

# The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet People 1941 - 1945

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# Knowledge vs. Understanding

Knowledge is a mighty thing  
To have in the hand,  
But I would trade it all  
If I could only understand

***Karen Paik***

8th Grade Student, U.S.A.

# Understanding GPW

# World War II

- 1 September 1939 – 2 September 1945.
- 2,194 days and nights of WW II.
- 1,419 days and nights of the Great patriotic War.
- Three continents – Europe, Asia and Africa, hostilities on the territory of 40 countries.
- 61 countries were engaged into the War with a population of 1,700,000,000 (3/4 of Mankind).
- Altogether, 110,000,000 men and women wore uniform.

# Hitler's Proclamation of War against the USSR, 22 June 1941

“German people! National Socialists!

Weighted down with heavy cares, condemned to months-long silence, the hour has now come when at last **I can speak frankly...**

During the night of June 17 to June 18 Russian patrols again penetrated into the Reich's territory and could only be driven back after prolonged firing. This has brought us to the hour when it is necessary for us to take steps **against this plot devised by the Jewish Anglo-Saxon warmongers and equally the Jewish rulers of the Bolshevist center in Moscow.**

I therefore decided today again to lay the fate and future of the German Reich and our people in the hands of our soldiers.

May God help us especially in this fight!”

# Ribbentrop on the War against the USSR, 22 June 1941

...Contrary to all engagements which they have undertaken in absolute contradiction to their solemn declarations, the Soviet Government have turned against Germany, they have:

- 1) Not only continued but, even since the outbreak of war, intensified subversive activities against Germany and Europe; they have
- 2) In continually increasing measure, developed their foreign policy in a tendency hostile to Germany; and they have
- 3) Massed their entire forces on the German frontier ready for action.

The Soviet Government have thus violated treaties and broken their agreements with Germany.

Bolshevist Moscow's hatred of National Socialism was stronger than its political wisdom.

# Ribbentrop on the War against the USSR, 22 June 1941

(Continue)

Bolshevism is opposed to National Socialism in deadly enmity.

**Bolshevist Moscow is about to stab National Socialist Germany in the back** while she is engaged in a struggle for her existence.

Germany has no intention of remaining inactive in the face of this grave threat to her eastern frontier.

The Fuehrer has, therefore, ordered German forces to oppose this menace with all the might at their disposal.

In the coming struggle the German people are fully aware that they are called upon **not only to defend their native land but to save the entire civilized world from the deadly dangers of bolshevism** and clear the way for true social progress in Europe.

# The Russian Front

Professor John Erickson:

- “No single explanation will ever suffice to explain the barbarity, heroism, self-sacrifice, patriotism, endless despair, the ecstasies of triumph which formed in myriads upon myriads of instances the Russian front.”



# The Russian Front - II

Professor John Erickson:

- “This was not a conventional war of conquest, it was intended to be a war of extermination. It was intended to root out what Hitler called the “Jewish Bolshevik gang” who ran Russia. It was designed to destroy the political structure both of the Soviet Union and of the Red Army. In consequence, the terrible barbarity which set in at the first stage in the Soviet/German war was to become the overriding feature which persisted until the very last day of that war.”

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# D. D. Eisenhower on WW II - 7

July 19, 1942. To George Marshall (Cont.):

- “Because of conditions existing throughout the world, including the bottlenecks in the preparatory program of the United States and Great Britain, it has been determined that direct, major, attack against German held Europe cannot be made before 1943. **This leaves Russia fighting virtually unaided against the full power of the German nation** until winter can again intervene, during all of which time **the fate of the rest of the Allied world is largely bound up in the endurance and efficiency of the Red Army**”.

# Understanding Russia's War

» Professor Richard Overy:

**The key to understanding that war lies with an understanding of Russia herself.**

The war exposed many of the enduring features of Russian and Soviet culture. **Soldiers were brutal because much of their experience of life was brutal and harsh. Their resilience and stubbornness, the toughness of both men and women, were the product of a bitter climate and extreme conditions of work.** The coarser side of Russian life was evident in the routine of the labor camps or the discipline of the regiment or the factory. Yet ordinary people could also display a traditional sentimentality, found in a powerful sense of both history and place.

# Understanding Russia's War - I

Professor Richard Overy:

**“Material explanations of Soviet victory are never quite convincing.** It is difficult to write the history of the war without recognizing that some idea of a **Russian “soul” or “spirit” mattered too much to ordinary people** to be written off as mere sentimentality, however mundane or banal or brutalizing was the real day-to-day experience of war.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that **every Russian ruler has been at war with the people**, partly because the Russian empire was a multinational empire built on conquest, partly because governing Russian society always required some element of terror to hold the vast, peasant-based, anarchic community together.”

