Seeking Peace in the Wake of War

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From 1941 to 1945, close to 35 million Soviet citizens served in the ranks of the Red Army. Almost 7 million of them died, about a third of all Soviet casualties in the war and 5 million were taken prisoner, half of whom died in captivity. About 800,000 Soviet citizens fought in the ranks of the partisans, while 1.5 million are thought to have fought, at one point or another, on the German side. In 1945, over 8 million Red Army soldiers were awaiting demobilization, while the Soviet state also had to deal with the return of 5.5 million displaced persons: Ostarbeiter and POWs. The sheer numbers involved and the extreme diversity of these war experiences are staggering. On top of that, the main difficulty the historian faces is in the definition of the ‘wake of war’ for the Soviet Union. The 1940s appear as a continuum of wars, demobilizations and remobilizations, with an according multiplicity of experiences of what is known in French as the ‘sortie de guerre’. In this long process, the Soviet state tried to address – ideologically, politically, legally and socially – the multiplicity of war experiences, by adapting and redefining the mirroring images of the inner enemy/traitor and the socialist hero, a dichotomy that had been central to Soviet discourse ever since the October revolution. The Soviet authorities had three aims: to punish; to screen and control; and to reintegrate veterans into society and promote their interests, in a process in which the boundaries of the social body were redrawn and identities recast.²

To try and offer an overview of the complex processes unfolding in the wake of war in the Soviet Union, this article will focus on the experiences of one particular group of fighters, the Soviet partisans – those 800,000 men and women who engaged in armed resistance against the German occupation of the Western territories of the Soviet Union, an occupation that

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1 On the manifold experiences of Soviet fighters during the war, see Catherine Merridale, *Ivan’s War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945* (New York: Picador, 2006).

lasted from a few months to over three years, on a territory encompassing 2 million square kilometres and about 80 million inhabitants. Although Soviet partisans formed only a tiny minority of Soviet fighters during the war, their fate offers a particularly interesting entry point for the study of the transition from war to peace in the Soviet Union, as they were central actors and objects for the policies of the Soviet state in the wake of war. First, a majority of them also fought in the Red Army, either prior to their involvement in the partisan movement or after the liberation of the territory on which they were active; they were thus often both veteran soldiers and partisans. They were key actors in shaping and carrying out the purges of collaborators and traitors. In occupied territories, they were the eyes and arms of the Soviet state, and their views strongly influenced the Soviet authorities in their subsequent treatment of the population upon liberation. On the other hand, they were viewed with high suspicion by those same Soviet authorities, and were submitted to a process of screening or ‘filtration’ by the security services upon their return to the Soviet rear or upon liberation, which meant that some of them became victims of the purges carried out by the Soviet state against elements deemed ‘disloyal’. They played a key role in the immediate aftermath of liberation, as the Soviet state drew heavily on them to ensure the pacification, administration and reconstruction of liberated territories. Many ended up in the administration, in the security services, and in the Red Army itself upon liberation. The aim of the article will be to highlight the complexity of the interactions between the state and the men and women who had fought for it, thus demonstrating their loyalty to it, but also gaining a new assertiveness, which in turn put new pressures on the Soviet authorities as they negotiated the rebuilding of the Soviet state on the rubble left by the German occupation.

In 1941, the future partisans were faced with their first transition from a state of war to a wary peace, as surprising as this may seem. Indeed, the German occupation was seen by most Soviet citizens left on occupied territory as a swift end to the war. For them, the war seemed to have ended barely after it had begun. The swift advance of the German army meant that the Soviet authorities could not even carry out military mobilization in large swathes of the western Soviet Union; mass desertion and captivity also depleted the ranks of the Red Army in the first weeks and months

