

## Introduction

# *World War II and the Remaking of the Soviet Union*

No foreigner needs to spend too much time in Russia to discover how central the war remains to how Russians see themselves even in the early twenty-first century. Most long-term visitors to Russia (whether Soviet or post-Soviet) will have been lectured at some stage on the failure of the Western allies to open a second front before 1944. Hedrick Smith, the highly informative *New York Times* correspondent in Moscow in the mid-1970s, caught the enormous outpouring of war commemoration on the thirtieth anniversary of victory: in his acclaimed *The Russians* he subtitled one of the chapters “World War II was only yesterday.” At the same time there were some war-related topics on which Russians were less eager to hold forth: the volte-face in Soviet foreign policy that made Stalin an ally of Hitler between August 1939 and June 1941, the actions of the Soviet political police in Poland and the Baltic states, the extent of wartime cooperation between the USSR and the West (and the extent of Western aid through Lend-Lease).

Opinion polls of the post-Soviet era have consistently placed the Great Patriotic War at the top of Russians’ list of defining historical moments. The October Revolution, by contrast, is now almost an irrelevance. This is not because Russians have abnormally short memories. Rather, it is because the prewar era is too complex and divisive to serve the purpose of historical myth. It is now fast becoming a cliché of Russian textbooks and public discourse to refer to the 1930s as a “complex and tragic era,” as if it is futile even to attempt to establish human agency in the deaths of millions of people. Russia has never had a true moral reckoning with the catastrophes of collectivization and terror, and by now there are reasons to doubt that it ever will.

Another reason why the war scores so highly in the popular consciousness is that its other main rival as a historical milestone, the collapse of the Soviet Union, is not – put it mildly – seen as an unmixed blessing. Even Russians with no



FIGURE 1.1 Stalingrad, summer 1945.

Source: © Mark Redkin / PhotoSoyuz.

great love of one-party socialism are likely to abhor the way in which the removal of Communist dictatorship led directly to the neglect of Russia's national interests and the florescence of crony capitalism.

But the prominence of the war in contemporary Russia is not due primarily to the lack of suitable alternative historical markers. It matters in absolute, not relative, terms. It cost the Soviet Union almost 30 million people: somewhere between 24 and 27 million premature deaths and the best part of 3 million other Soviet citizens who were displaced by the war and never returned to the USSR. If further account is taken of the wartime birth deficit, losses may run as high as 35 million. The Soviet population figure at the start of the war – 200 million – was not reached again until 1956.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the previously most developed parts of the country lay in ruins. Capital losses amounted to about 30 percent of national wealth. War damage had destroyed or disabled close to 32,000 industrial enterprises, 65,000 kilometers of railway, and housing for 25 million people. Infrastructure had all but collapsed. At the end of war, 90 percent of Moscow's central heating and around half of water and sewage systems were out of action, while 80 percent of roofs required urgent repairs. Despite the Soviet victory, much of the population endured unimaginable hardship. Household consumption fell from 74 percent of

national income in 1940 to 66 percent of a significantly reduced national income in 1945. In 1945, the average peasant on a collective farm received 190 grams of grain and 70 grams of potatoes for a day's work. In 1946–7, acute postwar scarcity, compounded by harvest failure and the government's commitment to industrial reconstruction, brought what turned out to be the last Soviet famine, whose death toll was at least 1 million and possibly a good deal higher.<sup>2</sup>

The war brought not only death, devastation and hunger but mass displacement and upheaval. During the war, the enemy occupied territory with a prewar population of 85 million (or 45 percent of the total Soviet population). Millions of people were displaced by the German advance. Around 15 million more were moved to the rear in 1941–2; by the end of 1942, more than half of workers and employees in Kazakhstan, one of the principal destinations, were evacuees. An industrial evacuation effort of unprecedented scale and speed was launched within days of the German invasion. In the critical early months of the war hundreds of large factories were relocated – the greatest proportion to the Urals, others to the Volga region, Western Siberia, Eastern Siberia, and Central Asia. Without the evacuated facilities, which included some of the crown jewels of the Soviet defense sector, the war effort would have been all but doomed. Two-thirds of prewar ammunition production, for example, had taken place on territory that would be occupied or wrecked by the enemy. The evacuation of Leningrad's all-important Kirov tank factory had to be completed in late 1941 by air after the city had been isolated by German forces.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of the war 11.4 million men in the armed forces had to find their way home somehow. Demobilization was a gradual process, but the vast numbers placed immense strain on Soviet society and infrastructure: about 3.5 million men had returned to civilian life by September 1945, 8.5 million by 1948. And then there were the captured enemy combatants. According to the Soviet General Staff, the Soviet Army took 4,377,300 prisoners between 22 June 1941 and 8 May 1945; at the end of June 1945, the Ministry of Internal Affairs gave a figure of 2 million prisoners taken in 1945 alone. Nearly 700,000 Germans from the combat zone were sent home immediately at the end of the war, as were 65,000 Japanese. Thereafter, repatriation would be a slow process that ended only in spring 1950. German prisoners convicted of specific crimes were allowed home only in 1956.<sup>4</sup>

There is, then, no shortage of ways in which the war may be seen to have cast a “shadow” over the later Soviet era. This makes it all the more surprising how little use existing histories of the Soviet Union have for it. The foundational decades of Soviet history are usually seen as the 1920s and (especially) the 1930s. Over the last half-century, and especially since the opening of the archives in the late 1980s, scholars have produced a vast quantity of interesting dissertations, books, and articles on the Soviet “system” as it came to be in the first ten or fifteen

years of Stalin's rule. The war is usually recognized as traumatic and important, but ultimately is granted the status of a cataclysmic interlude between two phases of Stalinism: the turbulent and bloody era of the 1930s and the deep freeze of the late 1940s (which would soon, under Stalin's successors, turn to thaw).