# The Soviet Soldier

- “You had always to kill a Russian twice over..., the Russians had never been beaten..., no man who drew blood there ever left Russia alive”  
(From: Alan Clark. “Barbarossa. The Russian-German Conflict, 1941-45)

## German assessments of the Soviet soldier:

- The Slav psyche: fanatic conviction, extreme bravery, cruelty and childlike kindness
- Fatalistic attitude enables the Russian to bear extreme hardship and privation
- Kinship with nature
- Frugality
- Physical fitness
- Ignorance of own casualties
- Night combat, over any terrain, under any weather conditions
- He had to be considered a first-rate fighter.

(Source: Small Unit Action During the German Campaign in Russia. Washington D.C., 1953)



**ЗА РОДИНУ,  
ЗА ЧЕСТЬ, ЗА СВОБОДУ!**

# German “Elephant” against Russian “Ants”

A German Colonel Bernd von Kleist:

- "The German Army in fighting Russia is like **an elephant attacking a host of ants**. The elephant will kill thousands, perhaps even millions, of ants, but in the end their numbers will overcome him, and **he will be eaten to the bone.**"

Source: Alan Clark. Barbarossa. The Russian-German Conflict, 1941-45. Quill. New York, 1985. P. 55.



# Those Russians ...

A German soldier's letter home from Stalingrad:

- “Don't worry, don't be upset, because the sooner I am under the ground, the less I will suffer. We often think that Russia should capitulate, but these uneducated people are too stupid to realize it”



# To Kill a Russian Twice

Professor Alan Clark:

“...That you had always to kill a Russian twice over; that the Russians had never been beaten; that no man who drew blood there ever left Russia alive. And every German, whatever part of the front he fought in, noticed with an uneasy mixture of horror and admiration the conduct of the Russian wounded.

They do not cry out, they do not groan, they do not curse. Undoubtedly there is something mysterious, something inscrutable, about their stern, stubborn silence.”

- *Source: Alan Clark. Barbarossa. The Russian-German Conflict, 1941-45*

# The Great Patriotic War: Names to Know

- **Stalin** – the Soviet political, military and ideological leader; a symbol of the Soviet Victory for the common people during the war
- **Zoya Kosmodem'yanskaya** - a hero partisan woman, executed (hanged) by the Germans
- **Karbishev** - a Soviet general, expert in fortifications, taken prisoner, executed (been frozen to death) by the Germans
- **Aleksander Matrosov** – a soldier who covered the enemy's bunker slot (machine-gun) with his own body and
- **Vlasov** – a Soviet general, went to the enemy side and headed anti-Soviet pro-Fascist ROA - “Russian Liberation Army”
- **Meresyev** – a Soviet pilot, his fighter was shot, he lost both legs, but survived, continued flying with two artificial limbs
- **Georgiy Zhukov** – the most famous and the brightest Soviet military leader; “where Zhukov is, there victory is”

# Heroism vs. Fanaticism

- HERO - A person who is admired for great courage, special achievements, or noble character.
- COURAGE – the quality that makes a person able to face danger or difficulty bravely.
- FANATIC – A person with unreasonable enthusiasm for or devotion to his/her beliefs, ideas, or feelings.

# Pavlov's House



- 27 September a reconnaissance group of four, headed by 25-year-old Sergeant Pavlov, occupied a 4-storied semi ruined house in the center of Stalingrad. That intensive fighting was going on for 58 days.
- That house, known as "Pavlov's house", became a **symbol of determination of Russians to hold the city no matter what.**
- General Chuikov: "This small group of men destroyed more enemy soldiers while defending one house than the Nazis had lost while taking Paris."

# The Soviet Soldier: German Assessments

Erhard Rauss, the German General:

- **“The Russians were very adept at preparing inhabited places for defense.** In a short time, a village would be converted into a little fortress... It was Russian practice to allow the enemy to draw near, and then to fire at him unexpectedly... Permanent structures destroyed by artillery fire or aerial bombs were utilized as defense points. The ruins hid weapons and served to strengthen the underlying bunkers. **Even the heaviest shelling would not drive the Russians from such positions, they had to be dislodged with hand grenades or flame throwers.** The Russians, upon retreating, frequently burned or blasted buildings suitable for housing command posts or other important military installations.”