of the war. Many of those early Red Army ‘veterans’ simply returned to civilian life, fleeing the German POW camps or benefitting from German policies that freed Ukrainian as well as many Belorussian POWs. For many of those left behind on occupied territory in 1941, the rapid collapse of the Soviet state and swift victory of the German army were interpreted as signs that the war had ended. One partisan, for example, described the mood of the population in north-eastern Belorussia in autumn 1941 as follows: the people believed that ‘the war has ended, Moscow is taken, Kalinin has surrendered Moscow with a white flag, a temporary government has been formed, Molotov was appointed president of the temporary government, negotiations about the peace treaty are being carried out with him, Stalin has flown out of Moscow to America.’ Many also saw this moment not only as the end of the Soviet-German war, but also as the end of the war that had started with the October revolution, a return to the old order of things. As one woman peasant in Belorussia summed it up, now that the war had definitely ended, ‘the landowners will return to the landed gentry, the peasants to peasantry, the aristocrats to nobility.’ Would-be partisans rejected this view, and their first aim was to reintroduce war into the occupied territories, to reframe the German occupation not as a transition to a new post-war order but as a war in itself. Their first targets were local collaborators and police. They saw themselves as the instruments of Soviet justice in occupied territory, thus launching a wave of retaliation against perceived ‘traitors’ that would stretch well beyond 1945. Self-proclaimed ‘avengers of the people’, the partisans saw themselves as representatives of the Soviet state in occupied territories. Indeed, their views on the inner enemies, the ‘traitors’, would have a deep impact on the policies of the Soviet state during and after the war.

The partisans redefined, on their own, the category of the inner enemy or the ‘traitor to the Fatherland’. They drew on the pre-war Stalinist political culture, but changed, and sometimes radicalized, the definition of the inner enemy so as to make sense of the reality of widespread collaboration on occupied territory. Collaborators – members of the local administration, starting with the village heads, the local police forces, informants and spies, or anyone opposing the Soviet partisans – were considered to be ‘traitors to

5 Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (hereafter RGASPI) f.69, op.1, d.283
6 National Archives of the Republic of Belarus (hereafter NARB) f.1405, op.1, d.1171, p. 154.
the Fatherland’, and therefore sentenced to death by the partisans wherever they could find them. The mere phenomenon of widespread collaboration with the Germans served to reinforce pre-war representations of the inner enemy. The war was thus seen as the last great test for Soviet citizens, finally revealing friends and enemies, as one partisan doctor explained:

for all the people left on enemy territory, a severe exam took place, which showed who was really a true patriot of his country and his people, and who wasn’t. At a time when the heart of every true patriot was aching [...], then the traitors met with joy and went to serve those hunters of men. They went to serve in the Gestapo, in the police, and in other vile posts, they helped the Germans crucify their own people. But during those same difficult times, the true patriots dug rusty weapons out, went looking for them in the water, they cleaned them and they went to the forests and the swamps, to take revenge against the enemy and against the traitors for the violation of the liberty and the honour of their people.7

Thus, the inner enemy had revealed itself. Class, however, was no longer an adequate criterion. From 1941 on, only acts would reveal the true nature of the people as either patriots or traitors. The war offered possible redemption to those who had fallen victim to Stalinist terror; it also meant definitive condemnation without the possibility of redemption to those who collaborated with the enemy. As one partisan put it, ‘if 25 years of Soviet life did not succeed in re-educating those people, then they were truly irredeemable’.8 This was seen as a moral failure of the ‘traitors’, one rooted in nature, in biology, which warranted the death not only of the culprit but also of his whole family, infected by this moral virus. The objective was to ‘destroy them with all their breed’,9 ‘burn them with their roots’.10 This meant that whole families, and sometimes even entire villages deemed to be ‘police villages’, were routinely targeted by the partisans.11 This shift did echo the increasing biologization – some would argue, racialization – of the

7 Central State Archives of Public Organizations of Ukraine (hereafter TsDAGO), f.62, op.1, d.1804, p. 75.
8 NARB, f.1405, op.1, d.1171, p. 6.
9 TsDAGO, f.64, op.1, d.59, p. 1.
10 NARB, f.1405 op.1, d.423, p. 423.
inner enemy on the part of the Soviet state; the systematic killing of the families of traitors, however, including the widespread killing of women and children, clearly went beyond the retributive policies of the Soviet state.

