

## Stalin as Human Being: A Snapshot from the Military Conference of April 1940

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Joseph Stalin remains and in all likelihood will remain the central figure of the Soviet Union. Was he a "monster" or "devil," as some commentators have said?<sup>1</sup> For other writers, Stalin was perhaps slightly more human, but was above all a master plotter without compunction who killed millions of innocent people in order to keep himself in power. Although in recent years new biographies of Stalin and collections of documents related to his leadership of the USSR have appeared, we seem to be no closer to a resolution of who Stalin was and what he really wanted than we were before the era of glasnost'.<sup>2</sup>

The image of Stalin as monster is deeply embedded in the culture of educated Russians and in the western public's mind. This picture blackens many, probably most, interpretations of Soviet history, which in turn have a profound impact to this day on opinions of Russia. Writers like Richard Pipes, Martin Malia, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn have tried to shift much of the blame for what they see as the unmitigated fiasco of the USSR, encapsulated in something called "Stalinism," onto "Leninism" or Marxism. Yet it is Stalin who remains the preeminent symbol of Soviet history. He is still mentioned casually in newspaper reports about current Russian life, as though westerners need to be reminded regularly of the horrors that he inflicted—single-handedly, it would seem in many scholarly and popular accounts—on the Soviet people.

Herein lies a problem. The more that political power in the USSR is credited to Stalin alone, the less the people count for anything. If Stalin had all the power, the people had none. The devil may delegate some authority to lesser demons in hell, but the souls who suffer there are

in no way participatory citizens. The monster Stalin ruled over the hapless people, who were never actors but always mere objects of actions from above. This view of the Russian/Soviet citizenry is in fact quite old, as you know; it harks back to Custine, Olearius, and Herberstein, to name a few prominent foreign observers of Russia. The Russian intelligentsia, as noted, has also widely embraced the idea that Stalin possessed all power in the USSR; this is convenient for Russians, who can therefore argue that the people had no responsibility for the massive crimes that took place while he ruled. On the other hand, a number of recent accounts by Russians of the man and his era at least hint that Stalin enjoyed considerable popular support.<sup>3</sup> The dilemma of a monster with popular backing is often solved by denigrating the Soviet people.

But such arguments, whether made in East or West, set up another problem: why were the Soviet people so helpless? The ordinary folk of the USSR—in fact, everyone below Stalin, including figures like Kalinin and Molotov, whose wives were arrested—were supposed to be incapable of resistance to their chief. The opinion that Russians love a strong leader is advanced fairly often; presumably this would extend for some to a love of the knout,<sup>4</sup> or of nine grams of lead in the back of the head.<sup>5</sup>

Wouldn't it be nice if we could jettison all of the material we have ever heard about Stalin and start over by looking without preconceptions at the documents from his rule that are now available? And wouldn't it be appropriate to start with the assumption that Stalin was a human being, and that he should be understood as such? Could we perhaps go one step further and not begin with the prejudice that while in the West people are actors, in Russia they are only recipients of actions by the "state"? It would be difficult to do any of this, of course; we are the products and prisoners of many layers of information, legend, political considerations, and

personal inclinations.

Yet it is worth the attempt to cut through all the baggage and take a fresh look at Stalin as leader. This is not easy in any event, for there are relatively few materials currently available that show him interacting with other people in discussions of policy issues. Politburo minutes are not accessible to researchers, and the Central Committee records opened years ago often have a highly ritualized quality that makes it difficult to tell when, where, or by whom an important decision was made.

However, a different kind of document has recently been published from Soviet archives; this is the stenographic record of a military conference held in the Kremlin in April 1940.<sup>6</sup> Stalin attended every session, interjected remarks regularly during speeches by military officers, and delivered the closing address. He appears as a leader concerned above all with how to find the best policy for a critical area of Soviet life.

After the humiliating early defeats of the Winter War with Finland, which dragged on from November 1939 until March 1940, Soviet military performance was in dire need of improvement. Although the April conference closed before the German attack began on France and the Low Countries, the fascist menace to the USSR was already crystal clear. On the other side of the globe, Soviet armies had fought against and defeated the Japanese in encounters in the summers of 1938 and 1939. But Japanese expansionism remained a powerful force, and the conquest of Manchuria and then large areas of central China raised the possibility of the USSR's ultimate nightmare, a two-front war.