# The Soviet Soldier: German Assessments-1

Erhard Rauss, the German General:

- “The commissars found special support among the women who served within the framework of the Soviet Army. Russian women served in all-female units with the so-called partisan bands, individually as gunners in the artillery. As spies dropped by parachute, as medical corps aides with the fighting corps and in the rear in the auxiliary services. **They were political fanatics**, filled with hate for every opponent, cruel and incorruptible. The women were enthusiastic Communists – and dangerous.

It was also not unusual for women to fight in the front lines. Thus, in 1941 medical corps women defended the last positions in front of Leningrad with pistols and hand-grenades until they fell in the battle...”.

# The Russians: National Psychology

- National character of the Russian people was formed under the influence of a severe climate, boundless geographical spaces, Orthodox Christian religion, unique national culture.
- Russian mentality and national character influenced behavior of the Soviet soldiers and the Soviet combat style.



# The Russians: National Psychology-1

- *Courage, tenacity, persistence, toughness, ability to sustain the most severe hardships.*
- *Passivity, long-lasting tolerance.*
- *Anarchism, rejection and ignorance of laws and regulations. "A Russian, no matter what his rank and position are, avoids or violates laws everywhere, where it is possible to do so being unpunished; and by the same token the Government acts" (A. Herten).*
- *Fanaticism, extremism in acts and ideas. "The Russian can not carry out his historical destiny without revolt ..." (N. Berdyaev).*

# The Russians: National Psychology-2

- *Collectivism vs. individualism; the strong “herd instinct”;*
- *AVOS’ principle: do nothing to make things better, ignore the reality in a hope that everything will be OK;*
- *Scornful attitude towards a human life, to an individuality.*  
The cost of a human life in Russia was traditionally very low.
- *Self-sacrifice, mass heroism and fanaticism, “First think (care) about others and then – about yourself”, the eagerness to perform the most dangerous missions.*

# The Russians: National Psychology - 3

- “Death is glorious, if there are people around you” (На миру и смерть красна).
- “Iron Fist” syndrome.
- Russian national character is a mixture of extremes, opposing traits:
  - Passive, inert + risky, adventurous;
  - Kind, open-hearted + cruel, savage.

WHAT ELSE?

# Russians: Influence of Totalitarian Regime

- Absolute, blind faith in Stalin.
- Suspicion. Anyone around could be a “stukach” (person, secretly working for NKVD-KGB)
- Lack of initiative; afraid to take the initiative and responsibility.
- “The boss is always right. If he is not right – see the previous sentence.”
- Nowhere to escape feelings of the people.
- Fear for your life and your family member’s lives.

# The Soviet Management Style

- BASIC PRINCIPLES:

- Strict hierarchy: CPSU on the top of management pyramid
- CPSU membership was a prerequisite for career
- Active social position
- Total planning and control
- “Telephone law”
- Total cynicism and double standard attitude

- MAXIMS:

- I am a boss, you are a fool
- The boss is always right
- Initiative is punishable
-

# Russian hostility toward the outer world

- A nation's attitude toward its environment is a nation's perception of its place and role in the world.
- In general, the environment for the Russians is traditionally hostile – **confrontational type of attitude.**
- The Russians were to protect their own house from the enemies outside.
- The Russians are more **“defensive-oriented”** than **“offensive-oriented”** people.
- This trait of the Russian character is connected with other traits: passiveness, patience, tenacity.
- **Russian mistrust of the external world**, for instance, is historically verifiable as part of the national character, whether it is because of the centuries of Tatar rule, three invasions from Western Europe in little more than a century, or something else. And **Russian stoicism** is a character trait, whether the cause is Russian Orthodox Christianity, communism, or the long Russian winters.

David Jablonsky. *National Power// Parameters*, Spring 1997.

# The Soviet Soldier: His Dreams

- During the war all the soldiers and senior officers were “normal” civilian men and women, mostly young (18-30 y.o.). Some of them were volunteers, some – were mobilized. They were united by the hatred towards Nazi invaders.