Besides these collaborators, the partisans also held other groups in particular contempt. They often saw the pre-war Soviet elites, including leading members of the Party, as having failed their people and country to the point of treason. Prisoners of war were also viewed with contempt and suspicion. Even without knowing the official Soviet policy regarding POWs, many partisans suspected them of being mere deserters, cowards and traitors. Only those who were wounded when taken prisoner or who rapidly escaped captivity avoided this widespread suspicion. Finally, some ethnic groups were also considered with suspicion by the partisans, most prominently the Crimean Tatars and the Jews. From the spring of 1942 on, partisans sent report after report to Moscow stringently denouncing the Tatar population of Crimea for collective treason. Their unqualified calls for harsh reprisals against the Crimean Tatars would, tragically, be answered by the Soviet authorities in the form of their mass deportation in May 1944. Anti-Semitism was also widespread and although the treatment of Jews by the Soviet partisans varied greatly, in many instances, the partisans expressed shock and outrage at their mass killing by the Germans, but also contempt for their perceived apathy; moreover, in many units, Jewish survivors were seen as German spies or criminals, while it was not rare for partisans to prey on helpless Jews.

The Soviet authorities did not consider it the partisans’ task to carry out justice against those traitors; they did, however, rely on partisans to identify

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them. Throughout the war, they asked the partisans to list collaborators and report them. In the spring of 1944, they finally sent precise instructions to the Belorussian partisans to draw detailed lists of collaborators in order to ‘create a working base for the Soviet justice institutions after the liberation’. The partisans were asked to prepare two lists, one of ‘active’ enemies presenting an immediate threat, and another of ‘passive’ ones only suspected of being enemies by the partisans. They were to be divided into categories: citizens who had shown sympathy with the Germans or hostility to the Soviet power; socially alien elements; people who had held civilian functions in the administration of occupied territories; people who had collaborated militarily with the Germans in various units; former collaborators who had defected to the partisans; German spies; Belorussian and Polish nationalists; members of the Communist Party and of the Soviet security services and Red Army soldiers who had not participated to the partisan movement. Upon liberation, the partisans were also the first people to whom the Soviet authorities turned to identify former collaborators.

While they saw themselves as the punishing arm of the Soviet state in occupied territories, the partisans played a peculiar part in the screening and purging processes after the liberation, in which they would interestingly find themselves on both the acting and receiving ends of the ‘filtration’ process. Indeed, the treatment of partisans by Soviet authorities upon liberation greatly varied. The filtration processes started as soon as the war began. Wary of Red Army soldiers returning from occupied territories, who were always suspected of desertion or even of being German spies, the Soviet government had set up so-called ‘special camps’ under the supervision of the Department for Prisoners of War of the NKVD (security services) at the end of 1941. All Red Army personnel returning from occupied territory had to be screened in those special camps, where they would be interviewed multiple times by different intelligence and security agencies. All in all, about 350,000 men went through this screening process in the special camps from 1941 to 1944. However, given that this process could take months, a parallel procedure was established in 1942, whereby returning groups of Red Army soldiers were sent to Red Army reserve units, where they would be sorted out and screened quickly, usually before being returned to the

16 NARB, f.1450, op.2, d.1031, p. 32-41.
front. Only Red Army commanding officers still automatically had to be sent to the special camps, where they often faced harsh treatment: a third of the almost 50,000 officers who went through the special camps were sent to the infamous punitive battalions upon screening, while the rest were sent to work in industry. In 1942 and 1943, partisans faced both those procedures, regardless of whether they were former soldiers or not. This was often a protracted process, which the partisans resented. For example, in the summer of 1942, most partisans from the Smolensk region returned to the Soviet front lines, as the Red Army had succeeded in pushing the front back westwards after the Battle of Moscow. From 80 to 90 per cent of the partisans were sent to the Red Army reserve units, where they waited for up to three months to get clearance. Among them, women, the sick and the heavily wounded were demobilized and sent back to civilian life. The commanders of the partisan units, meanwhile, were sent to the special camps. They were thus treated as Red Army commanding officers, although hardly any of the partisan commanders were above the rank of NCO. Their decision to return from the occupied rear to the front line was considered by the Soviet security services to amount to desertion. For those partisans who were indeed commanding officers of the Red Army, their partisan activity was not seen as redeeming; on the contrary, the Soviet authorities seemed to be particularly wary of the prospect of having out-of-control commanding officers fighting autonomously on occupied territory. The most famous case is that of Colonel Nichipurovich, a personal acquaintance of General Zhukov, who had taken the command of a strong partisan movement in a region of eastern Belorussia; he was recalled to Moscow in September 1942, sent to a special camp, then imprisoned by the security services and died in jail in 1944.19 For most partisans however, this first screening and filtration process did not end nearly as tragically. While a minority was demobilized, about 80 per cent of the partisans who joined the Red Army in 1942-1943 were sent back to the front line, while a minority was sent back to the German rear.20 However, this reintegration into the Red Army was far from unproblematic. Complaints were numerous and varied. First, the length of the process was tiresome, as the partisans particularly resented the obvious suspicion with which they were treated. Second, they found that their service time and rank as partisans, and even in the Red Army prior to that, were often ignored; they received no payment for that time,

