particularly in lands annexed by the USSR in 1939-1940, but also in areas where the cruelties of collectivization, the political repressions, and general brutalities of the Stalinist regime had not been forgotten.

Yet these sentiments did not last long. Certainly many, including Communists and Red Army soldiers cut-off from Soviet lines (known as *okruzhentsy*), saw the chaos unleashed by the war as a chance, one observer noted, to live “the free life with arms in one’s hands, without government oppression, with abundance of home-brewed alcohol, accessible women, [and] opportunities for plunder.”<sup>10</sup> Others began to fight when they realized that resistance would not be futile, after the successful counter-offensive before Moscow in December 1941. Still others, more cynically, fought for entirely opportunistic reasons, taking up arms only when it became clear that the Soviet Union was going to win the war after the German defeat at Kursk, and that

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<sup>9</sup>RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 3, ll. 12-17.

<sup>10</sup>N. Galay, “The Partisan Forces,” in B. H. Liddell-Hart ed.: *The Red Army* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1956), 167.

they had better prove that they supported the winning side. Again, such motivations were hardly exclusive to the Soviets.

The search for the “free life”, and elements of opportunism influenced almost all Soviet partisans to one degree or another, including those who fought for less self-interested sentiments. Corporate affiliation, pride and obligation compelled many Communists and *okruzhentsy* to take up arms. Local, ethnonational and Soviet patriotism, German atrocities, and the desire to avenge these losses were also powerful motivators. Indeed, individuals were usually inspired out of a combination of self-interested and patriotic reasons. It was the genius of Soviet propaganda, as well as the experience of war and occupation, that fused the personal interests with those of the regime.

Communists and activists were generally the first to become partisans and dominated the movement in its early stages before losses from combat, illness, and desertion took their toll, and as more non-Party citizens joined the movement. In general, the percentage of politically-affiliated partisans, including both Party and Komsomol members in a given unit ranged between 25% and 40%.<sup>11</sup> Even when the percentages of Communists decreased, their political status still secured their leadership in the bands.

At the beginning of the war, however, few Communists were ready to take on the mantle of resistance leaders. After twenty years of Soviet power, the idea of becoming a partisan seemed highly improbable to many, especially since most had joined the Party after the Revolution and Civil War, and were accustomed to what passed for bureaucratic routine in Stalin’s Soviet Union. A. F. Fedorov, the first secretary of Ukraine’s Chernigov Regional Committee and a Party member since 1927 recalled his incredulity when he was instructed to form a unit:

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<sup>11</sup>United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (hereafter cited as USHMM) 1996.A.169, Reel 36 ((YadVashem Archive {YVA} M37/820— Tsentral’nyi derzhavnyi arkhiv hromads’kykh ob’iednan Ukrainy {hereafter cited as TsDAHOU}, f. 67, op. 1, d. 1, ll.17, 53, 107, 141); RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 479, l. 167; d. 480, ll. 112-113, 126-127, 131-132; RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 583, ll. 72-73; *Partiinoe podpol’e: Deiatel’nost podpolnykh partiinykh organov i organizatsii na Okkupirovannoi Sovetskii territorii v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1983), 132, P. K. Ponomarenko, *Vsenarodnaia bor’ba v tylu nemetsko-fashistkikh zakhvatchikov*, (Moscow: Nauka, 1986), 128-129.

Create an underground! Even the words seemed bookish, dead. ‘A Bolshevik underground’—after all this is from the history of the Party. And here we were, not so very young people but of Soviet formation, who had to prepare themselves for the transfer to an illegal position.<sup>12</sup>

There certainly was little in most cadres’ political experience to prepare them for the physical rigors, isolation, and secrecy of underground work.<sup>13</sup>

Nor did many Party members wish to risk their lives, especially if they thought the Soviet Union was a lost cause. Many Party-recruited units were formed before the occupation, but the possibility of life in a hostile environment, or fear of German retribution against their families evidently unnerved supposedly reliable cadres, who refused to join the underground resistance even before the Germans arrived.<sup>14</sup> Some simply avoided the partisans altogether and either renounced their Party membership publicly or went into hiding.<sup>15</sup> As one official reported to partisan leader Ponomarenko, “Many Communists and Komsomol members live in the villages of Belorussia, and hide from the Germans and the partisans and do nothing.”<sup>16</sup>

The Party-recruited partisans had a complex relationship with other partisans and the regime. They fundamentally distrusted the Red Army partisans, whom they believed at best to be cowards and defeatists, responsible for the defeats of 1941, and at worst to be traitors. True to their Stalinist past, they also distrusted the surrounding civilians, many of whom they also believed to be spies and traitors. Most interestingly, they displayed little regard for their Party comrades on the Soviet side of the lines whom they believed had abandoned them. One Communist partisan noted shortly after the war:

I consider those who went with us to the forest to the partisan detachment, [turned out] to be the true patriots of the Rodina. Now look at the comrades who had the opportunity together with you to take rifle in hand and go to the forest, but did not do this. They left the forest, [saying] ‘Better I should leave for the East’ if there were appropriate reasons.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>A. F. Fedorov, *Podpol'nyi obkom deistvuet* (Kiev: Politizdat Ukrainy, 1986), 11.

<sup>13</sup>*Partiinnoe podpol'e*, p. 90.

<sup>14</sup>IIAN ORF, f. 2, raz. II, op. 6, d. 27, l. 1; USHMM, 1996.A.196, Reel 39 (YVA M-37/1257—TsDAHOU, f. 62, op. 9, d. 3, l. 5).

<sup>15</sup>RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 1067, l. 43.

<sup>16</sup>RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 1067, l. 172.

<sup>17</sup>IIAN ORF, f. 2, raz. II, op. 9/2, d. 57, l. 1.

Other Communists contrasted others' flight to their own hardiness, as a group of Party officials attested in a March 1942 report:

The work in the enemy's rear is a testing of one's own nerves, a testing of dedication to the Party of Lenin-Stalin, and to our people. The difficult situation, which we did not expect, crashed down like snow on our heads. The Red Army retreats, and individual units even flee in panic, throwing away their weapons, tanks, and other vehicles. The local authorities run away. The vaunted German troops move noisily forward. In this situation, we find ourselves in the forest, we believe in our victory, we gather strength, make our plans, and prepare ourselves for the struggle with the fascists. There is no experience of underground work. It was necessary to take in the experience of every individual [historical] period, and in accordance with this, build our work.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, many partisans were angry at their fellow Party members who were safely ensconced in the Soviet rear, as one of the authors of the reported cited above indicated six months later:

To me it is simply not good to be at the regional committee. Several [members] will curse and reproach me. And this is most insulting. A year underground, a year in the most difficult living conditions, and here not only our mistakes, but even those actions this year which saved our skins, will be treated with contempt.<sup>19</sup>

This anger was a variation of the classic resentment of the frontline soldier towards those in the rear. It also reflected the feelings among Party-recruited partisans, chosen by the nation's leaders to be the movement's organizers, that they were a special breed, more devoted to the motherland, Party and Soviet state than other citizens and Communists. As they were well aware, Party-recruited partisans had to rely on their own initiative and skill to survive, and could no longer rely on higher authorities to make decisions.<sup>20</sup> They were also struck by the apparent similarity of their underground life to Lenin's and the old Bolsheviks, surrounded as they were by enemies and engaged in conspiratorial struggle to overthrow brutal oppressors.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 1067, ll. 55-56.