**BUT**

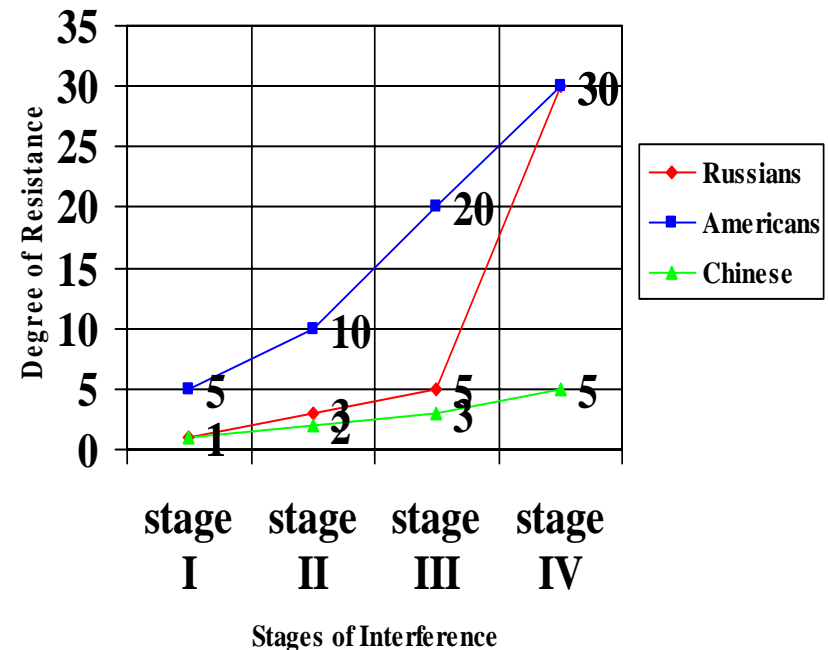
- «I want to be wounded in a combat, but lightly.”
- To get enough sleep and food.
- Friendship, personal relations were extremely important.
- Vodka: up to 100 grams a day.
- “Front wives”.



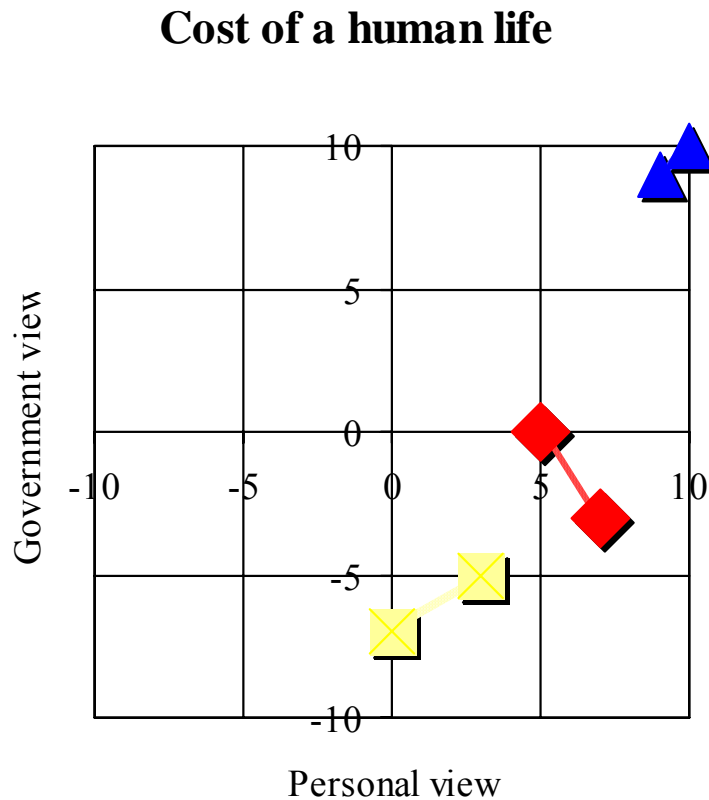
# Mode of a Nation's Resistance

- A nation suffers from different actions (hardships, interferences) from inside (economical and social policy of its government, etc.) and outside (war, aggression, disaster, etc.)
- The attitude of different nations toward these sufferings and hardships are different: some of them resist, some are patient for a certain period of time, some – don't react at all.

"Don't wage war against Russians, **they harness horses slowly, but ride very fast**" - Bismark



# The Cost of a Human Life: Subjective Vision



- Cultures differ in their attitude towards a human life. The importance (or the cost) of a human life is different:
- from the government point of view (to start a war, to send troops into combat, purges, etc)
- and from a man personal point of view (to sacrifice your life, to die for your country, to give your life saving other people, etc.).

# German Soldiers-POW



## Stalin's anecdote:

- “One of our men was leading a large group of German prisoners and on the way he killed all but one. They asked him, when he arrived at his destination: “And where are all the others?” “I was just carrying out the orders of the commander in chief,” he said, “to kill every one to the last man – and here is the last man.”

(A conversation with Milovan Djilas)