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Hist 410

Ivan's War Analysis

In *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945*, Catherine Merridale recounted the way that soldiers in the Red Army experienced the Second World War and their relationship with the Soviet government. To gather information, she read a great number of books and other media, searched through archives, and most importantly conducted around two hundred interviews with war veterans. Merridale described the experience of the soldiers as one of brutality and hardship, if a soldier managed to survive. She argued that the Stalinist system was a hindrance on the soldiers and took cruel measures to ensure discipline.

Merridale's main purpose and point was to unravel the official myths of the Soviet soldier. In this myth, the soldier is described as an “ideal everyman” who has all positive qualities such as being healthy, strong, selfless, and being unafraid of death (Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945, 6*). All errors in judgment by Stalin and the high command were glossed over and ignored, and the crimes committed by the Red Army in Germany never talked about. Merridale wanted to discuss the “true war stories” such as the retreats and mistakes in 1941 and the “revenge” taken upon the German people as soldiers crossed into Germany in 1944 (Merridale, *Ivan's War,* 7). To do this, she took the information from her readings and interviews and took the story of the war from the viewpoints of the soldiers involved. She gave a background of Soviet Russia before the war, describing how the entire country shared in the delusion that there would be a quick and easy offensive victory, even to the point where all Soviet military planning was of an offensive nature. She then describes the mobilization and training of the military in 1939 and the horrible conditions and how politics and the energy spent on politically educating soldiers detracted from their training and effectiveness as a fighting force. The chapters about the war itself go into detail about the battles that were fought and the soldiers who fought them, discussing their grievances with the treatment by the government of them and later their families. The book concludes with two chapters. One is on the end of the war and the treatment the

soldiers received as they returned home to their civilian lives and another is on the changing notions of the idea of the motherland and of patriotism during the war as well as how the importance of ideology changed.

There are many different myths surrounding the soldiers of the Red Army. As was mentioned, there is the Soviet state's myth about the ideal everyman that ignores the mistakes of Stalin and the cruelty of the Red Army soldiers in Germany. The strength of this official myth was such that the soldiers Merridale interviewed had a hard time distinguishing their actual memories from the ones the state had built up over the years. The soldiers that survived the war and managed to not get arrested once they returned home had much to gain by supporting this myth and not talking about their real experiences, becoming supporters of the regime.

There was also the Nazi myth. In propaganda from Goebbels, the Red Army was a “red horde” that threatened Europe and needed to be exterminated. Nazi officers took more scientific notes based on their own combat experiences combined with interviews with their own men and interrogating prisoners. Even they and their spies did not entirely avoid racial ideology though, talking about how the two largest groups in the Red Army (Great Russians and Ukrainians) had strains of German blood from the Middle Ages as well as Mongol heritage and how this explained their actions. This racially based intelligence was then used by the US Army after WWII to give a general description of the Russian soldier. The Russian soldier was considered to be a “semi-Asiatic” who acted upon instinct, was primitive in behavior, and was unable to be trusted(Merridale, *Ivan's War, 13).*

The life of a soldier in the Red Army, as described by Merridale, was one of brutality and hardship. Some volunteered for military service, as it could be a potential route for upward mobility if they survived, and some were persuaded by propaganda about defending the motherland or for a sense of adventure. These illusions would be dispelled once they got to training camp. There was a housing crisis in 1939, as the number of soldiers in the army had increased from 885,000 to 1,300,000, and not even officers received their allotted amount of space. One officer even remarked “It would be better for me to kill myself than to go on living in this hole” (Merridale, *Ivan's War*, 59). Many recruits slept on straw. Material goods were in eternal short supply, and the black market thrived. Food was scarce and of low quality, even causing widespread food poisoning. To

help with the food issue, the soldiers were tasked with helping on the collective farms and even growing food on the army's land (Merridale, *Ivan's War*, 69). Time spent on farming and on political education cut in greatly into actual combat training, leaving little time to master important combat skills such as shooting their rifles. By 1942, training had become expedited, lasting about three months with twelve hours a day of training and self preparation for skills soldiers weren't taught during their regular training.

Human life was not held at high value by the Soviet high command. In the retreat of the Red Army because of the German advance, men were used as cannon fodder slow the Germans down. They generally had nothing but their rifles and their bare hands, and often were out of ammunition and therefore fought with bayonets. Desertion rates were high among all sections of the army. Many just wanted to go home to their families and did not see the point of dying for what they saw as a hopeless cause, as at this point the Germans were undefeated. Deserters and self-mutilators were shot, and criminals from the labor camps eventually were sent to *shtraf,* or penal battalions. These units were used for dangerous tasks such as defusing mines, storming German defenses, and locating hidden foxholes. Ivan Gorin, a survivor of a penal battalion, commented “We thought it would be better than a prison camp. We didn't realize at the time that it was just a death sentence” (Merridale, *Ivan's War*, 157).