<sup>19</sup>RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 164, l. 157.

<sup>20</sup>Fedorov, 235.

<sup>21</sup>RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 1067, ll. 55-56; Kubatova: *Smolenskaia partiinaia organizatsiia v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny*, (Smolensk: Smolenskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1958), 33-34.

In comparing themselves to the Party's founders, the Party-recruited partisans elevated themselves in moral stature above their brethren in the Soviet rear, and claimed to be Lenin's true heirs. They believed that they embodied the Party's heroic, historic past, and represented its true values. Thus, although they distinguished themselves from their Party comrades in the Soviet rear, their identity with the Party's mission, and the general Soviet cause, was strengthened.

The second group that dominated the partisan movement was former Red Army soldiers, primarily *okruzhentsy* and escaped POWs, and organizing teams sent by the regular army to form new units. They were a significant manpower source (in some areas comprising over one third of all partisans) and provided much of the movement's military leadership, discipline, and training.<sup>22</sup> The Red Army led and dominated bands represented themselves as military professionals, as soldiers behind enemy lines, an identity manifested in their unit structure, appearance, discipline, and military expertise.<sup>23</sup>

Red Army partisans also fought for multiple reasons. Self-preservation was perhaps the single most important factor. The Germans' brutal treatment of POWs, and their wanton shooting of Soviet soldiers caught behind lines, compelled many stragglers, who hoped to avoid any additional fighting, to take up arms for their own survival.<sup>24</sup> Some observers believed that, paradoxically, such men became the fiercest fighters precisely because they knew from personal experience what the German occupiers were all about.<sup>25</sup> As one partisan stated, "Those who run away on their own [from imprisonment] will fight like lions. They fight not from fear, but for the Soviets."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 480, ll. 112-113, 131-132; d. 1076, l. 10; Ponomarenko, 30; V. A. Perezhogin, "Iz okruzheniia i plene—v partizany", *Otechestvennaia istoriia* 3 (2000); taken originally from RGASPI, f. 69, op. 8, d. 27, l. 31.

<sup>23</sup>RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 28, . 72; d. 283, ll. 2, 3; d. 1076, l. 10; d. 1080, ll. 25, 39; IIAN ORF, f. 2, raz. II, op. 4, d. 23, ll. 7, 10; d. 117, l. 8; Fedorov, 245-246.

<sup>24</sup>Of the 5.7 million Soviet prisoners of war, approximately 3.3 million (57%) died in German hands; for a brief discussion of the Wehrmacht's treatment of Soviet POWs see Christian Streit, "Soviet Prisoners of War in the Hands of the Wehrmacht" and Theo J. Schulte, "Korück 582" both in Heer and Naumann, 81-91, and 317-320.

<sup>25</sup>P. P. Vershigora, *Liudi s chistoi sovest'iu* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii), 68

<sup>26</sup>RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 28, l. 166.

Patriotism inspired many, often by reading propaganda leaflets and newspapers dropped behind the lines, or heightened by their personal experiences as witnesses to and recipients of German brutality. A few evidently agreed with Party-recruited partisans and Soviet officialdom that they were "guilty" of the sins of defeatism and cowardice, and fought as one former prisoner of war allegedly said, "to justify the confidence of the Party and to be an honorable Soviet citizen." Some claimed that hearing Stalin's voice over the radio during celebrations of the Bolshevik Revolution inspired them to continue the fight.<sup>27</sup> Many more felt duty-bound to help out their Red Army comrades still fighting at the front.<sup>28</sup> Some, perhaps animated by the romantic exploits of the previous generations of Red partisans, hoped to live the good life of the partisan ethos, or "wanted to copy the Civil War."<sup>29</sup>

The former soldiers shared their Party comrades' estrangement from their parent institution. Despite their pride in their military professionalism, they still defined themselves as "partisans", with different needs from those of soldiers in regular Army formations. They also resented regular army officers who were sometimes sent to command them.<sup>30</sup> Red Army partisans might mutiny--and get away with it--if certain minimal standards of living were not met--an occurrence unimaginable in a regular Red Army formation.

Partisans of the 1<sup>st</sup> Voroshilov Detachment, for example, refused to undertake a long and difficult march unless they were given adequate footwear and provisions. Although officials, including the unit's former commander, ordered the detachment to obey orders, the partisans remained adamant. Their demands were finally met, and the 1st Voroshilov resumed operations without suffering any consequences for its rebellious action.<sup>31</sup>

This examination of the motivations and mentalities of Red Army partisans indicates that they fought not necessarily out of love for the Soviet regime, but often because of personal, professional, and corporate pride. However, this pride, linked as it was to Soviet patriotism and

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<sup>27</sup>IIAN ORF, f. 2, raz. II, op. 2, d. 25a, l. 17, 19

<sup>28</sup>IIAN ORF, f. raz. II, op. 4, d. 125, l. 6; op. 6. d 12, l. 47, 48.

<sup>29</sup>IIAN ORF, f. 2, raz. II, op. 6, d. 12, l. 47.

<sup>30</sup>RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 283, l. 9; d. 474, l. 26.

<sup>31</sup>IIAN ORF, f. 2, raz. II, op. 6, d. 15, l. 17.

to a vital Soviet institution helped anchor them to the regime and to take up its interests as their own. This bond was further strengthened, for the survivors anyway, by three years of guerrilla warfare.

Yet citizens not affiliated with any institution also fought. They were motivated by patriotism and the desire to avenge, feelings which were also shared by the Party-recruited and Red Army partisans. One of the most powerful themes pervading both Soviet propaganda and the partisans' own sentiments, was the importance of defending the *rodina* or motherland, a term which had deep emotional and political significance. The precise meaning of *rodina* was vague and depended on context since it could refer to the entire the Soviet Union, a republic, a region, or home district.