Nonmilitary historians do not quite know what to do with the war.<sup>5</sup> It can – indeed must – be mentioned, but its impact on the paradigms and agendas of Soviet history has so far been vastly more limited than its human and material cost might seem to warrant. Russian historians – and Western specialists – have produced an enormous amount of writing on military aspects of the conflict of 1941–5, but this impressive body of work has mostly failed to connect with the preoccupations of those who study Soviet history over a longer range.

The design of this three-volume Blackwell history of Russia forces us to take the war seriously. Periodization is not an empty formality but rather an intellectual choice with far-reaching consequences. The chronological boundaries of this volume invite consideration of the war as a conditioning factor for later Soviet and Russian history – all the way to the early twenty-first century present. To my knowledge, there is no other book that examines exactly the period from 1941 to the end of the century and beyond. Most authors zero their clock in 1917, 1945 or 1953, while 1991 has tended up to now to mark the watershed between history and political science. To start an account with the Nazi invasion rather than the Soviet triumph makes it possible to see the war not just as a catastrophe that had to be withstood and overcome but rather as a starting point for much that followed.

The legacy of the war was not only destructive. It also brought the Soviet regime new opportunities. Internally, its hand was strengthened by the growth of Soviet patriotism and the consolidation of a loyal new elite. Internationally, it now had a large part of Europe (and in due course of the entire world) directly in its sights. The war also had ideological value: it could also be interpreted by the regime and its committed servants as the delayed culmination of the revolution, a “Bolshevik Armageddon.” It was a self-destructive conflict among the main parties to world capitalism that picked up where 1918 had left off. It was the moment that the home of world Communism had to fight off the renewed threat to its existence of which the Soviet leadership had been warning its population since the late 1920s. The war finally sorted out the enemies from the friends of Soviet power, the truly committed from the impostors and opportunists. In this life-or-death struggle, “enemies of the people” (who had needed violent unmasking in the 1930s) were exposed as such: as traitors, cowards, collaborators. The Soviet body politic was now fully purged and could look to the future with confidence.<sup>6</sup>

The war was quite literally an ordeal by fire for the new generation of committed Stalinists who had got their career breaks in the 1930s. The Soviet political

system and its armed forces had to learn quickly on the job. The Red Army in particular had started from a low base. In the late 1930s Stalin had launched a bloody purge of his military elite. The first major action seen by the army since then had been a disaster: in the Winter War of 1939–40, the Finns had successfully defended their independence in the face of a Soviet assault, inflicting heavy casualties on their enormous adversary. Over the three and a half months of the conflict, nearly 127,000 Soviet soldiers were killed or lost in action, which was more than 90 percent of all the combat losses sustained by the Soviet armed forces since 1922. The early months of the conflict with Nazi Germany were more disastrous still. By the start of the rearguard defense of Moscow in early December 1941, the Soviet armed forces had lost almost 3 million men killed or captured and over a million more sick and wounded.<sup>7</sup> Catastrophic failures of command and preparation were compounded by collapsing morale: it is hard otherwise to explain how 2 million or more Soviet soldiers were taken prisoner in the late summer and autumn of 1941. Discipline was instilled at gunpoint: in the first three months of the war alone, the political police (NKVD) shot 10,000 Soviet soldiers for desertion, a third of them in front of their units.<sup>8</sup>

Disaster, however, brought a form of rebirth. The Red Army of 1941 perished in the first months of the war not just physically but also operationally. From mid-1942 onwards, the Party authorities ceded more authority and autonomy to frontline officers. The men brought in to replace their dead comrades managed to learn fast, and the poorly led army of 1941 became a more effective fighting force. Human endeavor and know-how was backed up by technology. The Soviet mode of war became faster moving as production of tanks and mobile artillery increased. Transport and communications also helped to boost military coordination: more than half a million American jeeps and trucks were combined with vastly improved radio communications.<sup>9</sup>

In the spring of 1943, with victory at Stalingrad, the momentum of the conflict swung to the Soviet side, and by the end of that year the Soviet leadership could begin to reflect on the likely shape of the postwar European order. In 1945, as the Red Army rushed toward Berlin, it might be thought that the Great Patriotic War had succeeded where the civil war had failed: it had delivered on Lenin's promise that socialism would spread west. It also, in due course, appeared to have spread revolution east: from mid-1946 onward China was convulsed by a civil war between nationalists and Communists.

But this apparently favorable geographical conjuncture did not make the Soviet leadership rest easy. Stalin might have gained a more comfortable buffer zone in eastern and central Europe, but he soon found himself drawn into competition with a capitalist adversary, the United States of America, that had not previously been one of the Bolsheviks' principal hate figures. The victory of 1945 had not fully assuaged Soviet feelings of weakness, vulnerability and encirclement

by hostile powers. Stalin and his comrades had hardly forgotten how poorly the Soviet Union – a thoroughly militarized society by 1941 – had been prepared for the German assault.

