

Roger Reese

WHY STALIN'S SOLDIERS FOUGHT

Four major conclusions can be drawn from the study of the Soviet soldier's motivation and morale and popular attitudes about service in the Great Patriotic War. First, morale and motivation fluctuated dramatically during the war, varying by circumstance, nationality, and social group. Second, the state and Stalinism did not always figure prominently in people's decision to fight or not. Instead, a wide variety of factors based largely on personal circumstances played the greatest role in voluntarism or compliance with conscription. Third, although the state was determined to enforce compliance, its ability to do so was limited, and people's willingness to challenge it directly through draft evasion and desertion was fairly persistent and widespread. People's willingness to risk the consequences of resistance, however, was based primarily on a weighing of the lethality of the battlefield against the lethality of the state. Thus, coercion was a far less important factor in maintaining effectiveness than it has been made out to be, yet elemental obedience to the state was also an important psychological factor. Fourth and finally, Soviet patriotism was real, but it did not equate directly with support for the Stalinist system. Fighting for the *rodina* meant different things to different people.

The main schools of the historiography of the war lie at the extremes: they maintain that people either rejected Stalinism or actively supported it. My analysis does not propose a meet-in-the-middle compromise. There are indeed hundreds of thousands of cases that support each of the two conflicting interpretations; however, there are millions more that fall at various points in between. There was a wide range of popular



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responses to the Nazi invasion, and although the state wielded tremendous coercive power, people exerted significant agency in determining their own fate. Ironically, the decisions of many to fight the Nazi invaders, which served the state's purposes, were often made with no reference to the state at all, or they were sometimes made with conscious hostility to the state. People adopted an astoundingly wide variety of reasons and rationalizations to justify serving or not. Personal or family circumstances, ideology, life experience, the immediate war situation, social factors, institutional factors, and many others, usually in combination, all affected people's thinking.

The power of the state was manifest in the penalties it imposed on the population for noncompliance, but the power of the people was evident in their attempt to avoid service or to escape the dangers of the front. Still unresolved is the issue of whether the early surrenders equated to a rejection of Stalinism or whether fighting the Germans and their allies meant support for Stalinism; however, it is clear that blanket statements one way or the other are untenable. It is well established that the Soviet people expected their participation in the war to result in a moderation of the Stalinist state's oppressive policies. Peasants expected an end to collectivization, and workers anticipated an end to strict labor discipline. Intellectuals expected more freedom of thought and expression. Party apparatchiks and government officials expected greater latitude in decision making at the lower levels. A sense that the state owed the people something pervaded popular attitudes, which shows that many people fought for a state they did not endorse in its current form.

Soviet patriotism was real but certainly not universal; it resonated most deeply among Russians and least among the non-Slavic ethnic and national minorities. For many, patriotism did not equate with support for the Stalinist system; instead, it was an elemental urge to defend what they understood to be their homeland, sometimes coincidental with the socialist ideals inherent in the revolution and professed by the



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Communist Part and Stalin. The state, for the most part, failed to generate patriotism; rather, it took advantage of inherent or latent patriotic feelings and harnessed them. In non-Slavic and non-Russian areas of the USSR, where there was no inherent *ruskii*, *rossiiskii*, or *Sovetskii* patriotism, the state not only failed to generate significant levels of voluntarism and struggled to enforce conscription but also faced outright resistance.

In the end, the Stalinist state succeeded in mobilizing, through inspiration and coercion, just enough of the population for military service to ensure its survival. People from all social classes and milieus, age cohorts, nationalities, and ethnicities, including both party members and nonparty citizens and both victims and beneficiaries of Stalinism, volunteered to serve or reported for conscription. Simultaneously, people in all the same categories refused to volunteer, evaded the draft, or deserted. Still, mobilization, with all its flaws and obstacles, and popular submission to it, and obedience to the state, as well as belief in their cause, were why Stalin's soldiers fought.