Soldiers found various methods of coping with the hardships of war. First, they developed a sense of brotherhood with their fellow soldiers. While casualties were high and regiments never full, soldiers became incredibly close to each other as they were the only ones who understood each other. Most petitioned to be returned to their old units after being in the hospital. Tank crews especially had strong bonds, spending all their time together and ensuring their tank was in working order developed friendships to the point that “The friends were more like brothers by the time he [Ivan Gusev, a tank crewman] wrote” (Merridale, *Ivan's War*, 215). The gap between officers and soldiers decreased, as the levels of experience between them were not much different. There were few enough soldiers that officers who put the effort in could become friendly with the men, with some eating the same food their men did. Second, since they had little control over most of their lives as soldiers, they developed a system of cosmology for predicting the events of the chaotic world around

them. Superstitions based on sex, swearing, and the weather attempted to explain the randomness of their world. Third, even though communism is an ideology that promotes atheism, many soldiers wore crosses and crossed themselves before battle. These acts were less of acts of faith and more of superstitious totems used in the hope of preventing death. Finally, the soldiers used song to boost their morale. These songs were maudlin rather than tragic, and were drawn from various sources such as old patriotic ballads, songs put out by Stalin's artists, and songs about women based on songs like “The Blue Scarf” and “Wait for Me.” Songs boosted morale greatly, with a former partisan commenting “You can't have a war without songs” (Merridale, *Ivan's War*, 195).

The soldiers would prove themselves just as capable of committing war crimes as the Germans did when they were on the offensive, but not to the same scale or for the same reasons. As they crossed over into Germany, they finally had an outlet for all their frustrations and their grief in the German people, especially the women. Mass rapes were common, and when groups of refugees were captured the soldiers would be directed by the officers so “...every soldier without exception took part” (Merridale, *Ivan's War*, 309). Some towns were burned and destroyed without even a thought to looting for valuable supplies, but eventually Soviet leaders realized the waste this caused and heavy looting began. Women were found with objects such as telephone receivers shoved up their vaginas, the violence explained under the pretext that they might be spies. Soviet soldiers drank heavily to numb their feelings, which allowed them to commit these acts of violence, as an anonymous German diary noted “They had to goad themselves on to such brazen acts, had to drown their inhibitions” (Merridale, *Ivan's War*, 313).

The Stalinist system was a great detriment to the training and overall effectiveness of the Red Army. In the training camps, valuable time was spent on ensuring the soldiers were being trained in proper ideology. In each day, they would attend at least one class on politics. The *politruks* were responsible for handing both denunciations and fostering mutual trust, and this hypocrisy greatly diminished group spirit until 1942, when the authority of the *politruks* was scaled back. The continued supply problems caused by the focus on heavy industry led to absolute wreck of 1941, as new troops could not be brought to the front because of a lack of transportation vehicles and the troops at the front could not have necessary supplies, which themselves were

in short supply because of the focus on heavy industry, delivered. Stalin's appointment of cronies to positions of importance meant that some very bad military decisions were made. For example, Lev Mekhlis was put in charge of the defense of Kerch. His focus on ideology meant that to him it was a struggle of morale and attack, and therefore there was not much preparation for defense. He believed that fortified trenches sapped aggression, so none were built and 176,000 men were killed in twelve days of fighting (Merridale, *Ivan's War*, 148). Psychological problems, other than mental disorders such as schizophrenia, were basically presumed not to exist. The symptoms of things like post traumatic stress disorder were viewed as signs of weakness and personal failing. While partially the result of personnel without effective training and insufficient resources, “no allowance was made [in Stalinist medical psychology] for hysteria” (Merridale, *Ivan's War,* 269).

Desertion was a huge problem, and the government took cruel steps to combat it. In June 1941, the army was granted the power to punish deserters, with three man tribunals set up that effectively had the power to order the death sentence without appeal. Officers coerced their men through fear because they themselves were threatened with cruel punishment. Surrender and retreat were counted as desertion, and any officer who tried to desert could be shot on the spot by a superior, with reluctance to lead able to count as desertion. Families of deserters were to become liable for arrest, and anyone whose corpse was missing was counted as a deserter.

As the war went on and the soldiers heard about the hardship their families experienced back home, they started to feel betrayed by the government. They had hoped at minimum that their families would be cared for in their absence, which was not happening. The government tried to respond to the issue, but they did not have the resources to fix the issues of poverty and homelessness in a timely manner. Decorated soldiers were supposed to get extra rewards for their families, and there was much outrage when they found out the promise was broken.

Soldiers were eternally treated with suspicion, especially as the war came to a close. Close friendships were viewed as conspiracies waiting to happen. The NKVD monitored conversations for the entire war and soldiers who complained about or insulted the system and/or Stalin were arrested. As the soldiers crossed over

into Axis territories, they were exposed to the capitalist system for the first time in their lives. Stalin was worried that they might bring their experiences back with them, and many were sent to labor camps after the war ended so they would not spread their stories. After the war, many officers sent in lists of ideas for change within society based on their experiences of viewing a dictatorship from the outside, but the government ignored them all.

The experience of the soldiers in the Red Army is described as generally short-lived and hard. The Stalinist system decreased the effectiveness of the Red Army and was iron fisted in its approach to discipline. It speaks to the power of Soviet propaganda and myth building skill that veterans even today have a hard time separating their own experiences with the official myth.