A few words about the Winter War may be helpful in setting the scene of the conference. A basic problem for the Soviet side was the Finnish landscape, which was especially unsuited

for mechanized warfare. D. D. Leliushenko, who commanded the 39<sup>th</sup> tank brigade, reported that in the military theater the terrain was “about 50% forest, 25% water, a small percentage of swamps, and about 10% land where tanks could operate.”<sup>7</sup> The Soviet government opened the war in November, the worst time of year to start a fight, as deep snow particularly hampered offensive movements, and the short days and fog greatly limited the use of aviation, in which the Red forces were vastly superior to the Finns. Soviet planes could not fly at all on 80 of the 105 days of combat. The lack of air activity meant that planes could not support ground troops and that enemy firing points could not be spotted from above. Red Army commanders learned, at great cost, that it was better to attack Finnish fortifications at night than by day. But at night, even in good weather, aircraft were of no help at all.

On the other side of the front, the defenders made brilliant use of equipment, landscape, and climate. They had constructed strongly fortified regions among the seemingly numberless forests, rivers, and lakes of their country. In the area of Khotinen, along a belt 2.5 kilometers wide and 1 to 1.7 kilometers deep, the Finns had built 22 reinforced concrete fire points (pillboxes); of those 10 were artillery points. There were also trenches, 29 firing blinds, and a series of other defensive structures consisting of wire, pits, traps, and mine fields. The biggest pillbox was 20 meters wide and 40 meters long and had two stories; after Soviet troops captured it, they needed 5,500 kilograms of explosives to destroy it.<sup>8</sup> The pillboxes formed a dense network, leading one Red commander to claim that, “As a rule, each pillbox was supported by the fire of five other ones.”<sup>9</sup>

Finns had automatic weapons, Soviet troops had rifles. The defenders all wore snow camouflage, while Red units usually went into battle wearing dark uniforms. Sometimes Soviet

soldiers went to the front even without boots, let alone the winter footgear of choice, *valenki*. The Finns skied silently through the forests that they knew well, often probing deep into the Soviet rear, where they carried out surprise attacks and disrupted communications. They also made a practice of destroying field kitchens, which harmed Red morale deeply. Finnish soldiers were highly trained, and they acted independently, quickly, and boldly. Out of desperation, they took calculated risks that paid off handsomely in the early fighting.

Soviet forces were probably overly mechanized for action in Finland, especially in winter. The attacking troops stuck largely to the narrow roads through the forests, frequently bringing movement to a crawl or halting it completely. Columns strung out for many kilometers, offering easy targets to small units of Finns who attacked along the flanks. For all these reasons the defenders were able to surround a total of six Red Army divisions, of which three to four were utterly destroyed, in separate battles. Finally, starting in January 1940, the Soviet side regrouped and brought up massive numbers of artillery pieces; this spelled the difference, though the process took another two months. Red losses have been put at more than 84,000 killed or missing, plus 186,584 wounded. Finnish casualties were 23,157 killed and 43,557 wounded.<sup>10</sup>

Thus the Winter War produced an image in the West of the USSR/Russia not only as a bully that attacked tiny Finland, but as a grossly incompetent one. The British, you will recall, came close to declaring war on the Soviet Union as the fighting went on. In 1939-early 1940 an old poem by Rudyard Kipling, "The Truce of the Bear," circulated among high British officials. The Russians were "the bear that walks like a man," a "monstrous, pleading thing." It is most dangerous when it seems to be "seeking quarter, with paws like hands in prayer." That is when it will try to get near to rip your face off. The poem itself grew out of Anglo-Russian rivalry in the

nineteenth century, itself to some degree fed by the legacy of western fear of Russia dating back at least to the construction of a fleet by Peter the Great. Neville Chamberlain remained opposed to any conciliation with Moscow; "He who supps with the Devil," he said to the Allied Supreme Council, "needs a long spoon."<sup>11</sup> Only the deeper British fear of German power maintained London's neutrality at this point.

Old western impressions of Russians' willingness to throw lives away and to absorb tremendous casualties in battle were also reaffirmed; in World War I the Russian Army had been a "steamroller," but an ineffective one. The British, French, and Germans all now conveniently forgot about their own penchant for sacrificing troops from 1914 to 1918.