19 See Bogdan Musial, Sowjetische Partisanen 1941-1944: Mythos und Wirklichkeit (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2009).
20 Cf. Slepyan, Stalin’s Guerrillas.
medals were often refused, and they were almost systematically sent back to the front as rank-and-file soldiers, even if they had been NCOs before or during their time with the partisans. Finally, their reintegration into the Red Army posed other problems: after their time as guerrilla fighters, they often resented both army discipline and the Red Army commanders, who in turn often complained that the former partisans were uncontrollable. On the other hand, especially as the war progressed, a majority of partisans had never been Red Army soldiers before; they lacked not only army discipline habits but also basic military training, which they did not receive before being sent back to the front. Thus, the headquarters of the partisan movement received scores of letters from former partisans asking to be relieved of their new Red Army duties and sent back to the German rear as partisans.

The situation changed radically for the partisans who re-encountered the Red Army in 1944. The priorities of the Soviet authorities had by now changed and the recruitment needs of the Red Army were no longer their main preoccupation. Over 250,000 partisans, in Ukraine and Belorussia, gradually met with the advancing Soviet forces on liberated territory. Only 40 to 45 per cent of them were sent to active duty in the Red Army. The fate of the others shows the intricacy of the process of reintegrating the liberated territories into the Soviet Union, as was the case of Belorussia, where about 180,000 partisans were met by the advancing Red Army forces during the liberation of the republic between September 1943 and August 1944. Although some eastern regions had been liberated in the autumn of 1943, in the wake of the Red Army counteroffensive after the Battle of Kursk, most of the republic was liberated in the course of Operation Bagration, launched on 22 June 1944. The capital, Minsk, was liberated on 3 July, almost three years to the day after its occupation by the Germans. Brest, the last city to be liberated in Belorussia, was taken by the Red Army on 28 July. Symbolically, the liberation was celebrated with a huge parade in Minsk on 16 July 1944, during which 22,000 partisans marched through the almost entirely destroyed capital city. In parallel, partisans were quickly drawn to the numerous tasks facing the Soviet authorities in their effort to pacify, rebuild and reintegrate the liberated territories.21 About 16,000 of them, women, children, elderly, wounded and sick, were demobilized and sent home. Almost 42,000 were sent to work in various administrative and party functions in the republic, which meant that the partisans basically took over the state apparatus in Belorussia almost overnight. This would soon prove to be a major source of tension within the administration of Belorussia and

21 Statistics from Musial, Sowjetische Partisanen 1941-1944.
Ukraine, not only because the former partisans competed with the pre-war elite but also because those former partisans were constantly suspect in the eyes of the Soviet power, being too independent and too difficult to control. Thus, in Western Ukraine, as Amir Weiner has shown, most former partisans were purged from the local administration in the late 1940s.  