Besides failing to remove external sources of unease, the war had also created or exacerbated internal divisions in Soviet society. The USSR now contained tens of millions of people who had experienced German occupation. About 1 million Soviet soldiers ended up fighting against the USSR, whether voluntarily or under duress.<sup>10</sup> The Soviet regime was expert at making enemies of its own people. During the war, POWs were classified as traitors by Soviet officialdom; their families might face reprisals. After the war, more than 5 million Soviet citizens (POWs or forced laborers) were repatriated to the USSR, where they immediately came under suspicion; hundreds of thousands of them spent time in the camps.

The problem of potentially disloyal elements in the Soviet population had a large ethnic dimension. In Ukraine and Belorussia, around 300,000 people had served in the local police of the occupation forces by 1943.<sup>11</sup> Levels of collaboration would surely have been much greater if the Germans had not done so much to antagonize the population of the occupied territories. Although the experience of Nazi overlordship in the western regions had for many people not been much preferable to Stalinist rule, these parts of the Soviet Union had strong reasons – national, ethnic, religious, political – to resent the reimposition of Stalinist controls. Soviet measures against the populations perceived to have committed collective treason – mass deportation – hardly provided a long-term solution.

The war represented the apotheosis of the social mobilization for which Soviet ideology was striving, yet this too had disturbing implications for Stalin's rule. Besides the possibility of a Bonapartist threat from the military High Command, the postwar regime faced the challenge of bringing a vast army – close to 12 million men at the moment of victory in Europe – under control. Loyal servants of the Soviet cause during the war might not prove so loyal or committed when returning to civilian life, or when government austerity could no longer be justified by the fact of a life-and-death struggle. The problem was compounded by the rapid wartime growth in Party membership. Frontline soldiers had been admitted to the Party in their hundreds of thousands. While this mass constituency was in principle a good thing, it also carried the danger that the purpose and ideological purity of the Party would be compromised. Had the Party taken over Soviet society, or vice versa?

Even government and administrative elites were a source of concern for an ageing dictator. After the disastrous early months, the Soviet political system had functioned remarkably effectively in wartime. Its successes, however, had been bought at the cost of blurring the boundaries between the military, the political

system, and economic administration. The war had forced the regime to give administrators and managers more leeway, and to punish them less arbitrarily, than in the preceding era of Great Terror. How was Stalin to make sure that they did not feel too comfortable in their positions and that the administrative system did not end up subverting his political will?

Even at the moment of victory, then, there were reasons for Stalin to feel “embattled.”<sup>12</sup> Later sections of this book – especially Chapter 2 – will explain how he set about maintaining his kind of order: by extending the military discipline and austerity of the war years into the late 1940s, and by periodically striking fear into his loyal servants. But Stalin’s rule also asserted itself in less tangible ways – notably by controlling the memory of the war itself.

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### The War Remembered

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The process began even before the war ended. Especially after victory at Stalingrad, the personality cult fostered by Stalin entered a new, more intense, phase. From the beginning, the war had caused Stalin to take on a more public role. In the summer of 1941 he quickly outgrew his notional Party post, becoming Supreme Commander almost immediately after the Nazi invasion. With an engaging radio address two weeks after the start of the war, and then with his last-minute decision in October 1941 not to join much of his government in evacuation, he allied himself with popular patriotism to an extent inconceivable in the 1930s. Even if Stalin’s military command was largely a disaster until he started paying attention to his generals in 1942, his symbolic authority took on a new martial coloring.<sup>13</sup>

After 1945 Stalin remained at the core of accounts of the war, but patriotic memory abandoned any populist concessions to become entirely Party-centered. In a famous Kremlin speech two weeks after the victory over Germany, Stalin raised a glass to the powers of endurance of the Russian people (*narod*); a month later, on a similar occasion, he spoke warmly of the “simple, ordinary, modest people” who formed the “cogs” of the mighty state mechanism that was the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup> These, however, were toasts at banquets rather than statements of intent: very soon the much-cited *narod* would be handed back its normal Stalinist role as a bit-player in the narrative of Communist triumph. Naturally, this required writing out of the story the many ambiguities and contradictions of Russia’s war. Nothing was heard of the NKVD atrocities in Poland and the Baltics before the *Wehrmacht*’s arrival, or of the war crimes of the Soviet Army on its westward march in 1944–5. The mass panic of Moscow’s population in October 1941, at a moment when the government itself appeared to be turning tail, was taboo. Nor, of course, could it be mentioned that not all Soviet people had thrown themselves



FIGURE 1.2 Stalin and Zhukov on the Lenin Mausoleum, 1945. The Party and the military in uneasy equilibrium.

Source: © Eugeny Khaldei / PhotoSoyuz.

into the cause with patriotic aplomb: hundreds of thousands had been worked to death in the Gulag, others had been conscripted into labor battalions, while frontline soldiers had been kept fighting by “blocking units” (*zagradotriady*) instructed to mow down any troops who appeared to be retreating. Any Soviet people who did not have an exemplary record – notably those conscripted or captured by the Germans – were automatically under suspicion after the war; many of them could never shake off the stigma.