Any attacking force would have had much trouble overcoming the Finnish defenses and the advantages of fighting on one's home ground in a region of dense forests and endless lakes. Nevertheless, it was clear to all observers that for several months the Red Army had performed badly. Major changes were in order, and it was not a time for mouthing propaganda, particularly in a closed session among military professionals. Still, Stalinism was a system that in most circumstances precluded open, serious discussion of problems. Therefore the conference of April 1940 was remarkable for the nature and depth of criticism by participants. In reviewing the negative and positive sides of Soviet performance in Finland, the military officers who addressed the conference followed Stalin's lead in speaking with considerable frankness. Some speakers even quarreled with the *vozhd'*. By the way, we know the fate of the major participants, and there is no discernible pattern of repression among those who pointed to shortcomings, even systemic ones, in Soviet organization and performance.

One of the defects mentioned several times at the Kremlin conference was poor military

intelligence about the enemy. The location of the Mannerheim defensive line as well as numerous details about it were known to the Soviet side. However, to give an example of poor intelligence highlighted at the conference, the commanders of the Leningrad Military District, responsible for the initial attack, had no information about Finnish aircraft past the year 1917. Things were slightly better at the general staff level, where intelligence on planes from 1930 was available. Of course, the problem of access to data was endemic in the Soviet military and in the Stalinist system in general. But now the costs of excessive secrecy were evident; in Finland it had produced losses that could have been avoided.

Army Commander V. A. Frolov gave an example: around Petsamo the 14<sup>th</sup> Army had attacked in a certain direction in order to seize the area's nickel mines. But it turned out that the mines were located in a different area. Frolov commented that "it was possible in peacetime to learn" the precise location of the mines.

Stalin replied from the tribune that, "Here in Moscow we knew."

Frolov: "But we did not know."

Stalin: "[We are] sorry that we didn't communicate anything."<sup>12</sup>

P. S. Stepanovich, commander of an infantry corps, complained that although the army possessed a new and effective 50 millimeter mortar, it had largely been kept secret even within the top ranks. "Absolutely no one of the command staff knew this mortar, and we had to study it during the fighting. We should declassify (*rassekretit* ) all new weapons."<sup>13</sup>

Kiril Meretskov, already a leading general and head of an army in Finland, expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that commanders were not able to read foreign military literature. "This, Comrade Stalin, hampers us in following military affairs abroad."

Stalin: "This is an intolerable situation."<sup>14</sup>

The chief of military intelligence, I. I. Proskurov, attempted to justify his office's activity by saying that recent information was available in safes, but that it was often secret (*zasekrechena*). At this point the stenographic record reads:

A voice [from the audience]: "It is all secret."

[Another] voice: "That is why it is necessary to say bluntly that abroad it is possible to buy in the shops what is secret for the Red Army."

Stalin: "This is the way of people who do not want our Red Army to know much. That is why, evidently, everything is secret with us."<sup>15</sup>

If less was to be kept secret, it followed that there should be more faith in commanders. This was crucial in any event, for they had to show initiative in battle; otherwise they could not change tactics and methods to meet new challenges. Several high officers had displayed some daring in Finland, even violating the rules of the army field manual, which stated that tanks could not be used at night. When Colonel S. I. Mladentsev, commander of an infantry regiment, proudly said that he had successfully employed tanks at night, no one objected. Stalin even insisted that "everything depends on the commander,"<sup>16</sup> echoing his comment of the early 1930s that "cadres determine everything." As was true for economic managers, much was resolved or permitted in the military by success.

When it came to questions of life or death on a large scale, as it had in Finland, concrete ways to improve matters had to be found. The Kremlin conference dealt with sharp, painful questions about the recent performance of Soviet forces, in the midst of a highly threatening international situation. The speeches and interchanges at the sessions were not political intrigues



but attempts to correct fatal mistakes, drawing on the experiences of field commanders. When Stalin spoke to the assembled group, he expressed a political line. The officers then took his directives back to the rest of the armed forces. We should not assume that after the commanders left the closed meetings, Stalin returned to his office, lit up the old glittering yellow eyes mentioned by so many writers, and countermanded what he had just said. Such a scenario would be a fruitless return to the image of the devilish plotter. Besides, Stalin's interjections at the conference made sense.

A particularly important exchange that illuminated army politics in the wake of the Finnish debacle occurred between Meretskov, Stalin, and G. I. Kulik, assistant commissar of defense and head of artillery in the Winter War, who had just been promoted to the rank of marshal. Here is the relevant portion of the stenographic report:

Kulik: I think that we eliminated the arrest of commanders too early. [When a policy of not arresting top officers began is not clear, but it was no earlier than late 1938].

Meretskov: That's wrong. We need to raise the honor of the commander, so that he survives, but we write reports [*raspistoniat*] and say that he is not disciplined.

