

The People's War: Ordinary People and Regime Strategies in a World of Extremes

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The German invasion of the USSR on June 22, 1941 brought with it the most extreme conditions of the short twentieth century. Suddenly, the existence of the Soviet state was no longer assured. What the regime did in response tells us much about Stalinism and the Soviet order. In an enormous swathe of territory from the western and southern borderlands of the USSR to the ethnic Russian heartland, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and Operation Barbarossa triggered successive regime changes and reversals with which everyone had to reckon. States and armies were hardly the only critically important actors, moreover, as the war unleashed local conflicts and nationalist movements. In sum, after years of extreme statism and isolation, millions of Soviet citizens suddenly faced fateful decisions about what to do and how to act.

For years, the Holy Grail of Soviet history revolved around what ordinary people “really” thought. As opened archives yielded fewer silver bullets than hard-won insights, historians gained a new appreciation for how hard it can be to generalize about popular ideas and behavior, which can be highly situational. Yet moments of existential crisis in highly dictatorial and ideological regimes can provide a virtual laboratory for the historian. In the most visible and dramatic way, the onset of war blew the lid off Soviet power and its monopoly on violence. Despite this opportunity, prewar Stalinism has long been studied without the insights to be had from crossing 1941, while new works on postwar Soviet history often relegate the war years to a separate period bracketed off from what came before and after. At the same time, Soviet history and the home front has, in general, been examined separately from the history of German and Axis occupation regimes on the Eastern Front—in part because of sources, in part because of political and disciplinary borders. In recent years, scholarship has moved forward with a proliferation of valuable archive-based local, city, and regional studies. Yet this welcome development prompts the need for greater synthesis, which has been especially lacking across regional and national boundaries. There are many compelling grounds to study occupation regimes on the Eastern Front while also investigating the home front and Stalinism more generally.

Although any such integrationist scholarly desiderata go far beyond what any single publication can achieve, this cluster of articles was assembled in order to promote the synergies and insights that accrue from looking at frequently

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separated fields in tandem.¹ It spans the history of occupied territories to the Soviet rear, juxtaposing a range of territories from the Soviet home front (Ironsides) and the ethnic Russian heartland (Bernstein) to lands further to the west—Belarus (Exeler), Volhynia (McBride), and Romanian-occupied South Ukraine or Transnistria (Solonari). The treatments also traverse chronological boundaries, including 1941 and the divide between German rule and re-Sovietization.

The “people’s war” that comes into better focus here takes its name from but is rather the opposite of the “*voina narodnaia*” of song or the all-people’s war (*vsenarodnaia voina*) Exeler discusses as an ideological construct of wartime recruitment and re-Sovietization. The former aimed at inspiring total war mobilization during the first days of the conflict, and the latter was part of a strategy to make the partisan movement as inclusive as possible—and retrospectively to mythologize the mass support of the people for the partisans and Soviet power.² Nor are the “ordinary” people under consideration analogous to Christopher Browning’s famous “ordinary men,” the Germans of one police battalion who were socialized as *génocidaires*—despite the fact that a central feature of the article by McBride is how “average” members of a local rural population became perpetrators in ethnic cleansing operations.³ The ordinary people in these articles were more often fragmented and divergent than unified in their responses, and their ordinariness is not remarkable principally in light of participation in acts of violence. They are undoubtedly closer to the people taking part in prewar “ordinary life” referenced, for example, in the subtitle of Sheila Fitzpatrick’s book on the 1930s, *Everyday Stalinism* (and, since they include rural folk, her *Stalin’s Peasants*), but with some notable differences: there is no overriding concept either of everyday life or resistance, on the one hand, or a mission to focus on a single social group, on the other, shaping how they are examined historically.⁴ These ordinary people include not just cross-sections of locals in a range of places, but also local elites, those who collaborated, and those who lived through successive phases of Stalinism, German and Romanian occupation, and Soviet-style liberation. Since communist-era and contemporary Russian historiography on the war to this day has privileged military history and “great men,” a response within both western and Russian-language scholarship of bringing “ordinary Soviets” into more central focus is hardly new.⁵

1. These articles were originally presented as papers at a Georgetown University conference on “Occupations and Liberations in World War II,” October 31 and November 1, 2014, co-organized by the International Centre for the History and Sociology of World War II and Its Consequences of the Higher School of Economics and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

2. The lyrics to the rousing “*Sviashchennaia voina*,” written by Vasilii Lebedev-Kumach, were published on June 24, 1941.

3. Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, 1992).

4. Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times. Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York, 1999); Fitzpatrick, *Stalin’s Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (New York, 1994).

5. Notably, see Robert Thurston and Bernd Bonwetsch, eds., *The People’s War: Responses to World War II in the Soviet Union* (Urbana, 2000).

Even as they concern the mass impact of the war on ordinary people, the articles that follow are not noteworthy because they set out to make an overarching attempt to construct ordinariness. Rather, they investigate aspects of popular behavior and motivations as part of a primary mission of furthering historical knowledge about the successive regime changes central to the titanic cataclysm on the Eastern Front (or in the case of Ironside, who deals only with the Soviet home front, the shift from war to reconstruction). The articles by Bernstein and McBride focus most directly on the locals, ethnic Russian peasants and townspeople in Riazan' in the first case and, in the second, three non-homogenous groups of Ukrainians—UPA soldiers, OUN-B members, and rural civilians—who perpetrated ethnic cleansing operations. Bernstein interprets these ordinary *riazantsy* in terms of a unique, short-lived moment of power vacuum or *bezvlastie* in fall 1941, after Soviet power had collapsed but before the Wehrmacht had established authority. His main actors are the local kolkhoz peasantry, local notables reacting to the power vacuum, and ambitious, petty officials who saw an opportunity for advancement in the advent of a new regime. McBride examines ordinary Volhynians both at a single moment in time (the ethnic cleansing of a number of Polish villages in the northwest of Volyn' oblast) and in terms of the chain of command and recruitment policies of the Ukrainian nationalist movement (OUN-B and UPA). He traces a direct line from the OUN-UPA leadership down the nationalist chain of command to the specific operations in one region and group of villages. He does so to establish how highly coordinated the ethnic cleansing campaign was, and to investigate the varied, situational reasons locals not previously connected to nationalist ideology became perpetrators. No one who reads his vivid account of how the ethnic cleansing occurred on the ground on Sunday, August 29, 1943, when a night of dancing, eating, and drinking in a neighboring Ukrainian village was followed by the murderous action that wiped out Polish settlements such as Volia Ostrovetska, will forget the chance 1943 roadside encounter between neighbors from the Ukrainian village of Krymne, with which the article begins.

In the case of the other three articles, it is policies and state practices that assume the center of attention: the determination and prosecution of wartime guilt of all those who were considered to have, in the common party and secret police expression, “worked under the Germans,” in the case of Exeler; an analysis of the drivers of Romanian occupation policies in Transnistria, especially in terms of economic exploitation and in comparison to better-researched Nazi occupation policies, in the case of Solonari; and Stalin's economic doctrine of price reductions on the home front and during reconstruction, in the case of Ironside. But in all three of these cases, the analysis of state politics and ideology also serves to reveal and elucidate the behavior and outlooks of ordinary members of the population. Solonari's striking new material on the brutality and extent of Romanian economic exploitation in Transnistria, for example, goes a long way toward explaining the rapid alienation of local residents and the need to resort to naked coercion. Exeler's article details how the only systematic exception for mitigating circumstances in the decisions of Soviet military tribunals was made for

Soviet citizens who had served the Germans as local policemen or in military formations, but who had defected to the partisans as a result of wartime recruitment strategies. In other instances, no mitigating circumstances met with clemency, even though this could clash with what other locals claimed were pragmatic decisions or the less odious choice in extreme circumstances. A certain Mikhodievski, a German-language teacher before the war, indignantly wrote the Soviet authorities that he had chosen work as a minor translator in the city administration rather than as a schoolteacher (who were generally not prosecuted) because he had not wanted to propagate the spirit of fascism.