Even the men and women who unquestionably had done their patriotic duty – the frontline soldiers, or *frontoviki* – were denied adequate recognition by the postwar Soviet state. Soviet provisions for returning soldiers always lagged far behind the American G. I. Bill, with its extensive package of welfare benefits, educational opportunities and home loans. By 1948 veterans in the USSR had

ceased to exist as a coherent category of welfare recipient. They were even denied symbolic recognition: Victory Day was celebrated in 1946 and 1947 but then discontinued as a public holiday.<sup>15</sup>

Veterans gained a louder public voice almost by accident in the mid-1950s, when the Soviet authorities permitted – as an international propaganda move – the creation of a Soviet Committee of War Veterans, which quickly outgrew its brief to take on welfare and lobbying functions. At the same time, a less state-centered version of the war made a comeback for reasons that were less accidental. One important factor was Nikita Khrushchev's pride in his own war record and his indignation at Stalin's monopoly on heroic wartime leadership. Khrushchev could argue that, unlike Stalin, he had spent most of his war not in the Kremlin but in several of the most intense theaters: Kiev, Kharkov, Stalingrad, Kursk. In his Secret Speech of February 1956, besides exposing some of the crimes of the Great Terror, he set about tarnishing Stalin's war record. Even on the printed page, Khrushchev's tone and delivery are noticeably more vivid and heartfelt when his four-hour oration moves on from the 1930s to the Great Patriotic War.<sup>16</sup> De-Stalinization was at least in part driven by the need of the Soviet elite to reclaim the memory of the war from its deceased progenitor. Like Stalin, moreover, Khrushchev felt it necessary in due course to remove and disgrace the war's most famous Soviet general, Georgii Zhukov. Yet, while this Kremlin revisionism may have been self-interested, in combination with a slight liberalization of public discourse it made war memory a more honest and democratic affair. The 1950s and 1960s saw an outpouring of fiction and film that gave the war a more nuanced human dimension and brought to light some of its moral ambiguities.

The Brezhnev era confirmed the centrality of the war to Soviet self-understanding. Brezhnev, like Khrushchev, was concerned to burnish his own image as war hero, most notoriously by awarding himself medals and having his ghostwritten memoirs win a state prize. But he was prepared to share at least some of the credit with Soviet society. Victory Day was re-instituted as a public holiday in 1965, while veterans were given more generous state provision. The edginess and contentiousness of Khrushchev-era war culture faded into stable bombast at the level of public ritual, even if film directors of the 1970s continued to produce a few morally complex accounts of the war.<sup>17</sup>

Mikhail Gorbachev was not only young for a General Secretary, he was also the Soviet Union's first properly postwar leader. He had been ten years old at the time of the Nazi invasion. Not only had he not served in the armed forces at any point in his life, he had spent several months, from August 1942 to January 1943, under German occupation in his home village in southern Russia. If he had been just a few years older, his war record would have been considered compromised and suspicious; at the very least, it was not heroic. War was not central to

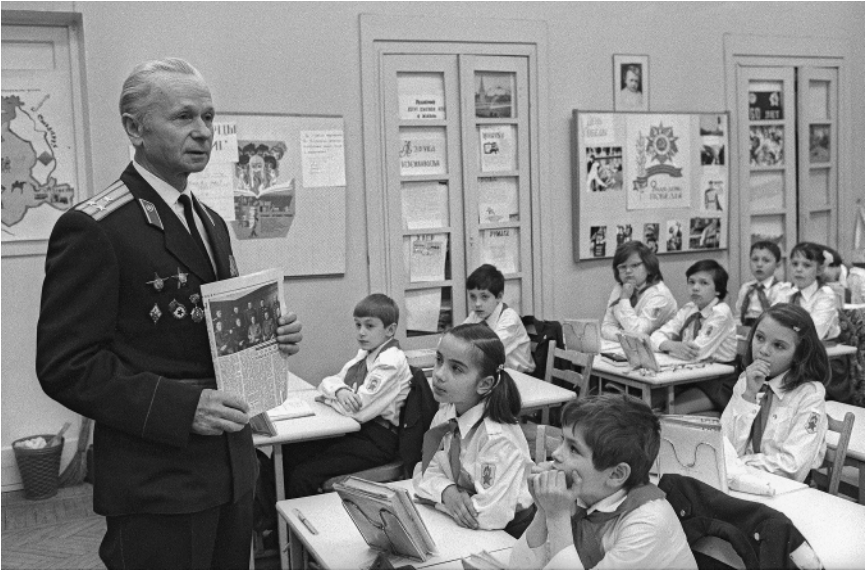


FIGURE 1.3 A veteran in the schoolroom, 1970s.

Source: © Victor Akhlov / PhotoSoyuz.

Gorbachev's self-understanding as it had been for his predecessors. The Germans he encountered were relatively well behaved, and he did not witness any atrocities. He had, however, observed at close quarters Soviet-style atrocity: one grandfather had been arrested in the Terror of 1937, while the other had seen three children die in the famine of 1933 before himself being arrested for "sabotage" and doing two years of forced labor in Siberia.<sup>18</sup> When the time came for another reckoning with the Soviet past, in the era of Gorbachev's *glasnost*, what came under scrutiny above all was the prewar Stalin era, from collectivization through Great Terror to the last great crime Stalin had time for before the Nazi invasion: mass murder in the Soviet-occupied western borderlands in 1940. For Gorbachev, the Secret Speech meant 1937 rather than 1941.