Nor did *rodina* necessarily have any political connotations, other than one's native land. When used without a defining adjective, as was often the case in the Soviet media, it could refer to almost any place the speaker claimed as home.<sup>32</sup> Soviet media portrayed the partisans as defenders of the *rodina* and as supreme patriots. At the same time, it was not always clear what *rodina* individual partisans might be defending. Were they protecting the Soviet Union, their republic, their region, or even their native village? Because *rodina* often remained undefined, audiences, including partisans, could then substitute any political or geographical entity they wished.

In other instances, the state issued more specific appeals to defend their ethnonational homelands (e.g. Russia, Belorussia, Ukraine etc.), thereby encouraging citizens to take pride in their own ethnonational identity. While Russians were particular targets of this strategy, articles and movies also featured Ukrainian, Belorussian, and other non-Russian groups. The press referred to specific national histories and heroes, such as the nineteenth century Ukrainian poet

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<sup>32</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 (Winter 2000): 825; See the discussion of the ambiguity of "motherland" in the 1943 debate over *History of the Kazaksh S. S. R.* Lowell Tillet, *The Great Friendship: Soviet Historians and Non-Russian Nationalities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 73-74.



Taras Shevchenko, and celebrated the feats of Belorussian and Ukrainian partisans during the Civil War.<sup>33</sup>

Some stories and radio broadcasts to the occupied territories did refer to the “Soviet” land, people, partisans, and *rodina*, but more frequently the media referred to an ethnonational *rodina* alongside the Soviet *rodina*, thereby linking the two together. Official propaganda reminded its audience that all ethnonationalities of the country were united in their love for each other and their common Soviet motherland. Hence one radio broadcast, heralding the awarding of nine partisans with the title “Hero of the Soviet Union” stated, “Among the new heroes, among those awarded medals and orders are Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians. The peoples of the Soviet Union are united in their efforts so that the enemy will be destroyed.”<sup>34</sup>

Local patriotism and the desire to defend one’s home was another powerful factor influencing people to fight. Soviet authorities also capitalized on this emotion. One typical article noted that a partisan band, which included the elderly, women, and children in its ranks, fought German troops for five hours. “They fought for their native village, which the Hitlerites had seized.”<sup>35</sup> One radio broadcast reminded partisans why they were fighting:

Patriotism begins from the most ordinary [things]: from the tree next to the house, from the lane running down the river with the smell of antonovka apples or the steppe fields. The war helps every Soviet person understand the beauty of his native place.<sup>36</sup>

The broadcast then took its listeners on an audio tour of the Soviet Union, ending at the Kremlin with its “ancient towers, the glory of Rus’ and the red stars of the future.” Such descriptions of hometowns and the implicit—and often explicit—threat to their existence mirrored real-life experiences of many Soviet citizens. But by connecting this powerful sentiment to the fate of the Soviet Union as a whole, officials hoped to mobilize citizens to fight

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<sup>33</sup>Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskii Federatsii (hereafter cited as GARF), f. 6903, op. 20, d. 1, l. 382 (broadcast 10 June 1942); d. 4, ll. 438-441 (10 August 1942); d. 5, ll. 62-67 (3 September 1942); d. 8, ll. 247-248 (12 November 1942); d. 9, ll. 363-364 (28 November 1942); d. 14, ll. 371-374 (26 June 1943).

<sup>34</sup>GARF, f. 6903, op. 20, d. 5, l. 34 (9-2-42).

<sup>35</sup>*Krasnaia zvezda*, 5 November 1942, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup>GARF, f. 6903, op. 20, d. 2, l. 491 (broadcast 28 June 1942).

for the common, national cause, if for no other reason, than because it was in their personal interest, and in the interest of their family and neighbors to do so.

The rodina theme resonated strongly with the partisans. They identified especially strongly with their own ethnonational republics. Soviet nationality policies of the 1920s and 1930s, which promoted the development of particular ethnonational identities, contributed to this enthusiastic response. Thus Leningrad partisans claimed that local peasants regarded them as “patriots of their Russian country who ably defend [the peasants] from the yoke of German slavery.”<sup>37</sup> One partisan related proudly in a letter home, “Mama and Papa, I know from the history of the whole world, that the Russian people never have been and never will be defeated.”<sup>38</sup> Even when separated from their native lands, citizens spoke of their desire fight for them. Belorussian Nadezhda Medvedeva, then located in the Siberian city of Omsk, wrote a letter to a high ranking official, describing her love of Belorussia and, asking that she be sent there as a partisan: “I love her, [my]native Belorussia, without effusiveness, without high-sounding phrases, I love her fields, forests, her skylarks.”<sup>39</sup>

When combined with hatred for the invaders, this ethnonationalism was a potent mobilizing force. The Belorussian partisans of the “Flame” Partisan Detachment read in their unit-produced journal in late 1943, that they must “broaden and strengthen their ties with the population”, and to help them whenever possible, particularly since the “people’s avengers” were the best sons of the Belorussian people themselves.<sup>40</sup> Graphic stories of German atrocities against Belorussians, especially women and children, drove this point home.<sup>41</sup> One partisan in a Belorussian brigade complained about his unit’s inactivity, stating that “I cannot sit here any longer doing nothing, I am a Belarussian, and we must defend Belorussia [sic], and not sit.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 474, l. 13.

<sup>38</sup>RGASPI, f. 625, op. 1, d. 28, l. 77;

<sup>39</sup>RGASPI, f. 625, op. 1, d. 28, l. 12. It is not known whether Medvedeva’s request was granted.

<sup>40</sup>Tsentral’nyi Muzei Vooruzhennykh Sil’ (hereafter cited as TsMVS), f. 4/38347, l. 30.

<sup>41</sup>TsMVS, f. 4/38347, ll. 36-42, 44-46

<sup>42</sup>RGASPI, f. 625, op. 1, d. 61, l. 145.

Partisans also expressed Soviet patriotism in a number of ways. Unit names such as “For Soviet Belarus” (*Za Sovetskuiu Belarus’*), “For Soviet Power”, and “Bolshevik” or those named after Soviet leaders such as Stalin, Molotov, Frunze, Voroshilov, Mikoian, and even such popular heroes as Valerii Chkalov, the late great Soviet flyer, were demonstrations of Soviet consciousness. Celebrations of Soviet holidays, particularly the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, also suggested popular support for the regime.

Others found more deadly ways to identify themselves as Soviet. One partisan, for example, recorded in his diary specific, positive observations about the Russian soul and the invincibility of the Russian people. He nevertheless was very proud of his affiliation with the Komsomol, and later, his acceptance as a candidate member of the Party. And, when he participated in the execution of three captured policemen, he left a note on their bodies “‘Shot for betraying the Rodina’ (signed) Soviet saboteurs”,<sup>43</sup> thus highlighting his identification with the Soviet state.