Ironside's focus is the relationship between state and market prices at a time when private trade expanded exponentially during the war and as the Soviet government curtailed it during reconstruction. By establishing how low prices and price reductions became a core economic doctrine of late Stalinist political economy, the article provides insight into the tight interrelationship in the Soviet economy between state stores and *kolkhoz* markets, on the one hand, and pricing policy and shortages, on the other. The point I would like to make here is that her treatment of the economic assumptions of Stalin and the leadership in the years from wartime rationing to postwar reconstruction could not be carried out without also surveying key components of ordinary people's economic behavior, including spending and saving. At crucial moments, the decisions of elite policymakers on economic affairs, starting with Stalin, are analyzed in conjunction with widespread popular attitudes, such as discontent with high prices and the hated wartime ration system, widely seen as corrupt and the cause of shortages. Throughout the war and postwar transition, peasants adjusted the cost of their wares with a constant eye on state pricing, and much more nimbly than Soviet trade officials.

To sum up: these articles construct a history of the "people's war" in a distinctive way, whether they start their investigations with ordinary locals or with policies and situations. They do not generalize about single social groups or classes; they make no attempt to distill a de-ideologized everyday life from the "ideological war" on the Eastern Front, nor do they reify collaboration or privilege resistance among all other forms of behavior. Instead, in ways that differ widely in their particulars but ultimately are in alignment—because, I would argue, they reflect the cutting edge of historical thinking in the field—these articles seek the nexus between ordinary people and state policies, ideologies and practices, inescapable contexts and survival strategies, wherever they occurred.

As the articles focus on either ordinary people themselves or policies shaping this kind of people's war, it is important to note, they pay close attention to material calculations and material incentives. This is in keeping not just with the renewed attention to economic history in general, but also with the recent concentration on material factors in studies of violence and the Holocaust. While Ironside's topic obviously dictates the most sustained attention to these issues, it is worth singling out one major thread of her piece: the doctrine of low prices that was long seen by Stalin and the leadership as a method of privileging the urban population over the peasantry, and was

justified in particular as a gift to the working class.⁶ But this supposed largesse could conceal other pressing motivations (reducing growing stockpiles of manufactured goods circa 1948), and was contradicted by conditions on the ground (such as ration-like measures or closed shopping practices resulting from shortages after rationing was abolished). Gaps between intentions and practices as well as unintended consequences were therefore key.

The focus on legal and political issues in Exeler's analysis of Moscow's politics of retribution dictates a less sustained focus on material motivations, but they do appear in a revealing way in the amnesty promised during the war to "traitors of the Motherland" who were recruited by the partisans. This deliberate policy attracted few takers as the partisan movement got off the ground in 1942, but the turning tide of war in the wake of Stalingrad prompted some large-scale defections from the German side to the partisans. There were reports of bribes of large sums of money and even gold offered to Soviet agents charged with organizing the *volte-face*. Ending up on the winning side, it turned out, could be valued more highly than gold.

The material dimension in Solonari's study revolves not only around how the turn toward total exploitation of resources in Transnistria devastated relations with the local population, but how Romanian pretensions toward defending European civilization led to a remarkable exception in the case of the Russophone intelligentsia, particularly in Odessa. Stunned by the Europeanness of Odessa's faded glory, the Romanian occupiers posed as patrons of opera, ballet, and theater. This had, as Solonari shows, distinct material consequences in terms of privileged rations, salaries for professors and artists higher than under the Soviets, and the allocation of luxurious housing. Unlike the Germans, whose racial hierarchy put the Russians underneath other Slavs, the Romanian occupation regime belittled Ukrainian culture and favored the Russian—as exemplified by the first performance of Tchaikovskii's *Evgenii Onegin* after the Opera Theater in Odessa reopened on December 7, 1941. The Romanian army and occupation administration saw the negative views of ordinary people toward them as a legacy of communism, not the result of rapacious economic exploitation. Yet they attributed the reliability and sympathy of Russophone intellectuals, including engineers and schoolteachers as well as professors and artists, to their material privileges and their higher cultural level, a main sign of which was appreciation of the Romanians.

The material dimension runs like a red thread through the other treatments as well. For Bernstein's largely rural Riazan' oblast, even collaborators cannot simply be labeled anti-Soviet; rather, in his account, they exhibited either enterprising calculations or survival instincts. The kolkhoz peasantry, by the same token, displayed a long-established hostility toward central authority rather than a preference for either German or Soviet power. Material considerations and motivations are part of the mix throughout Bernstein's discussion; a divisive and fateful moment came when local authorities received

6. In this sense, it formed part of the "economy of the gift" described by Jeffrey Brooks in *Thank You, Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton, 2000).

orders to burn the 70,000 tons of grain that had not been evacuated as of the arrival of the Wehrmacht in late November 1941.