The result was an intense phase of recovering a gruesome and long-suppressed past. Yet, while relatively few outright apologists for Stalinist terror could be found in the early 1990s, the momentum of this re-de-Stalinization soon petered out. One reason for this was the simple fact that Russian society had a great deal else to preoccupy it in the first years after the Soviet collapse. Another was that prewar Terror was receding into a distant past, and its victims, participants and eye-witnesses were dying out. Given the length of time that had elapsed, it became increasingly possible to see the crimes of the Soviet regime against its own popula-

tion as the collateral damage of history rather than a matter of present-day moral and political import.

But perhaps the most important reason that the Terror faded from Russian consciousness was that it interfered too much with patriotic memory of the war. Was not victory over the Nazis proof that, whatever the “excesses” of the 1930s, Stalin’s rule was ultimately justified? Did not the Soviet Union save Europe, and sacrifice itself, in 1941–5? This historiographical reflex is very strong in Russia even in places where one might not expect to find it. It is hard for an American or British audience to appreciate the extent to which Russians believe in the Soviet “liberation” of eastern Europe. In November 1969, a year after the Soviet crackdown in Prague and more than 20 years after the forced imposition of Communist rule, the up-and-coming Mikhail Gorbachev was part of a delegation to Czechoslovakia. He was taken aback by the hostility of the reaction he encountered from ordinary people. Prague he found to be in a state of “semiparalysis.” His hosts did not dare to take their visitors to workplaces for that ritual socialist encounter between government and people. On a visit to a factory in Brno, the Soviet delegation was cold-shouldered by the workers. In Bratislava too there were some awkward moments. Then the delegation spent the night in a Slovak village where they finally received a warm-hearted reception with food, wine, music, and open conversation. The peasants, it turned out, had been less impressed than the urban population by the mantra of “socialism with a human face” that had been adopted by the previous year’s reformist leadership: their concern was what it would mean in real terms for their lives. Seizing on evidence that Soviet-backed Communism in Czechoslovakia was in some sense popular, Gorbachev could not help recalling that his own father had been seriously wounded not far away, near Košice, when fighting to claim the region from the Germans.<sup>19</sup>

Patriotic pride born of wartime sacrifice went rapidly from psychological reflex to state-sponsored orthodoxy when the political and economic chaos of the 1990s was replaced by a more secure order under Vladimir Putin. The early twenty-first century saw a resurgent Russian cult of World War II. It was accompanied by acute hostility to any depiction of the war’s less glorious sides. In 2009, the defense of the cult went so far as the creation of a “Commission for Countering Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of the Interests of Russia”: the membership of this body was a lineup of state functionaries, including representatives of the military and security agencies, that would not have been out of place in the Moscow of c. 1975.<sup>20</sup> Once upon a time, it was Western scholars foraging for documents on the 1920s and 1930s who were likely to be rebuffed when they arrived in Russia to do their research. Now, the war was the research topic most likely to elicit the vigilance of archive officials. The reason for the change is presumably that, whereas revelations on the Terror are already too numerous to be



FIGURE 1.4 War memorial, Zvenigorod, west of Moscow, August 2007. The memory of the war is manifestly alive in this small town, which saw terrible bloodshed in 1941. In September 2009, the local authorities announced the imminent construction of an improved granite memorial engraved with the names of the 149 local inhabitants who died in the fighting.

Source: Author's photograph.

repressed entirely, very little light has ever been shone in Russia on the dark side of the war. Although World War II has been taken up by patriotic rhetoric as a more straightforward alternative to the 1930s, the silences and evasions in its treatment are just as great as they once were for prewar Stalinism. Little is heard or known about wartime Soviet atrocities, or about the extent of wartime repression of the Soviet population. In the current patriotic memory of World War II, we are witnessing an unifying competition for victimhood by a generation of people who were not themselves victims. In mainstream Russian accounts of World War II, it is hard to discern the fact that half of the Soviet Union's 5 million Jewish population perished, or that Poles and Lithuanians, following the experience of 1939–41, had few reasons to consider the Red Army preferable to the *Wehrmacht*. It is little consolation that omissions and evasions are found on practically all sides of public historical debates in eastern Europe.<sup>21</sup>

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After the War: Interpreting Later Soviet History

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The place of the war in Russian patriotic discourse is clear enough. What, though, can historians contribute by way of interpreting the six decades that have elapsed since 1945? The answer is surely that they can contribute a good deal more than ten or fifteen years ago. The postwar and post-Stalin eras have only recently started to generate detailed original research by social and political historians with access to all the tools of their trade (archives, memoirs, oral history, nonideologized publications by Russian historians). In the historiography of the post-1941 era, every half-decade that passes makes a difference in a way that is no longer the case for the 1920s and 1930s, where a critical mass of empirical material and historiographical reflection was achieved by the end of the 1990s. Thanks to recent books, articles and Ph.D. dissertations, it is now possible to write with greater certainty on a wide range of topics from the history of the Gulag to the development of Soviet television. The material at the disposal of a would-be synthesizer is immeasurably richer even than seven or eight years ago, and it will only get richer.