The linking of personal interests with the national was intensified by the horror and brutality of the German occupation. Even in 1941 and early 1942 partisan reports detailed the mass murder of Soviet citizens and the looting, burning, and raping of towns and villages.<sup>44</sup> Many of the victims were friends and family members. The Soviet press highlighted the partisans’ dual roles of witnesses to and avengers of atrocity. One such article noted:

In people who have arrived from the partisan detachments, there is something special, distinguishing them from others. A special expression of the face, a special look, their eyes have seen much, things we have not seen. In these people there is a surprising calm, forming from the maximum effort of will and infinite hatred.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Tsentr khraneniia dokumentov molodezhnykh organizatsii (hereafter cited as TsKhDMO), f. 1, op. 53, d. 88, ll. 59, 83, 93, 109, 114.

<sup>44</sup>RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 576, l. 28; USHMM RG 22.005M, Reel 1 (RGASPI, f. 17, op. 88, d. 480, l. 156); Reel 2 (RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 1074, l. 2:); Reel 3 (RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 347, l. 27; d. 713, ll. 7-8). For discussions on German atrocities during the first year of the war see Hannes Heer, “The Killing Fields: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belorussia, 1941-1942” and “The Logic of Extermination: The Wehrmacht and the Anti-Partisan War” both in Heer and Naumann), 55-79, 92-126.

<sup>45</sup>*Izvestiia*, 26 September 1942, p. 2.

This was not literary flourish. These sights profoundly affected partisans, as one wrote to her husband:

When I saw the [1938] film *Aleksandr Nevskii*, where it showed the German troops throw children into the fire, I did not believe it. I did not know that there were such cannibals. Now I see with my own eyes how these cannibals destroy our people regardless of nation. I have observed many instances of the annihilation of whole villages together with [their] inhabitants.<sup>46</sup>

This statement reveals two critical phenomena: first it indicates that Soviet partisans often understood the war experience in terms of cultural and political symbols emanating from the Stalinist interwar period, giving new credibility to them. Second, it validated Stalinist claims that had earlier been believed to be exaggerated or even false. Now prewar warnings of the threat posed by external and internal enemies had the power of personal truth as partisans actually experienced the reality of these images and themes. Seen in this light, what other previous and seemingly false or hyperbolic official claims might also have been true after all? Thus the war was critical in helping citizens internalize Stalinist values and to intensify their bonding with the regime, even if they had been alienated from it before the war.

Not surprisingly, in both official and popular eyes, these crimes demanded revenge.<sup>47</sup> Soviet propaganda further encouraged the view that the usual laws of war did not apply in the partisan struggle. Articles in the central newspapers and popular films such as *She Defends the Motherland* invoked the desire for revenge as the primary reason why people became partisans.<sup>48</sup> A radio broadcast to the partisan detachments in August 1942 explicitly made this point:

Not for nothing do the Soviet people call the partisans the people's avengers. The people's avengers--people of selfless courage and bravery, who destroy the enemy for his wild atrocities against defenseless Soviet women, children and the elderly, for burning down our villages, towns and cities, for ruthless tortures, which the

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<sup>46</sup>RGASPI, f. 625, op. 1, d. 28, l. 95.

<sup>47</sup>Piositis, 150-152.

<sup>48</sup>*Krasnaia zvezda*, 1 November 1941. For a discussion of *She Defends the Motherland*, one of the signature films of the war years, see Denise Youngblood, Denise J. Youngblood, "A War Remembered: Soviet Films of the Great Patriotic War" *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 3, (June 2001): 841-844; see also Peter Kenez, "Black and White: The War on Film" in Richard Stites ed., *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 167-169.

Germans subject on our captured soldiers and officers. Blood for blood--such is the iron law of the people's avengers.<sup>49</sup>

As witnesses to and victims of German atrocities, the partisans required little official encouragement to internalize the appellation “people’s avengers.” The seeking of revenge was symbolized in unit names such as “Revenge” (*Mstitel* and “*Nekrome* in Russian and Yiddish respectively), “Death to the German Occupiers” (*Smert’ Nemetskim Okkupantam*), and “Death to Fascism” (*Smert’ Fashizmu*). Revenge and patriotism were often intertwined, as one partisan expressed in a letter home that he wanted to perform “his holy duty as a Soviet citizen” to kill Germans.<sup>50</sup> Former partisan Z. A. Bogatyr’ recalled the cries of one partisan in the midst of a fight, “Take this, you snakes, [this is] for Kovalev, this is for Gutorov, this is for Burovikhin!” while another related that his unit swore an oath over the grave of a comrade to avenge his death.<sup>51</sup> Women were especially encouraged—and needed little encouragement—to fight to avenge the loss of loved ones. Surviving Jews were particularly intent on avenging the murders of their people, as well as fighting for Jewish honor and dignity.<sup>52</sup>

As the “people’s avengers,” partisans saw themselves as the judge, jury, and executioners of popular justice, standing outside the rule of regular warfare. A captured German officer was told by a partisan, after the former protested his rough handling, “You want justice? You want fair play and decency? When you burn thousands of villages and bury children and old people alive in mass graves—then you don’t think of justice, do you?”<sup>53</sup> In some cases the partisans handed over German prisoners, Soviet helpers, and nationalist opponents to the proper state authorities, but more commonly they summarily killed their prisoners.<sup>54</sup> Thus partisans saw their

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<sup>49</sup> GARF, f. 6903, op. 20, d. 4, l. 541.

<sup>50</sup>RGASPI, f. 625, op. 1, d. 28, l. 39.

<sup>51</sup>Z. A. Bogatyr’, *V tylu vraga: Boeviiia deiatel’nost’ soedineniia partizanskikh otriadov pod komandovaniem geroi Sovetskogo soiuz A. N. Saburova* (Moscow: Sotsekgiz, 1963), 237; IIAN ORF, f. 2, raz. II, op. 6, d. 12, l. 15.

<sup>52</sup>USHMM, RG 22.005M, Reel 3 (RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 746, l. 220); Schulman, 100. See also Mordechai Altshuler, “Jewish Warfare and the Participation of Jews in Combat in the Soviet Union as Reflected in Soviet and Western Historiography” in Zvi Gitelman, ed. *Bitter Legacy: Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 151-166.

<sup>53</sup>Cited in Nahum Kohn and Howard Roiter, *A Voice From the Forest* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1980), 173.