Finally, as McBride suggests, the allure of looted goods from the Polish villages in the OUN-UPA ethnic cleansing operations has to be considered a significant factor for “ordinary,” first-time peasant killers in the midst of wartime poverty and starvation. One villager who claimed he was coerced into killing, in testimony McBride highlights, also went home with looted goods, while another surprised fellow Ukrainian villagers in Krymne when he suddenly appeared at home with a new horse. Indeed, the allure of material gain does not invalidate the notion that this peasant could have also been coerced into violence. McBride’s micro-study of violence is notable for its explicit attempt to document a multiplicity of motivations and a heterogeneity of backgrounds among the perpetrators. This stands in contrast to the common practice of reducing them all to a single label (such as “nationalists”) motivated by a single cause (such as “ethnic hatreds”) or flowing inexorably from a single structural conjuncture (such as “triple occupation”). Some local Ukrainian policemen undertook anti-Polish actions and participated in the Holocaust, McBride argues in a critique of Timothy Snyder, but others had not. Local situational mechanisms producing violence, therefore, should not be subsumed under general arguments about brutalization or overlapping atrocities.

What, then, can we say about the role and nature of ideology in the titanic clash among quintessentially ideological dictatorships and movements on the Eastern Front? It is noteworthy that an exploration of ideology is also a major feature of this collection, and that this comes right alongside concerns with the material motivations of ordinary people. To continue with the case of ethnic cleansing studied by McBride: nationalist ideology assumes its place alongside coercion and material incentives in the multiple methods used by OUN-UPA in recruiting ethnic cleansers. Indeed, McBride emphasizes that OUN-UPA leaders had formulated a nationalist ideology that was a blueprint for ethnic cleansing before 1939 in order to underscore his argument that anti-Polish violence was not an epiphenomenon of either Soviet or German occupation.

In the case of Bernstein, whose central focus, like McBride’s, is on “ordinary” peasants, rural hostility to centralized authority—whether it be Soviet or German—is key. A major reference point for him is thus the collectivization of agriculture. In the case of 1930, rural rebellion led to the redistribution of property, and the retreat of Soviet power in 1941 led to a recapitulation of the same phenomenon as the kolkhoz system collapsed. The local, practical, and material concerns of the rural folk in Bernstein’s narrative seem to be far from ideology. However, even here ideology is ever-present, if only because Bernstein’s entire analysis of *bezvlastie* must be reconstructed against the grain of official ideological explanations that run through interrogation documents and the investigations that took place upon the restoration of Soviet power.

Does the stress here on ordinary citizens’ material motivations, not to mention coercion and the simple urge to survive, imply that ideology can be distinguished as the opposite of interests? Among the most common fallacies embraced by historians and students of communism is the notion that ideo-

logues must always operate according to a master plan or within a straight-jacket of ideas without consideration for pragmatic concerns. Ideology, according to this superficial stereotype, must be a rigid framework that is both inflexible and aggressive. In this view, upheld both by the man on the street and much of postwar social science, ideology is the binary opposite of realistic interests. By extension, it can also be disaggregated as a discrete, explanatory historical factor.⁷ In these treatments, by contrast, ideology appears more as one of many factors embedded in the interpretational mix. Even as McBride, for example, distinguishes among nationalist ideology, material incentives, and coercion as motivations behind the actions of the ethnic cleansers, he makes the case that more than one motivation can be present at the same time and that they can intermingle.

Additionally, much depends on how ideology is approached or defined.⁸ Ideology as a doctrine (Marxism-Leninism, for example) may be recognized as having its own weight and dynamics even as it is acknowledged that ideology can coexist and interact with other causal factors. Another possible way of approaching ideology is not as a doctrine or codified system of ideas, but as a more diffuse yet no less powerful world-view. The peasants described by Bernstein can be said to have operated in accordance with their own rural ideology. Indeed, material objects themselves shape and serve as vehicles for ideological projects and conceptions of self.⁹