The party and state administration was not the only one heavily populated with former partisans in the wake of the war. Forty thousand Belorussian partisans were charged with pacifying and securing the liberated territory, with about 6,000 sent to work in the ranks of the NKVD as of July 1944, almost 5,000 drafted into the ‘istrebitel’nye bataliony’ or destruction battalions, while 30,000 partisans had still not disbanded by the end of August 1944 – a few thousand of them were then sent to destruction battalions, others to the NKVD, while the rest gradually returned to civilian duties in the course of 1944. Those 40,000 men bore the brunt of the so-called pacification tasks that were carried out in the weeks after the liberation. The remaining partisans were charged with hunting down stray German soldiers, deserters, former armed collaborators who had gone into hiding, and ‘bandits’. The brutality of this continued war cannot be underestimated. For example, one partisan commander reported on 10 July 1944 that two partisan officers had been killed in a fight with a group of ‘German soldiers’, and that to avenge those deaths, thirty-five traitors and ten Germans who had been taken prisoner in that fight had been slaughtered by the partisans. The partisans of the Zheleznjak brigade, to the north-east of Minsk, were reunited with the Red Army on 29 June; they received their new orders on 1 July: the task of the unit was now to ‘hunt down and exterminate retreating enemy groups’; only on 11 July did the commander instruct his men that they were not allowed to kill prisoners on the spot but that all German prisoners had to be escorted to a prisoner camp, although no such instruction was given concerning former collaborators caught by the partisans. That unit was only disbanded in mid-August. The destruction battalions were reported to have arrested almost 90,000 people from July to December 1944 in Belorussia, about 32,000 of whom were German soldiers. Apart from this, the former partisans played an important role in many other security functions, including, for example, clearing the numerous mines that had  

23 NARB, f.1450, op.2, d.1007, p. 78.  
24 NARB, f.1450, op.4, d.166.  
been left throughout the territory, in part by the partisans themselves. In
the Vitebsk region, about 1,200 minefields had to be cleared; during 1945,
277 civilians were killed and 222 wounded by landmine explosions in that
region alone.26 The Soviet authorities also spent months trying to gather
and destroy all the accumulated weapons, which the partisans in particular
were loathe to surrender.
In liberated Soviet territories, the former partisans thus acted for months
in the shadow of war. A minority of them was actually involved in direct
military operations, especially in the so-called ‘war against banditry’, which
primarily targeted national resistance movements – mainly Ukrainian,
Polish and Lithuanian. In Western Ukraine, whole partisan brigades were
directly put under the supervision of the NKVD upon liberation during the
summer of 1944 and became the first NKVD units charged with the so-
called ‘war against banditry’ against Ukrainian nationalist organizations,
a war that partisans had been carrying out since mid-1943.27 These units
were disbanded only months after the liberation of those regions by the
Red Army and, even then, hundreds of partisans were drawn as officers in
the war against banditry in Western Ukraine. Former partisans were also
drafted in the NKVD ‘special units’, small units that were using guerrilla
tactics against the Ukrainian nationalist guerrilla fighters. Former partisans
also figured prominently in NKVD structures in Belorussia, where over
6,000 former partisans had joined the NKVD ranks up to July 1944; they
were charged with the ‘pacification’ of the newly liberated territory, mostly
fighting against Red Army deserters, former collaborators, and Polish and
Lithuanian nationalists. The head of the department for the war against
banditry in Lithuania in 1945-1946 was also a former partisan commander.
The Kovpak partisan brigade, under the command of Petr Vershigora,
one of the most famous Ukrainian units, offers an example of this slow
transformation of the partisans from guerrilla fighters into insurgency and
then counter-insurgency specialists. During the autumn of 1943, the brigade
was assisting the Red Army as it was liberating Ukraine. During the last
two months of the year, the partisans were in charge of one of the first key
measures implemented by the Soviet state authorities to regain control of
the western borderlands that had been conquered and annexed from Poland

