



The battle of Stalingrad

Fri, 04/12/1992 - 23:00

The decisive battle of World War Two was fought at Stalingrad. The Red Army stopped Hitler's drive to conquer the USSR and began the march west which was to destroy Nazism. Despite the terrible suffering and cost in human lives, and despite the degeneration of the workers' state under Stalin's rule, the USSR's war with German imperialism was a just war. It was a war to defend the remaining gains of the Russian Revolution against fascism's determination to destroy them. But the Stalinist bureaucracy came within an inch of losing that war. Then, the military turning point signalled the start of a process that was to see the consolidation of Stalinist rule in Eastern Europe. Paul Morris explains the class issues at stake in the defence of the USSR during World War Two.

In the late 1930s Stalinism was, in Trotsky's words, a 'regime of crisis'. It survived only through a massive terror against Soviet workers and peasants and even against sections of the privileged bureaucratic caste itself.

At the same time Stalin was forced to make desperate deals with imperialism to try and ensure the 'collective security' of the USSR. He recognised that war would threaten the existence of the bureaucratic ruling caste itself and he was desperate to avoid it.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, signed in August 1939 between the foreign ministers of Nazi Germany and so-called 'socialist' Russia, was the signal for the start of World War Two. Under the pact Germany and the USSR partitioned Poland. Afterwards the USSR annexed the Baltic states.

This monumental act of betrayal by the Kremlin bureaucracy was greeted by a sullen acceptance amongst the Communist Parties of the west and dismay by class conscious workers everywhere.

Worker militants loyal to Stalinism tried to explain the treaty with a nod and a wink - 'Stalin is playing for time before he crushes Hitler' was the unofficial line.

But even this lame excuse masked the truth. Throughout the period of the Stalin-Hitler Pact Stalinism went about its work of weakening and disarming the USSR with ruthless efficiency.

Under the pact Stalinism handed over a million tons of wheat and oil, half a million tons of iron ore, large quantities of platinum and manganese and hundreds of thousands of tons of other economic and war material. It received in return the dud blueprints of a German fighter plane.

Committed

Stalin was totally committed to the pact. Intelligence reports to the Kremlin from its own agents, the US government and Britain's ambassador in Moscow, all pointed to a German invasion. Stalin was even informed of the actual date of the invasion; 22 June. He refused to believe these reports. On 14 June Soviet national newspapers declared:

'Rumours of the intention of Germany to break the pact are completely without foundation, while the recent movements of German troops which have completed their operations in the Balkans to the eastern and northern parts of Germany are connected, it must be supposed, with other motives which have nothing to do with Soviet/German relations.'

One consequence of Stalin's bureaucratic terror was the decimation of the Red Army high command. Stalin feared the Red Army's leaders because many of them, including the commander-in-chief, Tukachevsky, had risen to prominence

when Trotsky was Commissar for War.

During 1937 and 1938 Tukachevsky along with a staggering 86% of all senior officers and 50% of all lower ranking officers were shot. Tukachevsky's advocacy and implementation of modern military techniques based on tanks and aircraft was denounced. His reforms were transforming the Red Army into a force capable of mobilising massed concentrations of armour, paratroops and artillery. They were reversed by his Stalinist successors, Voroshilov, Kulik and Budyenny.

Kulik stopped the production of anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns. Budyenny preferred cavalry to the creation of a motorised supply system. Voroshilov ordered the end of Tukachevsky's drive to develop armoured divisions with the words:

"It is almost axiomatic that such a powerful force as the tank corps is a very far fetched idea and we should therefore have nothing to do with it."

Trotsky, who had been assassinated one year before the outbreak of war between Germany and the USSR predicted that the Stalinist bureaucracy could not survive the war. If the workers did not take power from the Stalinist bureaucracy the nationalised property relations would be overthrown by imperialist invasion and the internal forces for capitalist restoration, he said.

Events ultimately refuted that analysis, but only because the Soviet working class proved willing to sacrifice itself on a scale unparalleled in any developed country during World War Two. The whole first eighteen months of the war came perilously close to proving Trotsky right.

Soviet defences were strung out along the frontier with no reserves behind them and with munition dumps sited within range of German artillery - one of the many examples of Stalin's "military genius". They collapsed and in the first few weeks of the German attack millions of square miles of the USSR's territory were conquered.

The contrast between the Soviet workers' response and that of the bureaucracy could not have been more marked.

On the day of the invasion, a Sunday, millions of workers rushed spontaneously to their factories to organise resistance. But Stalin was not seen or heard for several days. It became clear that there was no unified central command of the army!

Meanwhile the workers set about defending the Soviet Union. Hundreds of thousands of workers mobilised themselves for military service in the first few days. Between July and August one million Leningraders - a third of the adult population - were employed in building defences for the city.

Before the war the Stalinist generals had dismissed the idea of workers' militias. But with masses of workers volunteering, and the military machine in chaos, local government and Communist Party bodies took responsibility for their organisation. By 8 July over 100,000 workers were organised in Leningrad's militia, and the centre was forced to issue an order making such mobilisations government policy.