<sup>54</sup>See for example, the documents cited in Armstrong et al., 734.

function, as one wrote in a letter, “to annihilate traitors to the rodina, spies, police, police units, county [administrations], German garrisons.”<sup>55</sup>

In taking up the mantle of defenders of the people, partisans claimed to be the saviors of humanity itself. Partisan commander A. F. Fedorov reinforced this point in his memoirs, stating “The partisan, it goes without saying, went into battle not to enrich or feed or clothe himself. He was a warrior in the people’s cause, a people’s avenger.”<sup>56</sup> Rank and file partisan Faye Schulman echoed these sentiments in her memoir: “A partisan soldier is not a killer. A partisan fights for peace and justice.”<sup>57</sup> Some went to the forest not only to defend their fellow citizens, but “to beat the hated enemy at every step for all of humanity” as one partisan told his sister. Another declared grimly in a letter to family and friends, “Here the people see the ‘liberators’, because this war decides the life not only of Soviet power, but even the life of all of humanity on the globe”<sup>58</sup>

Soviet wartime propaganda did not create these feelings. Rather, these sentiments stemmed primarily from the partisans direct experiences. Soviet propaganda was critical in shaping and articulating them, inspiring others to act, and putting them into a distinct Soviet context. The state’s aim was to convince partisans that in fighting for their families, home district and republic, that they were also fighting for the Soviet Union, which enabled all these other things to exist. In this manner, partisan and official interests merged, thus bolstering the legitimacy of the Soviet order.

### **Partisans and Relations with Occupied Populations**

Despite their self-identification as the “people’s avengers”, the partisans’ actual relationship with civilians was fraught with ambiguities. Partisans constantly referred to their bond with the people and were proud to report that local civilians would refer to the partisans as

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<sup>55</sup>RGASPI, f 625, op. 1, d. 28, l. 87.

<sup>56</sup>Fedorov, *Podpol’nyi obkom deistuet* 406. Translation in A. F. Fyodorov, *The Underground Committee Carries On*, translated by L. Stolitsky (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1952), 425.

<sup>57</sup>Schulman, 177.

<sup>58</sup>RGASPI, f. 625, op. 1, d. 28, ll. 37, 70.

'ours' (*nashi, svoi*).<sup>59</sup> Their credibility as "the people's avengers" was, however, complicated by the nature of their war and the consequences of their operations: the almost inevitable brutal retribution the enemy visited on civilians, and at times, the partisans' own treatment of the local population. As a result, civilians often were caught between the occupiers and the partisans. But as violent as the partisans were, the eventual convergence of partisan and civilian interests, propelled by German policies, enabled the partisans to acquire the civilian support they needed for their very existence.

Certainly the Soviet leadership showed little concern for the fate of its citizens in the occupied territories, despite occasional references to Stalin's supposed desire to protect them. Rather, newspaper stories heroized partisans who fought for the cause, all the while knowing that their actions would lead to the deaths of their own loved ones, including children.<sup>60</sup> Nor were partisans told via the press or through direct orders until the spring of 1943 that they should temper their operations to save civilian lives, when it became state policy to protect human and material resources.<sup>61</sup> In the eyes of officialdom, civilians essentially were objects to be used for propaganda and production.

In spite of Moscow's evident callousness, partisan attitudes towards safeguarding civilians varied significantly, indicating underlying tensions within the movement. Many partisans believed their military operations *always* took precedence over concern for civilian lives. Others argued that protecting civilians meant sacrificing the mobility and stealth so essential to their survival and military success. The most callous and cynical, like the Soviet leadership, regarded the populace in purely instrumental terms. They ignored or even encouraged German retribution against civilians, with the justification that the killing of the

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<sup>59</sup> IAN ORF, f. 2, raz. II, op. 6, d. 15, l. 9; d. 12, ll. 8, 28; RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 159, l. 22.

<sup>60</sup> *Izvestiia* 17 July 1942, p. 2; *Krasnaia zvezda*, 5 November 1942, p. 2; 8 July 1943, p. 3; *Pravda* 9 January 1942, p. 3; 26 August 1942, p. 2; 23 November 1942, p. 2.

<sup>61</sup> RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 1098, ll. 3-5, 14-18; TsKhDMO, f. 1, op. 53, d. 4, ll. 35-36; *Pravda*, 10 March 1943, p. 1; 1 May 1943, p. 1.

innocent would fuel popular outrage against the occupiers.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, one partisan, well aware of the propaganda value of German atrocities, asked Ponomarenko to send a film crew to the occupied territories to record, “the staggering picture: fire-ravaged remains, shootings, cremated corpses.”<sup>63</sup>

The primacy of military necessity and the political advantage gained by provoking and publicizing enemy atrocities was contested by an opposing vision of the partisan war, which saw it as part of a larger political, and perhaps even humanitarian struggle. Partisans realized that allowing civilians to receive the German’s wrath while they fled would mean the loss of considerable popular support.<sup>64</sup> To others, the saving of civilians became the movement’s *raison d’etre*. In response to his partisans who wanted to keep a large number of civilians out of the detachment, saying “we’re here to fight the Huns, and not to nurse children,” a commander replied, “Only bastards can talk like that. I am ashamed of you! I see you do not understand the duties of partisans. To protect people who are being persecuted by the fascists is our most important task. To save lives is to fight the enemy.”<sup>65</sup>

Relations with civilians were further complicated by the partisans’ supply requirements. As partisans lived off the land, their presence could have a devastating effect on communities which were already strained to the breaking point. Provisioning smaller sized units (less than 50 people) in the movement’s formative period posed relatively little challenge. However, as the size of units grew into the hundreds and thousands, procurement expeditions became an increasingly essential part of the daily routine.<sup>66</sup> Most simply requisitioned whatever they needed from the surrounding population, or as one veteran termed it, engaged in “organized looting.”<sup>67</sup> The extent to which peasants gave up their food voluntarily varied from place to

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<sup>62</sup>NA IIR ORF, f. 2, raz. 2, op. 6, d. 9, l. 21; G. M. Lin'kov: *Voina v tylu vruga*, (Moscow, 1951), 92. Matthew Cooper: *The Phantom War: The German Struggle Against the Soviet Partisans, 1941-1944*, (London: MacDonald & James, 1979), 8.

<sup>63</sup>RGASPI, f. 625, op. 1, d. 10, l. 37.

<sup>64</sup>RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 474, l. 19.

<sup>65</sup>Cited in Ainzstein, p. 355.

<sup>66</sup>RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 1084, l. 66.

<sup>67</sup>Leo Heiman, “Organized Looting: The Basis of Partisan Warfare” *Military Review* 45, no. 2 (February 1965): 62.



place. Some seemed to have given supplies willingly, often because they had close personal ties with the unit. In an effort to apply a veneer of legality to the process, procurement squads sometimes even gave the peasants a “receipt” for what they took, which they hoped would lend credibility to their claims that they were the legal representatives of Soviet power.<sup>68</sup>

Yet behind even “peaceful” negotiations, was the ever-present threat that the partisans might simply take what they wanted and kill anyone who stood in their way. Partisans appeared in villages, requesting goods, while advising peasants, “If you give to the Germans, it will go badly for you.”<sup>69</sup> Sometimes whole units entered villages firing their weapons and demanding supplies.<sup>70</sup> If intimidation tactics failed to work, then actual force might be employed.