Stalin: What kind of dignity can a commander have if he is arrested?

Kulik: I personally think, I don't what the government [thinks], that we eliminated arrest too early. A court is a court, and arrest is necessary.

Stalin: What kind of authority can a commander have in the eyes of the troops if he can be placed under arrest. Everyone will point at him—that's the one who did time.

Kulik: Officers did time in the old days.

Stalin: Don't judge by the old style. The old command staff was comprised of nobles.

They beat soldiers with sticks. You won't beat soldiers with sticks.

Kulik: I won't, but it's necessary to use arrests.

Stalin: I see that your hands are itching for action.

Kulik: When it's necessary to introduce order—yes.

Stalin: There are other means of influencing the commander.<sup>17</sup>

How are we to understand these remarks? Don't arrest, there are other ways—these are bittersweet words in light of the mass repressions of 1937-38. But it is necessary to keep in mind that the number of arrests among officers fell sharply during 1938 and amounted to very little in 1939-40 (see appendix). As we all know, Stalin is generally presented in scholarly and popular works as the world's most devious person. But when he lent the weight of his voice at a closed conference to raising the authority of commanders instead of arresting them—other than in the presence of considerable, verifiable evidence of treason, apparently—then it stands to reason that he meant what he said. At the same time, he left Kulik in extremely important posts during the war (only to have him shot in 1950). Meretskov died of old age in 1968. There is no pattern here of repression.

In effect Stalin was admitting that gross errors had occurred in the mass arrests of military personnel in 1937-38. This admission fit with other policies of the period 1939-early 1941 that also marked a turn away from mass repressions; these new departures included greatly reduced use of Article 58, anti-Soviet activity, in the courts; a considerable decline in the use of torture; trials of former NKVD men held in several places which openly revealed some of the brutal methods they had just been using; and careful investigations by the NKVD of industrial problems or accidents, in contrast to the quick assumption of earlier years that sabotage was involved.<sup>18</sup> Of

course millions remained in confinement or exile, and new laws on lateness to work and restricting job changes caused further suffering; still, the situation had improved dramatically relative to what had occurred during the Terror.

In the summer of 1941, when the Soviet armed forces and the country itself nearly collapsed, Stalin resumed the practice of summary executions on charges of treason. But that was another story, in which the *vozhd'* appeared to forget the lessons of the years 1937-38, when so many valuable people had been eliminated, and of the Finnish War itself. Once again the suspicious side of his nature rose to the fore.

But in April of 1940 other issues were more important. One of the most pressing was how to improve discipline in the armed forces. When Stalin gave the closing speech of the conference, he condemned "the psychology in the ranks and the command staff—hat tipping [shapkami zakidaem]." This phrase, found often in internal reports on troop morale in the 1930s,<sup>19</sup> referred to a lack of respect for officers among the soldiers and that all ranks had a relaxed attitude toward discipline. Stalin indicated that this outlook had arisen during the campaign of September 1939 in Poland, where conditions had been easy. In fact "hat-tipping" had been endemic in Soviet forces for years. The many arrests among officers in the late '30s had worsened the picture; there is some evidence that ordinary soldiers believed in Stalin and his purges all too strongly.<sup>20</sup>

At the Kremlin conference of 1940, Stalin underscored the necessity to discuss problems openly, at least within a limited circle. He went out of his way to stress that difficulties in the armed forces were the result of mistakes, not of intentional actions; he made a remark to this effect in regard to the performance in Finland of M. P. Kovalev, commander of an army, who

lived into old age untroubled by arrest.<sup>21</sup> Stalin took this stance at the time of a campaign to restore economic managers' authority, itself badly shaken during the Terror.

I have argued elsewhere that Stalin reacted to events as much or more than he initiated them.<sup>22</sup> Newly unearthed archival materials on collectivization and the "road to terror" of the mid-1930s show that Stalin approached major decisions carefully and even hesitatingly, waiting for information to come to him from people he trusted before making up his mind.<sup>23</sup> He was human. He was a man who had survived the terrible days of the Civil War, carrying with him for the rest of his life the scars and fears of that conflict. It seems that at various points thereafter Stalin was deeply afraid that the Soviet experiment would collapse. In this light, any number of his decisions, as well as the twists, turns, and reversals of policy under him, begin to make more sense. And perhaps if we see Stalin as more human, albeit with a great capacity for suspicion and viciousness, we will make progress toward seeing the Soviet people as human beings, even as actors and participants in a political system.