In her article on price reductions, Ironside uses the notion of “doctrine” more narrowly, to refer to a set of beliefs and normative assumptions about how the planned economy worked—and not according to Marxist-Leninist postulates as such. In Soviet conditions of widespread scarcity on the supply side, the state’s pursuit of artificially low prices only threw fuel on the fire of “deficits” and queues. But price reductions, Ironside suggests, had their own peculiar logic within the world of Soviet economic thought, and they held political implications in their association with fighting speculation, benefiting urban workers, and moving closer to communism. Ironside, much like Bernstein, makes the case that the war years can only be understood in light of prewar Stalinism. While in Bernstein’s case, collectivization in 1930 serves to illuminate the outbreak of war in 1941, Ironside argues that the economic course toward lower prices (seen as a measure against speculation and a way to bring down market prices), launched after the abolition of rationing in 1935, was interrupted by the emergency rationing of the war. The late Stalinist resumption of repeated price reductions was thus a continuation of a broader arc of prewar “socialist construction” temporarily halted by years

7. Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (New York, 2007); Michael Freeden, *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2003), 2; Nigel Gould-Davies, “Rethinking the Role of Ideology in International Politics During the Cold War,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 1, 1 (1999): 90–109.

8. For my own approach, see Michael David-Fox, “The Blind Men and the Elephant: Six Faces of Ideology in the Soviet Context,” chap. 3 of *Crossing Borders: Modernity, Ideology, and Culture in Russia and the Soviet Union* (Pittsburgh, 2015).

9. Alexey Golubev, “Elemental Materialism: Objectifying Power and Selfhood in the Late USSR, 1961–1991” (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2016).

of war. If the doctrine of price reductions Ironside discusses was thoroughly ideological, it is shown to be ideological in a particular way. While approaching ideology as “doctrine” most often leads Soviet historians to examine ideas as expressed in disseminated texts, this discussion of an economic doctrine shows how a set of interlocking assumptions was expressed in and fortified by practices.

If Ironside provokes thought on the reinforcing intersection of ideology and practices, Solonari’s article suggests how ideology overlaps with broader cultural orientations. Solonari analyzes a form of Romanian Orientalism that drew upon certain aspects of Orientalist thinking toward the Eastern Slavs as it worked in tandem with extreme nationalism to produce a specific ideology of colonialism in Transnistria. By analogy, one can observe that that German *völkisch* nationalism and National Socialism also built on a more general myth of the East.¹⁰ In this incarnation, ideology appears at once as a set of ideas shaping the concrete occupation policies of Romanianization and a broader *Weltanschauung* incorporating Orientalizing cultural fantasies in the name of “European” civilization. The Romanian ideology of colonialism informed the extraction of resources, which quickly devolved into all-out plunder and wrecked initial goals of making Transnistria into a model province.

In Exeler’s description of the state’s treatment not just of those deemed traitors, but also of the Soviet population as a whole that had lived in occupied territory, Soviet power appears in the rather unfamiliar guise of an “ambivalent state.” Inconsistencies in Moscow’s politics of retribution, apart from reflecting tensions between ideological and pragmatic concerns, resulted in contradictions within ideology itself: the belief that the war had uncovered mass enemies in hiding, and the belief that it had been won with the mass support of the Soviet population. Indeed, any major ideology is like a tapestry comprised of many different and not always coherent strands. In this case, both dogmas can be seen to have evolved out of one of the core tensions within Bolshevik political culture after 1917—between an optimistic urge to proselytize or convert and a pessimistic mania for security dictating the eradication of pervasive enemies.¹¹ After the turning point in the war of 1943–44, the politics of retribution became more complex. As the military and political authorities faced numerous pressing and not always compatible imperatives in reestablishing the Soviet system, the two strands within the ideology clashed. Pragmatic concerns, including a desperate need for cadres in sectors such as education, certainly played their role, Exeler argues. But the shopworn dichotomy between ideology and pragmatism does not suffice as an explanation. In the end, Exeler’s treatment highlights how ideology need not always be impractical; like Ironside, she shows it to be embedded in and not always the binary opposite of practices.

10. Gerd Koenen, *Der Russland-Komplex: Die Deutschen und der Osten 1900–1945* (Munich, 2005).

11. Here see Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941* (New York, 2012), chap. 8.

Taken together, these articles suggest how the study of “ordinary” people sheds light on the pinnacles of power, as well as vice-versa; that the material and ideological dimensions of the war can and must be studied together; and that both chronological and geographical synthesis and boundary-crossing can be productively applied to many other areas in the scholarship on the Eastern Front in World War II.