Village elders, for example, who refused to aid the partisans might be labeled as collaborators and killed.<sup>71</sup> Such actions led some Army officers and Party officials to regard the partisans as nothing more than bandits and ruffians.<sup>72</sup> Indeed partisans tried to counteract these depictions by convincing local civilians, as F. G. Markov, a Belorussian commander reported, “that the partisans were not bandits, but the people’s avengers.” Some commanders even threatened to kill those, including officers, who disobeyed orders forbidding marauding.<sup>73</sup>

Although other resistance movements throughout Europe also had to convince local inhabitants that the guerrillas were not bandits and outlaws, partisan procurement operations—or partisan pillaging—had added meaning in the Soviet context. For many peasants and partisans alike, the overt or implied use of force in the name of the Soviet state, must have reminded them of the Civil War and collectivization, and revealed the underlying fissures still dividing the state and its agents from the rural population.

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<sup>68</sup>IIAN ORF, f. 2, raz. II, op. 4, d. 75, ll. 3-4; op. 6, d. 27, l. 16;

<sup>69</sup>IIAN ORF, f. 2, raz. II, op. 2, d. 25a, l. 115.

<sup>70</sup>RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 1108, ll. 6,7.

<sup>71</sup>NA IIR ORF, f. 2 raz. 2, op. 6, d. 27, l. 16; Heiman, 67.

<sup>72</sup>Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 74.

<sup>73</sup>RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 159, l. 22. See also d. 475, l. 69; IIAN ORF, f. 2, raz. II, op. 2, d. 25a, l. 50.

Partisans also implemented Stalin's "scorched earth" policy, destroying all agriculture and infrastructure that might be used by the enemy.<sup>74</sup> In 1942-1943, the partisans destroyed 10% of all grain and 20% of all meat produced in the occupied territories.<sup>75</sup> These actions further exacerbated tensions between them and the peasants, who themselves were barely managing to survive. They also reflected Moscow's continuing indifference towards the sufferings of its own citizens living under enemy occupation.

Only after the Red Army began liberate the occupied territories after the victory at Stalingrad were the partisans ordered to protect Soviet property and lives, but even here the main motive was to prevent their exploitation by the Germans.<sup>76</sup> That partisans and civilians could simultaneously be adversaries or friends reflected the ambiguities of Stalinist policy and discourse. It was the peasants who paid the human price of these "ambiguities."

Finally, the partisans' constant fear of spies and their murderous campaign against collaborators, potentially increased discord with local inhabitants. At the beginning of invasion, the partisans, many of whom were Party and Soviet activists, believed that they were amongst a hostile, or at best, ambivalent population. There was just cause for this perception. Many Soviet citizens, especially in the countryside, had not forgotten the violence of collectivization or the hardships imposed on them by the regime in the 1930s. People in the regions annexed in 1939 and 1940 also hated the Soviet regime as it brutally established its rule.

Although this anger generally diminished the farther east the Germans went, the invaders still found willing helpers.<sup>77</sup> In fact, in 1941-1942, ordinary citizens often gave the Germans such precise information about the names and whereabouts of the partisans (who, after all, were frequently their neighbors and relatives) that the Germans cleansed whole districts with relatively little effort.<sup>78</sup> Others who were more sympathetic to the Soviet state, or to the resistance in

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<sup>74</sup>RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 19, l. 34.

<sup>75</sup>Timothy Mulligan, *The Politics of Illusion and Empire : German Occupation Policy in the Soviet Union, 1942-1943*, ( New York: Praeger, 1988), 95-96.

<sup>76</sup>RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 1098, ll. 3-5, 14-18; TsKhDMO, f. 1, op. 53, d. 4, ll. 35-36; Moskoff, 207-219; *Pravda*, 10 March 1943, p. 1; 1 May 1943, p. 1.

<sup>77</sup>USHMM, RG. 22.005M, Reel 3 (RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 450, ll. 2, 7), IIAN ORF, f. 2, raz. II, op. 6, d. 12, l. 27;

<sup>78</sup>USHMM, 1996.A.169, Reel 33 (YVA M-37/459—TsDAHOU, f. 62, op. 1, d. 4, l. 18).

general, understandably and logically regarded the partisans as trouble-makers, and wished that they would leave their areas.<sup>79</sup>

For their part, partisans singled out collaborators, or those suspected of having collaborated. They were influenced, to some extent, by the political culture of the 1930s, in which the physical destruction of enemies was accepted practice, and by their own desire to annihilate real and perceived threats to their own survival. Moreover, they often lacked sufficient strength and skill to attack more substantial military targets, especially in the first year of the war.

The partisans' interpretation of who was a collaborator could be quite broad, stemming as it did from prewar Manichean definitions of friends and enemies. Peasants who continued to farm under occupation were sometimes viewed as collaborators (since they provided food for the enemy!), and some were even killed.<sup>80</sup> More typically, however, partisans attacked police, especially after the latter killed partisan families and peasants suspected of helping the partisans. "We then decided to conduct a repression, we shot Sal'nikov [a policeman] and several additional scoundrels, and this calmed [the peasants] somewhat," a partisan commissar recounted to a Soviet historical commission.<sup>81</sup>

Partisans were so determined to eliminate those suspected of helping the enemy that a German report covering the period from 11 December 1941 to 23 January 1942 calculated in the rear area of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Panzer Army (located in central Russia's Orel region), the partisans killed 33 German soldiers, 38 Russian policemen, and over 200 civil officials and civilians.<sup>82</sup> One commander boasted to newspaper reporters that by July 1942 he had had shot approximately 200 people in one district alone, including "all police, village elders and burgomeisters."

The executions stopped only because the partisans realized that they needed to distinguish between those who were forced to serve the Germans and those who did so under

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<sup>79</sup>TsMVS, f. 4/36.415, l. 5.

<sup>80</sup>RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 1072, l. 25; Fedorov, 69-70.

<sup>81</sup>IIAN ORF, f. 2, raz. II, op. 2, d. 25a, l. 23.