26 M.V. Pishchulenok, ed., Vystojali i pobedili: svidetel’stvujut arkhivy (Vitebsk: BelNIIDAD,
2005).
27 See Alexander Statiev, ‘Was Smuglianka a Lunatic or a Siguranţa’s Agent-Provocateur?
Peculiarities of the Soviet Partisan Struggle in the Western Borderlands’, Journal of Strategic
Studies, 31/5 (October 2008), pp. 743-770; idem, The Soviet Counterinsurgency in the Western
Borderlands (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
in 1939: they were tasked with carrying out – often with violence – the conscription of all young men in the region of Zhitomir and Rivne into the Red Army.28 In January 1944, the brigade was fighting again, but this time it was in charge of the Soviet counter-insurgency against the Ukrainian UPA nationalists. In February 1944, Vershigora’s men took up yet a new role, in Poland, as the Ukrainian partisan brigades were used as the vanguard of the Red Army in Poland and Slovakia. In close collaboration with the Soviet intelligence agencies, the brigades were collecting intelligence and carrying out sabotage missions to facilitate the Red Army’s offensive. Moreover, they were supposed to ‘help’ the locals organize pro-communist insurgencies that were meant to accompany the liberation of those countries and to prepare the ground for the subsequent coming to power of pro-Soviet regimes in Eastern Europe.29 After carrying out this mission in Poland, the Kovpak brigade was back in Western Ukraine, where it continued working under the orders of Soviet state security. In the summer of 1944,

the bandits [i.e. the Ukrainian nationalists] are blocking the collection of grain taxes [...] and the state agents in the region [...] are asking us [the partisans] to help them collect the taxes, by organizing four groups, each numbering at least 20–25 men, with our guys and 3–4 NKVD agents and tax collectors with this mission: 1. The NKVD agents and our 25 guys are tasked with fighting against the UPA and arresting the nationalists. 2. The tax collectors collect the grain taxes according to the plan.30

The partisans had thus become the main counter-insurgency force in those regions: the state security organs did not have enough staff to carry out their missions in all the liberated territories. Finally, in September 1944, the Kovpak division was officially placed under the command of the NKVD in the ‘fight against banditry’, thus completing its transition from partisan unit to state security auxiliary.31 There, it was tasked with ‘cleansing’ the forests, applying the techniques used by the Germans against them shortly before, surrounding the forests and then systematically combing them. The former partisans thus fought the first stage of a protracted war that was to last for another three to eight years in the western borderlands.

28 TsDAGO, f.63, op.1, d.20, pp. 240, 248.
30 TsDAGO, f.63, op.1, d.199, order of 26 August 1944.
31 TsDAGO, f.63, op.1, d.24, p. 80.
All in all, the reintegration of former partisans in Soviet post-war society was a lengthy process. As many of them had been drafted into the Red Army, they ended up not being demobilized for years after that. The first demobilization order, concerning soldiers over 30 years old, was issued in June 1945, and it would take months for them to actually come home; the second demobilization wave came a year after that, the last one, for the youngest conscripts, only came in 1948. Within three years, 8.5 million Soviet soldiers had thus been sent back to civilian life. As those men were reintegrated in Soviet society, multiple tensions arose, which have been thoroughly investigated by Mark Edele and Elena Zubkova. Disappointment and individual frustration soon ran high in the ranks of the former ‘defenders of the Fatherland’, as the high hopes they had held for the post-war years were replaced by the bleak reality of the return to the Stalinist society.

The end of the war in the Soviet Union was an exceptionally complex transition, especially in the former occupied territories, where the departure of the Germans left a landscape of desolation, a society torn by the legacy of the occupation and, in the westernmost regions, wholesale civil war. The reintegration of the former fighters was thus a difficult process. The Soviet state had to rely on them to rebuild its foundations and to restore the power and legitimacy that had been shattered in 1941. Yet the Stalinist regime also risked – or imagined that it risked – losing its position of total control if these newly assertive men, who had witnessed its weakness and failure, were not reined in. The Soviet regime thus had to use them to carry out the punishment of former collaborators and to fight against its adversaries, while also subjecting them to the control and potential sanction of the state. During those complex negotiations between the state apparatus and the former fighters, the voice of the latter was gradually suppressed, as they were either integrated into or excluded from the existing Stalinist system. The return to the status quo ante would prove to be a huge disappointment for many of those who had fought for the Soviet Union, even if a minority of them succeeded in adapting to and advancing within the system.

32 Zubkova, Russia After the War; Edele, Soviet Veterans of the Second World War.