

Stalin's War

To Soviet citizens, the war against Germany was run by Stalin. He was able to overcome German strength through cunning plans. Incompetence was fully due to certain officers, who were removed by Stalin. This is of course inaccurate. Stalin attempted to play the role of military commander with little success. His pride and need to show strength overcame logic, leading to unnecessary defeats. Many of the mistakes he made seem irrational. Stalin's primary goal was to serve as the absolute ruler of the Soviet Union. Every other concern was second to this.

Stalin preferred to take credit for military successes, rather than give credit to the commanders responsible. This is a rational decision for a dictator, as it gives the populace confidence in their leader. His response to failures is much harder to understand. Rather than demoting leaders back to positions they were effective in, he removes them from the military. This removal ranges from discharge to execution, depending on the individual. When engaged in a war which could destroy the nation, why would he do this? For Stalin, the most important aspect of a commander is their loyalty. Their competence comes second, until they fail in battle. By cycling through commanders, Stalin is guaranteed loyalty, and will eventually find effective leadership. Part of this reasoning is Stalin's apparent belief that military planning is quite simple.

Prior to the war, worries of invasion were prevalent. Western powers had sent assistance to the Whites during the civil war, and Great Britain cut off diplomatic ties for a period. Despite these fears, Stalin purged the officer corps of the nation. Trials were conducted, during which officers were tortured for false confessions (29). These confessions would reveal others as part of a spy ring, who would then be tortured to reveal more conspirators. The majority of the nation's military leaders were executed, leaving men without experience to take control of the armed forces. While this seems insane at the surface, there is a clear logic. The executions allowed for less loyal leaders to be removed and replaced with those who were blindly loyal to Stalin. By the time of these purges, Stalin believed that the west would be too preoccupied with Hitler to risk an attack, while Hitler would be too fearful of creating enemies on both sides of his nation. This gave an illusion of time for the officers to become better experienced.

During the early parts of the war, Stalin overrules commanders such as Zhukov regularly. Following the defense of Moscow, Zhukov advocates for a continued defense. Stalin wants a show of power however, and demands a counter-offensive (120). Despite Zhukov's protests, the counter-offensive commences. The result is Moscow being once again surrounded. The position of political commissar returns early in the war. These officers must sign off on orders from commanders, despite being untrained in military matters. Just as significantly, these commissars also determine if a commander is properly following orders from Moscow. Should they decide the commander is being insubordinate, they may execute them. These actions lead the Soviet Union to the brink of collapse.

With defeat seemingly inevitable, Stalin begins to change his attitude. He listens to Zhukov and other high ranking generals. Rather than argue with their plans, he consults with frontline officers to see if they agree. While still having the final say, Stalin places his trust in the commanders. This change in the upper ranks is reflected in the lower ranks with the demotion of political commissars (187). While still present, they have no power over the commanders. The military is allowed to function on its own, and Soviet fortunes turn.

This turn comes after the defense of Stalingrad. Against all expectations, the Soviets hold the town for two months, giving enough time to prepare a counter-offensive. This plan comes about due to Stalin's insistence that Zhukov find a way to defend the city (166). Believing the tide has already turned, Stalin once again insists upon a counter-offensive. Just as before, Zhukov protests the plan and Stalin once again ignores him. Once again, the attack is a failure. This serves as the last instance where Stalin's overconfidence serves as a major roadblock.

With the military given independence, the army works towards Berlin, eventually capturing the city. The Soviet Union is saved, with much greater influence than before the war. Though the Cold War begins, Stalin moves to take full control once again. The United States worries Stalin, with much of the worry coming from the nuclear bombs which the Soviet Union is still developing (312). To ensure all military credit goes to Stalin, Zhukov is moved to a remote, unimportant post (305). Other leaders find themselves discharged or executed. Though not as far reaching as the purge prior to World War II, many of the greatest generals are reduced to nothing, with their accomplishments attributed to Stalin.

Stalin shows himself to prioritize power and position over the health of the nation. Prior to the war, Stalin states “I shall ruthlessly sacrifice 49 per cent, if by doing so I can save the 51 per cent, that is, save the revolution” (16). While his ruthlessness is clear, important also is his language. The statement is not that any leader should be willing to sacrifice so much, but that he specifically will. The existence of the nation is only important in that it is something to control. Stalin aims to be the absolute ruler of the Soviet Union, whether it be a paradise or a wasteland. When this is considered, Stalin’s actions make complete sense.

Despite early failures, to be the mastermind of the counter-offensive which saves the nation is more important than that the nation be protected. Stalin always desires to push the advantage following important defenses, despite the doubts of his generals. Were he to prove right in these situations, he would appear more intelligent than the military men. By being wrong, he shows a lack of understanding, but the reward is too tantalizing to ignore. Having a military full of loyalists negates the possibility of a coup. Though the defense of the Soviet Union almost certainly could have been accomplished with fewer deaths, the major concern for Stalin of the early years of the war was his role as the Soviet Union’s hero.

This reveals the Soviet struggle as largely unnecessary. Many decisions made by Stalin were egotistical. His hopes of appearing the most intelligent and being the most powerful nearly doomed the nation. Millions of Russian soldiers and citizens died due to this overconfidence. While high casualties would be expected regardless of leadership, simply due to the strength of the German army, many could have been saved from the cruelty of occupation. When viewing the war as Stalin’s personal war, much of the

suffering seems pointless. Though Stalin was an effective leader, and helped pull the Soviet Union back from the brink of collapse, he was instrumental in bringing it so close to failure. Had Stalin's priorities been the survival of the nation and the well being of its people, a great deal of suffering could have been avoided.

When the tides turn and the nation seems lost, Stalin prioritizes having a nation to rule over his ego. Seeing the success of this, the military is allowed to operate largely autonomously in the closing years of the war. This allows Stalin to take credit for the reversal, though those in his inner circle know otherwise. When the war has ended, those who know the truth are diminished in importance, leaving Stalin as the savior of the Soviet people.

Stalin's failures created an almost unstoppable foe, which was only defeated when he left military matters to those who understood them. Despite this, Stalin was looked back upon as a hero of the Soviet people. He was viewed as a great strategist and a leader who motivated his people to work in impossible conditions. Though he acted primarily out of self interest, Stalin created a legacy for some time as a hero of his nation. The Soviet Union won its war of survival, and Stalin won his absolute control.