The question the synthesizer must ask, however, is what it all means. How does the stream of new information affect our notion of what took place in the Soviet Union and its successor states between the war and the present? For all the recent outpouring of new research on the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, we still have to confront fundamental discontinuities in the ways that Soviet history is conceived and narrated. There is a break between the period 1945–70, increasingly well served by historical research, and a historians' "black box" period of 1970–85, for which archival holdings are mostly still unavailable and which has been the preserve of area studies specialists writing close to the time of the events they investigated. In effect, this book has to cross at least three historiographical divides: between the war and everything else; between history and political/social science (otherwise known as the "Sovietology" of the 1970s and 1980s); and between Sovietology – which was obliged to study Soviet affairs from some distance, relying above all on published sources – and the revitalized area studies of the 1990s that could take the end of the Soviet Union as a given and gather firsthand information to an extent beyond the wildest dreams of the previous generation of specialists. To try to tell the story of the second half of the twentieth century in Russia is to make a bumpy journey along a twisted and uneven road.

But can we at least agree on the direction of the journey? By all appearances, the answer is only too simple: the later history of the Soviet Union tells us the story of that state's unviability, the profound flaws in its economic system, the inevitability of its collapse. Yet, while it would be perverse to argue that the Soviet planned economy of the early 1980s was set fair for prosperity, the inevitability

argument is not quite satisfactory. It does not do justice to the elements of contingency in the way the Soviet system actually collapsed; nor does it allow us to determine which of the many potential causes were fundamental to that outcome and which less so. It also does not help us to make sense of developments beyond 1991: yes, Russia is no longer part of the Soviet Union, but that by itself is not much of an analytical breakthrough. The notion of the inevitability of the Soviet collapse also invites teleological reasoning: all aspects of Soviet society, culture, economics, or politics become interesting *ex post facto* for what they reveal of the incipient disintegration of the Soviet order. The guiding presumption of this book is that there are other, often more interesting, things to say about them.

The narrative of inexorable Soviet decline has its subdivisions, many of them drawn from Soviet political discourse. The postwar era begins with the unloved period of “late Stalinism” (1945–53), a prolonged coda to the era of terroristic one-party dictatorship. With the old dictator’s death in 1953, Stalinism makes way for thaw and de-Stalinization. “Thaw” is a term first dreamt up by a talented novelist and former war journalist, Ilya Ehrenburg, while de-Stalinization is a Western gloss on Nikita Khrushchev’s campaign against “the cult of personality and its consequences,” as manifested most famously in his Secret Speech. Following Khrushchev’s removal in 1964, de-Stalinization peters out into a prolonged era of economic and social “stagnation” under Leonid Brezhnev. Brezhnev’s immediate successors, Iurii Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko, were too sickly to make much impact, but the next man in the Kremlin, Mikhail Gorbachev, was young, energetic, and full of programmatic statements. His best-known reform slogan, *perestroika* (literally “reconstruction”), has given the era its name. Soon, however, this reconstruction came to seem the work of a jerry-builder: in 1991 it brought the collapse of a superpower state in what has been called the “second Russian revolution.” Following that, Russia embarked on a phase of “transition” that would take it away from the legacy of state socialism.

The periodization I have sketched out informs most accounts of postwar Soviet history – whether scholarly or otherwise – and has much to recommend it. Leaders mattered a great deal in the Soviet Union, and it is clear that epoch-defining changes came about very soon after the death of Stalin (to take only the most important example). It is also clear, however, that many of the labels we attach to these periods were dreamt up by contemporary participants or observers: they come with a political agenda or at the very least a degree of historiographical “spin.” They practically define in advance the ways we might interpret the periods to which they refer. If the years 1945–53 are called “late Stalinism,” the war becomes an interruption to the “general line” of Soviet history: normal service is resumed in 1945 with the hegemony of the secret police, the extension of the personality cult to ever more baroque dimensions, and ruthless exploitation of the population to boost the industrial economy. Yet, as this book

will suggest, a great many things in the postwar Soviet Union were novel, not normal – most obviously, the Soviet domination of central and eastern Europe. “Thaw” is an attractive notion, but it does not do justice to the many ways in which the Soviet Union in the 1950s remained a profoundly illiberal, even “Stalinist” place. De-Stalinization, on closer inspection of the Secret Speech and its preparation, was as much to do with bolstering the authority of Khrushchev’s leadership and reclaiming the memory of the war from Stalin as it was about “rehabilitating” Stalin’s victims and righting historical wrongs.

The political baggage attached to periodization does not lighten when we enter the ostensibly least eventful phase of Soviet history. The tag of “stagnation” was applied to the tenure of Brezhnev by the Gorbachev regime, and for that reason alone deserves to be treated with suspicion. All newly installed politicians like to bolster their authority by casting aspersions on their predecessors. It is certainly true that the Soviet economy was in a sorry state by the early 1980s, but it is unclear to what extent that failure should be laid at Brezhnev’s door rather than ascribed to the inherent logic of Soviet industrial development. On the international front, the period 1964–82 was far from uneventful and not without Soviet successes – at least until the invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. The label Gorbachev applied to his own enterprise – perestroika – is no less open to questioning. Quickly taken up in the Western press as a sign of liberalization, the term is conventional in Soviet political discourse as a vague signal of reforming intent. What it might mean in practice is unclear – and was made no clearer by Gorbachev’s opaque policy statements. Even when we reach the Soviet collapse, events are not easy to interpret. “Revolution” is plausible enough as a one-word description, but it does not by itself sort out the causes of events: was popular pressure the critical factor, or a failure of nerve by the ruling elite, or a self-interested decision by members of that elite that they would be better off abandoning the system that had reared them? Finally, the notion of “transition” – widely adopted by economists and political scientists in the 1990s – implies a direction of change that was rarely borne out by developments in Russia’s *fin de siècle*.