<sup>82</sup>Cited in Timothy Mulligan, "Reckoning the Cost of People's War: The German Experience in the Central USSR," *Russian History/Histoire Russe*, vol. 9, pt. 1 (1982), p. 33.

their own free will.<sup>83</sup> Not surprisingly, the Germans used these atrocities to support their claims that the partisans were not Russian (or Belorussian or Ukrainian) patriots, but mere bandits.<sup>84</sup> On the other hand, such actions could enhance the partisans' reputation as the people's avengers when their targets were actually guilty of killing Soviet citizens.

The killing of collaborators needs to be put in the context of a particularly brutal war. It must be remembered that it was the Germans and their indigenous allies who unleashed the waves of mass murder that swept through the occupied territories. From the war's very beginning, Germany employed the harshest policies against suspected partisans and their families. Wives were sometimes forced to retrieve their husbands from detachments, lest their own children be shot and their homes burned down. When caught, the men were executed.

More frequently the occupation troops simply destroyed villages suspected of aiding the partisans and slaughtered or drove away defenseless parents, children and spouses as part of collective reprisals. Police also targeted individual family members and friends.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, these killings took place amidst the large-scale and oft-witnessed Axis massacres of the Jews, which brutalized and terrorized their gentile neighbors.<sup>86</sup>

The partisans' attacks, ruthless though they were, were also rational in that they attempted to hinder the occupation authorities, discourage others from collaborating, and remind people of the continued existence of Soviet power. From the partisans' perspective, these killings were one of the few "positive" measures they could undertake since any actions against German troop formations early in the war were almost pointless and potentially suicidal. At the same time, they contributed to an escalating cycle of violence that helped give the Eastern Front its particular veneer of brutality, and caused so much needless suffering.

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<sup>83</sup>TsKhDMO, f. 1, op. 53, d. 252, l. 6.

<sup>84</sup>IIAN ORF, f. 2, raz. II, op. 6, d. 12, l. 25.

<sup>85</sup>USHMM, RG 22.005M, Reel 2 (RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 1074, ll. 46-47); Reel 3 (RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 713, 8), IIAN ORF, f. 2, raz. II, op. 3, d. 18, ll. 1-3; RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 1080, l. 24; *Vsenarodnoe partizanskoe dvizhenie v Belorussii v gody Belikoi Otechestvennoi voiny*, T. 1, 142-143, 146.

<sup>86</sup>Daniel Romanovsky, "Soviet Jews under Nazi Occupation in Northeastern Belarus and Western Russia" in Zvi Gitelman ed., *Bitter Legacy: Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 239-250; Weiner, 269-297.

The reprisals were more than just a savage but pragmatic response to a bleak military situation. Many partisans had clearly absorbed a Stalinist ethos, which saw external and internal enemies everywhere, who therefore had to be annihilated. Unlike the 1930s, however, these enemies were undeniably real. The Stalinist claim that the Soviet Union was constantly threatened was vindicated by the appearance of collaborators, many of whom were identified as “formerly repressed people.” Partisans, collaborators, and apolitical opportunists continued the behaviors of the Civil War and the 1930s by identifying and physically destroying their enemies, or anyone else who got in their way.

The killing of indigenous administrators and police, along with German officials, made sense in that they were accessible targets, but it also reflected a mentality that held that enemies must be annihilated regardless of costs and consequences. So too did the killing of those who were forced to serve the enemy: the black and white Stalinist world-view was blind to the subtle shades of gray that composed the portrait of wartime reality.

To the partisans, the internal and external enemies were visible and active, and the danger to the rodina clear and present, unlike “conspiracies” of the prewar period. The partisans’ use of Stalinist terms such as “spies”, “kulaks”, “sons of kulaks”, and “enemies of the people” not only gave these labels a new legitimacy, but also showed the continuing power of 1930s categories into the war period.<sup>87</sup> The repression of collaborators reinforced and legitimated the Stalinist vision of the physical obliteration of political opponents. In other words, it helped to confirm the validity of Stalinist values.

Yet for all the tensions and strife between partisans and civilians, the latter ultimately sided with the former in the war against the occupiers. The basic ideological and economic premise of Barbarossa, rooted in notions of racial supremacy and ruthless exploitation, meant that the occupation regime was inevitably cruel. Far from dismantling the hated collective farms,

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<sup>87</sup>See for example, RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 28, ll. 57, 159; d. 29, ll. 62-63; f. 625, op. 1, d. 28, l. 87; IIAN ORF, f. 2, raz. II, op. 4, d. 25, l. 12.

the occupiers transformed them into institutions of “full-blown serfdom” as corporal punishment and even arbitrary executions were used to enforce a rigid and brutal discipline.<sup>88</sup>

The *Wehrmacht* had planned to live off of the conquered lands, thereby consciously condemning hundreds of thousands of civilians to starvation.<sup>89</sup> Strict curfews, restricted travel, harsh labor discipline, and compulsory mobilization for work in Germany further alienated the population. The barbaric public treatment of Red Army POWs horrified civilians, all the more so as many of the witnesses’ loved ones were also Red Army soldiers, who might also be subjected to the same treatment. The genocide of the Jews shocked Gentiles, who even if they were complicit in and brutalized by these murderous actions, nevertheless realized that any authority that could openly commit such atrocities, would have little regard for other groups in the conquered population.<sup>90</sup>

The occupiers own counter-insurgency tactics were even more retributive and less selective than the partisans’ assassinations and procurement operations. The Germans and their allies annihilated whole villages, with their inhabitants, simply on the suspicion of having aided partisans. As bad as the partisans might be, it became increasingly clear to the populace that life under Nazis was impossible. Thus peasants found themselves caught between the brutal policies of the occupiers and the draconian expectations of the partisans. An observer caught in this nightmare world poignantly put it:

We live between the hammer and the anvil. Today we are forced to obey the partisans or they will kill us, tomorrow we will be killed by the Germans for obeying them. The nights belong to the partisans, but during the days we are in no-man’s land. Oh, I know the partisans can protect us now, but for how long?<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup>Karel Cornelis Berkhoff, “Hitler’s Clean Slate: Everyday Life in the Reichskommissariat Ukraine, 1941-1944” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto, 1998), 143.

<sup>89</sup>Horst Boog et al eds., *Germany and the Second World War*. Vol. 4, *The Attack on the Soviet Union* (London, 1996), 1141-1172; Omer Bartov, *Hitler’s Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 72-80.

<sup>90</sup>The following Ukrainian ditty reveals this realization: “The Germans have come-gut/For the Jews-kaput/For the Gypsies-tozhe/For the Ukrainians-pozhe”. Cited in M. I. Koval, “The Nazi Genocide of the Jews and the Ukrainian Population” in Zvi Gitelman ed., *Bitter Legacy: Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1997), 53.

<sup>91</sup>Cited in Martin Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust: Crimes of the Local Police in Belorussia and Ukraine, 1941-44* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 146.