Dismissals from the army (not including the air force), 1935-39:

|      |              |                                    |
|------|--------------|------------------------------------|
| 1935 | 6198         | "discharged"                       |
| 1936 | 5677         | "                                  |
| 1937 | 4474         | arrests                            |
|      | <u>11104</u> | discharged for "ties to plotters"  |
|      | 15578        | total for 1937                     |
| 1938 | 5032         | arrests                            |
|      | 3580         | discharged for "ties"              |
|      | <u>4138</u>  | " for ethnic origin or connection* |
|      | 12750        | total for 1938                     |
| 1939 | 73           | arrests                            |
|      | <u>284</u>   | discharged for "ties"              |
|      | 357          | total for 1939                     |
|      | 28685        | grand total 1937-39                |

\* officers from the German, Polish, Korean or other "border peoples," or men connected to such peoples in some way. These officers were removed from the armed forces in June 1938 by order of the Commissariat of Defense.

Sources: figures for 1935-336 are from F. B. Komal, "Voennye kadry nakanye voiny," *Voенно-istoricheskii zhurnal*, no. 2, 1990; other figures and the directive of the Commissariat of Defense are from "O rabote za 1939 god. Iz otcheta nachal'nika Uprivleniia po nachal'stviuishchemu sotavu RKKK Narkomata Oborony SSSR E. A. Shchadenko, 5 maia 1940," *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 1, 1990. In general the figures given in these various sources correspond well to each other.

## Notes

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1. Getty and Naumov on monster, Radzinsky on devil. Many other views of S as not human, e.g. NYT Book Review cover May '96.
  2. Getty's comment in Road to Terror
  3. Dmitri Volkogonov, *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy*, ed. and trans. Harold Shukman (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991), xxiv, 188. Medvedev, *Let History Judge*, 711-17. Volkogonov, *Stalin*, 209, 267, 308, and 98, xx, 122, and 194. Edvard Radzinsky, *Stalin: The First In-depth Biography Based on Explosive New Documents from Russia's Secret Archives*, trans. H. T. Willetts (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 90, where, in reference to common people in 1917, he calls them "slaves." On 424 the people are termed "docile" in the 1930s, convinced by Stalin that they were "victors." O. V. Khlevniuk in his *1937-i: Stalin, NKVD i sovetskoe obshchestvo* (Moscow: Respublika, 1992), 7, finds that the people were naive. Like other Russian writers on the period, Khlevniuk recognizes only resistance to the Terror, never participation in it, as action: 6-7.
  4. Rancour-Laferriere, Slave Soul of Russia
  5. Nicholas Eberstadt on the "R factor" in declining Russian health: Russians' harmful "outlook, viewpoints, and attitudes," a kind of nationwide "mental-health problem," or "depression." Christian Sci Mon, 2/22/01
  6. *Zimniaia voina 1939-1940*. Kniga vtoraiia: I. V. Stalin i finskaia kompaniia (stenogramma soveshchaniia pri TsK VKP (b). Moscow: Nauka, 1998. Hereafter ZV, 2. Another military conference, with many of the same participants, was held in December 1940. Stalin does not appear to have attended this one; he is not mentioned in the stenographic record or the introductory material, and no one addressed remarks to him, as happened often in the first conference. On the December meetings, which Stalin did not attend, see *Nakanyne Voiny: Materialy soveshchaniia vysshego rukovodiashchego sostava RKKA 13-31 dekabria 1940 g.* Vol. 12 (1) of the series *Russkii Arkhiv. Velikaia otechestvennaia* (Moscow: Terra: 1993).
  7. ZV 2, 53
  8. Ibid 222
  9. 221-23
  10. *Grif sekretnosti sniat'*, 104; Allen Chew, *White Death*, 216.
  11. Gorodetsky Grand Illusion, 12, 19.

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12. ZV 2, 98
  13. 31
  14. 142
  15. 205
  16. 142
  17. 259-60
  18. See my *Life and Terror*, chapter 4.
  19. Von Hagen article in Robert W. Thurston and Bernd Bonwetsch, *The People's War: Popular Responses to World War II in the Soviet Union*, Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2000.
  20. See Grigorenko *Memoirs* 75 & Von Hagen.
  21. ZV 2, 199.
  22. *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia*
  23. Manning paper for AAASS, Boca Raton; Getty and Naumov, *Road to Terror*. Gorodetsky portrays Stalin as an extremely thoughtful and cautious leader in 1939-41, if not a successful one in terms of anticipating events.