It is relatively easy to ask questions of existing periodization, rather less so to propose meaningful alternatives. As this introduction has already elaborated, the significance of the war will provide a large part of this book’s analytical thrust. Beyond that, I will be asking a simple question: if we take the period from 1941 to the present as a whole, and without necessarily taking our lead from the periods in office of General Secretaries, what fundamental changes can we perceive in Soviet/Russian history?

A useful starting point is to ask when, if ever, the Soviet Union reached any kind of steady state. Soviet history in the interwar period had been characterized by massive social upheaval, state-sponsored violence on a vast scale and chronic

geopolitical insecurity. At the very end of the 1930s, following the worst ever outbreak of terror in 1937–8, there were signs that the political system might be reaching a kind of equilibrium. However, the Soviet leadership's way of alleviating its fear of major European war was to strike a deal with Adolf Hitler, which brought Soviet takeover of Eastern Poland, Bessarabia and the Baltic states but almost certainly made the USSR less well prepared for the Nazi assault when it duly came less than two years later. During the war – the most destructive such conflict in history, and one in which the Soviet Union bore a heavier cost than any other combatant – equilibrium was the last thing that could be achieved. It was also inconceivable in the war's immediate aftermath, with much of the more developed western part of the country laid waste and millions of people on the move.

Within a few years, however, signs of “normalization” – not that life in the Soviet Union had ever previously been “normal” – began to appear. Around 1950 the prospect of life-threatening hunger began to lift for the Soviet population. The economy entered a phase of steady growth. Unlike the 1930s, moreover, increases in industrial output were not accompanied by terror. Although the regime still relied heavily on its state security agencies, it eschewed mass violence as a primary technique of governance. By the late 1950s, the Soviet leadership could put forward a plausible account of historical progress toward socialism: this narrative seems to have been sufficient to generate a robust Soviet patriotism among much of the general population.

The Soviets could also feel that history was on their side because the postwar world was in a phase of decolonization. Throughout the first two decades of Soviet power, the Bolshevik leadership had railed at the forces of world imperialism. In their analysis, Western imperialists provoked World War I, engineered the postwar settlement in their favor, and thereafter kept a predatory eye on states – notably the USSR – that did not fit their ideas of how markets and territories should be controlled. The British were the main culprits, but the Bolsheviks also anticipated a resurgence of German militarism. In the East, a militaristic Japan posed a more immediate, and extremely serious, threat to Soviet security.

The situation was transformed in the postwar era. Germany and Japan had wrought terrible havoc on the world, but they were now devastated and militarily disabled. The Germans had created an empire in Europe itself, but that had now gone. Although Stalin anticipated a further German threat sometime in the future, it was not imminent. No less important, the British empire – which reached its greatest territorial extent between the wars – began to shrivel rapidly in the late 1940s. By the 1950s decolonization was sweeping the globe, and the Soviet Union – as an impeccably anti-imperialist state – could feel that it belonged at the head of the movement.

But things were not so simple. The actions of the Soviet state in the 1930s and 1940s had seemed to prove that the USSR belonged in the camp of the colonizers as a modern and far more brutal version of the Russian empire. Millions of non-Russians had perished in the Bolshevik assault on their way of life, mainly during the collectivization campaign of the early 1930s. Hundreds of thousands more had been deported, on the grounds of their real or potential disloyalty, between the late 1930s and the late 1940s. Worse still – from a postcolonial perspective – the USSR had acquired political domination of half a dozen nations in eastern Europe. Here, one might say, was a Soviet empire that filled the vacuum left by the eastern half of the Nazi empire.

We can in fact push the idea of the USSR as imperial power even further to argue that, in the Stalin era, the Soviet Union subjected its own population – Russian as well as non-Russian – to a form of internal colonization. Tens of millions of rural people were ruthlessly subjugated to the demands of crash industrialization: in the collectivized villages they entered what has justly been called a “second serfdom.” The industrial workforce – largely, of course, made up of peasants – was not much better off as it slaved in factories and on construction sites. And then there was the Gulag, a vast network of prison camps and settlements whose primary rationale was economic exploitation.

When Stalinist rule came to an end, the Soviet Union entered a period of internal decolonization. This did not mean, of course, any granting of sovereignty to the non-Russian nationalities. Rather, it implied that tens of millions of Soviet people – Russian and non-Russian – would be raised from the status of colonial subject to that of modern citizen. Naturally, Stalinist discourse – exemplified by the Constitution of 1936 – pronounced that Soviet power had already brought the gift of nondiscriminatory citizenship to its population, but such claims were so at variance with the reality of state–society relations in the Stalin era that they barely deserve comment. From the 1930s onward, a growing section of the population – party-state functionaries, army officers, educated specialists, skilled workers – could feel themselves to be fully empowered members of Soviet society, but such people remained a minority, and citizenship for them was a privilege attached to their position rather than a civic right.