Most Soviets eventually sided with the partisans since their killings tended to be limited and against specific targets, whereas the Germans were indiscriminate in their destruction. The fact that the partisans were indisputably their own, often neighbors and family, while the Germans were foreigners, made the former's oppression much more bearable than the latter's.

An underground Communist official in the Smolensk region, described how this situation was a political boon to the Soviet regime:

The same thing happened in Siberia during the Civil War years. The peasants only understood Kolchak when they had been through it themselves, when they had experience of this Kolchak. Here it is the same thing. And now when the fascists reveal themselves and what they represent to the peasants, when the peasants now have before them the ways of the Bolsheviks or the ways of the fascists, Stalin and Hitler, they say 'No, Stalin is right.' With whom could they compare Stalin and the Bolsheviks? With no one, because they did not know anyone else. And now everywhere this became known. . . Thus the peasants can, even if primitively, unmask the face of the fascists and immediately turn from them, and go over reliably and firmly to the side of Soviet power.<sup>92</sup>

Or as a joke circulating Ukraine as early as 1942 put it, "What was Stalin unable to achieve in twenty years [that] Hitler achieved within one year? That we started to like Soviet rule."<sup>93</sup> Such sentiments not only led to increased sympathy for the partisans, but also to an influx of recruits who joined out of a mixture of patriotism and the desire for revenge, and for some, because they believed there was nothing else for them to do, if they wished to live. It also reinforced the Stalinist worldview, lending credibility to its prewar warnings of the dangers of capitalist encirclement, the threat of internal enemies, and the need to crush those who opposed the regime.

This examination of the identities, motivations, and behaviors exhibited by the Soviet partisans illustrates the complexities of factors influencing the guerrilla movement, and the failure of German counter-insurgency forces to understand the enemy and therefore combat him successfully. German intelligence assumed the movement was fully under Party control, that it was instigated and led by Jews, and that aside from true believers, most partisans were literally

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<sup>92</sup>IIAN ORF, f. 2, raz. II, op. 2, d. 25a, l. 110.

<sup>93</sup>Cited in Berkhoff, pp. 327-328.

forced to serve. They did not recognize that the partisans fought for a variety of reasons, and that for many, the very presence of the Germans in their country, was reason enough to fight. And while some Germans did realize that brutal occupation policies were driving more and more civilians into the partisans' ranks, they lacked sufficient political strength to modify the inherent nature of the Nazi occupation.

Perhaps even more seriously for the Germans was the effects that the guerrilla war and occupation had on Soviet citizens' understanding and acceptance of the Stalinist regime. Many, if not most, partisans fought for reasons other than the defense of Communism. However, the experience of the war confirmed the efficacy of Stalinist values and methods. The Stalinist world view of constant threat from external and internal enemies was realized for both partisans and civilians in the occupied territories. So was the necessity of physically exterminating one's enemies. By emphasizing propaganda themes that had much meaning for the partisans, most notably the focus on local and ethnonational patriotism, and the desire for revenge, the government fostered a commonality of interests between itself and its citizens, which in turn led to a greater popular identification and bonding with the regime. Far from leading to its collapse, as many German and other foreign observers expected, the experience of the German invasion and the subsequent guerrilla war actually strengthened the Soviet state politically.

### **Postscript: The Soviet Partisan Experience and the Current Situation in Iraq**

The foregoing discussion allows for some important insights regarding the current situation in Iraq, despite its distance from the research in this paper. The Coalition's aims in its occupation are the complete opposite of those of the German occupation of the Soviet Union. The Nazis were engaged in a genocidal campaign against the Soviet people while the Coalition intends to rebuild a sovereign Iraq based on principles of human rights and liberal democracy. However, the Coalition could find itself making many of the same mistakes the Germans made, in kind, if not in degree leading to the unintended alienation of many Iraqis from the occupying powers and from the new Iraqi government. The danger is not that the Coalition would apply the



same brutal policies; rather it is that in fighting an Iraqi counter-insurgency, even unintentional actions may contribute to Iraqi perceptions that the Coalition is operating against Iraqi interests.

There seems to be assumption among many policymakers that the insurgents are composed primarily of Baathists, Jihadists, and some disgruntled Iraqis, primarily Sunnis' who feel dispossessed by the new powers in Baghdad. Clearly there is much truth in this assessment; however it may also be an oversimplification. In the Soviet case, although many partisans detested (or were unwilling to die for) the Stalinist regime, they were willing to fight—and die—for their ethnonational and Soviet motherlands, the protection of their hometowns, and for revenge. The Coalition should not underestimate the power of Iraqi nationalism, and how Iraqis might feel about the United States as an invader, even if they hated Saddam or the Baathist state.

These feelings might be intensified if they believe that the occupying forces have in some way insulted or harmed them personally. The Coalition must understand that some of the insurgents might be fighting for legitimate patriotic reasons, and should not be labeled as “dead-enders” or traitors. To lump these Iraqis in with discarded Baathists and fanatical Jihadists would only add to the level of opposition, and inhibit the Coalition from finding a political solution to this aspect of Iraqi resistance. Indeed, from the perspective of some patriotic Iraqis, even those who rejoiced at Saddam's downfall, any Iraqi who subsequently aids the Coalition could also be arguably viewed as a collaborator who has betrayed his motherland.

It is also worth noting that the war did bring to reality Saddam's claims that the United States was planning an invasion of Iraq. Furthermore, each Islamic holy site damaged in the war or in the period of Coalition occupation, whether or not the Coalition was responsible for that damage, lends credence to the beliefs of many Iraqis and extremist Muslims that the Coalition is engaged in a crusade against Islam itself. The more opportunity these ideas have a chance to take hold among ordinary Iraqis, the greater danger that the positions of the Baathists, radical Muslims, or another anti-Coalition group will gain popular legitimacy and converge with those of the general population.

In this light, the Coalition should be aware that Iraqi understandings of the prior regime, the war, the occupation, and the possible types of future government are very fluid. What may have seemed oppressive and abhorrent before the war, might be seen differently in the context of the current situation. The Coalition must do everything it can to prevent Iraqis from seeing the past government in a favorable light (especially as long as both Saddam and cadres from the Baath party still exist), and ensure that its actions, even inadvertently, do not confirm oppositional beliefs about the Coalition's presence in Iraq. It is especially critical to prevent the creation of a commonality of interests between ordinary Iraqis and the more militant foreign and indigenous Jihadists. Again, this requires much sensitivity from policymakers at home and administrators and soldiers on the ground in understanding multiple ways Iraqis identify themselves, define patriotism, and respond to the occupation. Failure to do so could easily lead to full-fledged guerrilla war, the material, political and human costs of which would be very extensive.