A similar pattern occurred in Moscow in December. General Blumentritt recalled:

"A few parties of our [German] troops actually got into the suburbs of Moscow. But the Russian workers poured out of the factories and fought them with their hammers and other tools in defence of their city."

As the German lines advanced another element of self-organised resistance came into play with the emergence of an enormous network of partisan guerilla groups.

The impetus for the partisan war was neither a cunning Stalinist plan nor independent military action by troops surrounded during the German offensive. The impetus came from spontaneous revolts against the occupation policies of the Nazis: rape, pillage, forced labour and genocide.

In the beginning the partisan forces exerted a considerable degree of autonomy from Moscow, with numerous reports of commissars and officers sent out from Moscow to 'take command' ending up with a bullet in the back. By the summer of 1942 the partisan movement was a mass force of ten of thousands, increasingly integrated into, and under the control of the Red Army, and operating on 150 kilometre 'fronts' deep behind German lines.

The partisan struggle, unplanned by Stalinism, tied up 10% of German divisions in Russia at any one time, and in the words of a pro-Nazi Russian officer, 'almost completely disorganised the efforts of the occupation authorities to exploit the economic wealth of the country'.

Trotsky had predicted that, without the masses removing the bureaucracy's grip on planning, disaster would befall the USSR. In reality we have to recognise that the bureaucracy found a way out of that predicament short of military defeat. Despite its initial unpreparedness and all the bureaucratic blunders of a military and economic nature, the Soviet degenerated workers' state survived.

There were three pre-requisites for victory. The first was a workable economic system that could focus Russia's vast resources into its war effort. This was achieved through an emergency war economy aimed at converting civilian industries to the war economy and relocating the arms industry east of the Urals. This system worked because the bureaucracy in this period was undermined from two directions.

It was undermined 'from above' by strictly centralised crisis management which cut through bureaucratic obstacles by the use of agents to override the local bureaucracy. By concentrating on war production and by drastically curtailing the inefficient and fragmented planning mechanisms of peacetime the bureaucracy was able to make the planned economy work.

In addition the emergency economic measures worked because the initiative of workers and lower level managers was unleashed. New methods and initiatives were able to be adopted undermining bureaucratisation 'from below'. The recent economic collapse of Stalinist planning should not blind us to the fact that during the war post-capitalist property relations proved stronger than the mightiest onslaught imperialism was able to throw at the degenerated workers state.

The second pre-requisite for victory was the ability to focus the economic power generated by the planned economy onto the battlefield. The bureaucracy achieved this by reverting to the most advanced bourgeois methods: the massed tank concentrations and 'deep battle' advocated by Tukachevsky. Stalingrad was the first occasion when these methods were successfully put into operation.

Just as in the economy however, Stalinism caught up with capitalism's most advanced military methods, to use Trotsky's words, 'at three times the cost'.

Finally the Soviet victory would not have been won without the subjective commitment to struggle of the working class. Overall wealth was transferred from the workers to the peasants during wartime. Labour was virtually militarised, with youth over 12 in some cases being conscripted for war work. Food consumption per person was at levels far below anything seen in Western Europe.

The commitment of the Soviet working class to the socialist ideals and anti-fascist war aims, behind which the bureaucracy hid its authoritarian power and parasitic existence, allowed the workers to accept and even impose on themselves extremes of work and malnutrition without the social order collapsing.

Stalingrad changed the military situation, ripping the heart out of the German army in Russia. It was the signal for revitalised bureaucratic planning and the bureaucratic war machine to begin to function efficiently. It was also the signal for the bureaucracy to begin to seize back all the elements of initiative it had to concede during the first eighteen months of the war.

Nationalist

In 1942 political commissars in the Red Army were abolished, ranks and medals for officers were introduced. The

Internationale was abandoned and the USSR's anthem was replaced by a nationalist parody. During 1943 Stalin increasingly conducted war propaganda on the basis of a nationalist common denominator. By 1944 the Red Army itself was retitled the 'Soviet Armed Forces' to emphasise the discontinuity with the revolutionary years. The Orthodox Church was legalised, the Comintern disbanded, the law of value officially recognised as part of the Soviet economic system, and Motherhood Medals began to be awarded to women who produced the most babies!

In both Leningrad and Stalingrad the first act of the bureaucracy upon liberation was to flood the cities with the NKVD, arresting and purging many of the individuals who had been responsible for non-bureaucratic defence organisations.

Stalinism proved capable of stifling all the elements of semi-independent activity the first years of war unleashed, and put into place the post-war Soviet ideology of rampant nationalism and national oppression, atomising the workers' class consciousness. In the buffer states it oversaw the reimposition of capitalist order, before under the international pressure of imperialism in 1947-49 it bureaucratically destroyed capitalism in Eastern Europe.

None of this should allow us to forget that the USSR's victories over Nazism, at Stalingrad and after, were victories for the working class, won largely by the ingenuity and self sacrifice of the working class itself, even though bureaucracy, not working class power, prospered as a result.

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