Decolonization is always a fraught and difficult business. If it is ever unproblematic for imperial powers, that is because they can turn their back on distant colonial territories and leave others to sort out the mess. The Soviet Union did not have that option. Nevertheless, it set about the task of internal decolonization with determination and to much demonstrable effect. The Gulag – the worst example of Stalinist exploitation – was scaled back by a series of mass releases of prisoners in the mid-1950s. The post-Stalin leadership showed that it took the discourse of citizenship rather more seriously than its predecessor. The landmark social policies of the Khrushchev era – a mass housing campaign, the introduction

of a comprehensive pensions system – made popular wellbeing a regime priority to an unprecedented extent. Civic participation was encouraged, whether that meant writing letters to the authorities, voting in elections to the soviets, or participating in the Komsomol, the Party, or other “voluntary” organizations. Collective farmers were given greater opportunities to turn themselves into something else, and in the mid-1970s those who remained on the *kolkhoz* were finally granted that key attribute of Soviet citizenship: the internal passport.

But the changes at work in the post-Stalin USSR were a matter not only of direct government action. They also came as broad, often unintended, consequences of the social and economic transformation the Bolsheviks had brought about. The Soviet Union was not just a self-colonizing backwater; it was also the twentieth century’s quintessential fast modernizer. New cities were built, old ones swelled to bursting, millions of people were given tertiary education and took their place in a new urban civilization. That civilization was not just about pig iron and ball bearings: it came with many of the attributes of modernity that were found in more developed parts of the world. Soviet urbanites were not just producers, they were also consumers, and their notion of consumption expanded over the later Soviet period to include color television sets and automatic washing machines as well as vodka and pork fat. Once people became educated and ambitious, they were less ready for the self-sacrifice of earlier generations (which had often been driven by the absence of less sacrificial alternatives). Much as the Soviet state might tell people to reproduce, its citizens drew the same conclusions as everyone else from declining infant mortality: they had fewer children. The decline in the birth rate was only hastened by the public insistence that women work and by the chronic shortage of urban housing.

In short, the postwar Soviet Union experienced a demographic and cultural revolution that was the logical corollary of the Soviet project of urbanization and modernization but was not straightforwardly compatible with other core Soviet goals: collectivism, equality, social unity, transparency of political control. The discordance between society and politics was exacerbated by the fact that many attributes of late industrial consumerist modernity were now truly global and able to cross even the least permeable national boundaries. The most striking example was audio-visual mass culture. For the Soviet regime, it was a source of patriotic pride that production of wireless radios had been vastly increased in the late 1940s and 1950s, while TV sets had become routine household items by the 1970s. But this also meant that millions of Soviet people had the opportunity to listen in to Western radio at just the moment that the Americans and British wished to get through to the Soviet audience, while the investment in radio and TV implied a more interactive and more public form of politics. For all that Soviet media were often deadening in their content, would Leonid Brezhnev’s poor health in the late 1970s have mattered so much if he had been able to control his public image in

the same way as Stalin, who was seen by the population mostly in touched-up press photographs?<sup>22</sup>

All this caused Soviet elites from Khrushchev onward a degree of discomfort. The archives of Agitprop in the 1950s are peppered with minuted discussions of what to do about Voice of America and the BBC, while the KGB at various moments expended vast resources on tracking down and punishing forms of behavior that in a liberal country would have been considered apolitical. Another source of disorientation for the Soviet Union was that the new bugbear of the anti-imperialist USSR, the United States, was not an empire in the sense that had been known hitherto. From time to time, in locations from the Bay of Pigs to Vietnam, it certainly behaved like one; in its treatment of its own black population, moreover, it had its own, very nasty, version of internal colonialism. There was no question that the USA was a global power with the capacity to intervene almost anywhere in the world it pleased. But it did not dominate other states' political systems in the direct way that the Soviet Union did in eastern Europe, and a large part of America's enormous power around the world was exercised not militarily but economically and culturally. As well as a superpower, it was an amazingly successful world brand.

The postwar Soviet Union, then, had to negotiate the global transition from an era of decolonization (which started in World War I and was completed after World War II) to one of American hegemony – while at the same time maintaining its own, newly acquired superpower status. The challenge was so formidable that it is almost possible to feel sorry for the Soviet leadership. The chapters that follow will describe, from a number of different perspectives, how they went about the task, what response they met from their population, and to what extent their efforts have left a mark on the society, politics, and economy of the former Soviet Union as it has moved into the twenty-first century. The rest of the book's contents may usefully be seen as four linked pairs of chapters. The first pair examines the fundamentals of Soviet/Russian life: its mode of government (Chapter 2) and the economic system that has mostly been inseparable from politics (Chapter 3). Chapters 4 and 5 put Soviet/Russian society under scrutiny, exploring both broad sociological trends and patterns of everyday life. The next pair of chapters is concerned with the social and political issues arising from the Soviet Union's immense size and diversity: Chapter 6 investigates how the Soviet system governed such a huge territory and managed its population, while Chapter 7 looks into what might be considered the main distinguishing attribute of the Soviet Union – the fact that this country contained dozens of different ethnic groups, gave many of them the attributes of nationhood, yet maintained a strong central state. Chapters 8 and 9 go beyond the borders of the Soviet Union to consider Russia's relationship with the wider world, whether geopolitical or cultural. A brief conclusion attempts to make sense of it all.