



## *Fortress Dark and Stern: The Soviet Home Front during World War II*

by Wendy Z. Goldman and Donald Filtzer.

New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2021. Pp. xxvii, 494. ISBN 978-0-19-061841-4.

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On 22 June 1941, Nazi Germany and its allies invaded the Soviet Union. Their successful advance all the way to the suburbs of Moscow in late fall of that year had an impact on the home front that lasted until the war ended in 1945. Anchored in newly available primary sources, *Fortress Dark and Stern* complements John Barber and Mark Harrison's still useful *Soviet Home Front, 1941-1945*.<sup>1</sup> Its authors, social historians Wendy Goldman (Carnegie Mellon Univ.) and Donald Filtzer (Univ. of East London), with great empathy, detail the many challenges the USSR faced and overcame with such resilience and faith in victory. They concentrate on six major areas: evacuation and resettlement, food supplies, labor mobilization, public health, propaganda, and liberation and reconstruction.

Chapters 1-2 describe the evacuation of thousands of industrial facilities, coal mines, electric power stations, oil wells, herds of cattle, food factories, and agricultural machinery, as well as the plight of millions of people, including the elderly, invalids, and children. The decision when to evacuate had repercussions for defense factories in the rear that had to maintain production until the last minute, even at risk of falling into German hands.

The main challenge, once the war began, was to organize and coordinate many evacuations along a 1000-mile retreating front under severe time and transport constraints owing to a dearth of boxcars and barges. Factory managers, health officials, and local Soviet authorities faced "challenges of epic proportions" (59). These included a shortage of housing for those in need (compounded by a lack of construction workers and materials); the need to build electricity and water lines, roads, and spur rail lines; and evacuees often wearing out their initial welcome. Fraught everywhere with close calls and the risk of death, the evacuation was a mix of improvisation and planning, timely shipments and frantic loading over eighteen months. It succeeded thanks to a centralized command and the initiative and courage of local activists and workers. Indeed, the authors argue, evacuation and the resettlement of people and industry enabled the Red Army to defeat Nazi Germany and its allies.

Chapters 3-4 concern the difficulty of feeding the masses. The loss of grain fields and food processing plants to the Germans triggered a food crisis on the home front. Though hunger was fiercer and more widespread than in 1917, there were no food riots or rebellions. Theft and both gray and black markets, however, both large-scale and petty, occurred wherever there was food. With widespread popular, state, party, and trade union support, authorities introduced rationing to mitigate the country's dreadful wartime food shortages.

How exactly was all this managed? The ration system was not based on equal distribution; instead, it channeled food to those most vulnerable to hunger and those most valuable to the war effort. Soldiers, for instance, fared better than civilians. Rationing ensured a fixed minimum, but

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1. Subtitle, *A Social and Economic History of the USSR in World War II* (NY: Longman, 1991).

everyone supplemented their daily consumption through gardening, collective farm markets, substitute foods, foraging, and culinary experimentations. These initiatives allayed, but could not altogether eliminate chronic shortages. Many went hungry or starved to death during the war's first three years. Only toward mid-1944 did the food crisis begin to abate on the home front, as a result of Lend-Lease food aid and the advancing Red Army provisioning itself outside the Soviet Union.

Chapters 5–7 focus on the Soviet government's handling of an acute labor shortage caused by the thousands of vacancies created by the military draft and increased production demands. Subsequently, the Soviet Union was able to build and staff a new industrial base in the east, beyond the reach of German bombers.

Over the course of the war, the Soviet government mobilized some fifteen million free laborers for temporary or permanent work and enrolled millions of youth in vocational schools. Prisoners in the Gulag camps built railways, highways, and aerodromes, and worked in the timber, oil, and mining sectors. By late 1942, a significant influx of female, teenaged, and elderly workers had entered the work force. Workers endured scarce and unheated barracks, poor (and rare) medical care and a lack of hot water, soap, and bathhouses. Such conditions drove many of them to flee, which caused new demands for more workers.

All those mobilized to work far from home faced great hardships, but the plight of the Central Asians was especially painful. They were compelled to adapt to a new climate and exotic foods, unable to communicate in Russian, and subject to callous prejudices. The strict and draconian wartime regulations and penalties for unauthorized job changing and absenteeism failed to curb labor mobility. Whether motivated by family circumstances, hunger, or the simple desire to return home, vast numbers of workers flouted the harsh labor legislation. With the end of the war in sight, the scale of desertion actually increased. Prosecutors, factory managers, collective farm chairmen, and party officials, though responsible for the enforcement of state orders, had their own competing interests and therefore did not always carry them out, thus weakening the threat of punishment. Desertion, however, did not mean a lack of support for the war. Once back in their own provinces, most deserters took jobs in agriculture or industry and continued to help with the war effort. Finally, labor mobilization—a powerful weapon in the war—also helped reconstruct the liberated territories.

Chapter 8 analyzes the impact of the war on public health. This was not solely the result of unique wartime conditions. Prewar failure to invest in essential sanitary infrastructure and the attempt to subordinate medicine to the goals of industrial production left the population vulnerable to the shocks brought by the Nazi invasion. And, again, the needs of the rearguard were subordinated to those of frontline soldiers. The movement of millions of evacuees and refugees along rail lines and waterways, together with defense production that exposed workers to toxic chemicals took an especially heavy toll on the health of people of all ages, but in particular infants and children. That said, public health officials were able to overcome shortages of personnel and equipment and to contain the worst outbreaks of diseases by establishing basic disinfection protocols.

Chapter 9 looks at loyalty, propaganda, and popular moods. The shock of the invasion and the initial military losses were so demoralizing that the state's ability to convince people of its message assumed even greater urgency. Wartime state propaganda, at first hesitant over how to report the retreats, became ever more personal and emotional, deliberately forging ties with peasants, workers, and soldiers. Discoveries of German atrocities spawned a more passionate tone that the authors call "vengeance propaganda" (334). A unifying wartime culture soon emerged, based on political education, poster art, radio and newspaper reportage, and song and poetry.

People responded in various ways: workers promised to meet production targets, all-female brigades taught women workers new skills, and ordinary people worked together on roof-top fire-spotting and anti-tank constructions. All these initiatives helped create a spirit of *levée en masse*.

State propaganda and popular opinion shaped each other, changing over time in accord with conditions on the homefront, events at the front line, and the liberation of the occupied territories. The state succeeded as long as its message aligned with what people actually experienced or knew. Never monolithic in their responses, Soviet citizens reacted to the war effort based on their nationality, social class, and political and personal experience. The overwhelming majority of Soviet citizens supported the war out of revulsion at fascist brutality on the one hand, and on the other out of pride in socialism and the Red Army, or simply because a family member was serving in the army. Overall, they accepted sacrifices they were asked to make, so long as they were shared.

The authors conclude with a look at the Soviet home front and problems confronting the authorities in the immediate postwar years; these included (1) the activity of nationalist guerrilla bands in Ukraine, (2) the need to restore liberated areas lying in ruins, (3) the reestablishment of Soviet and party organizations, and (4) the beginning of mass roundups and prosecution of collaborators. This last task was complicated because the lines between collaboration, resistance, and accommodation were often blurred, and people naturally sought to cast their behavior in the most favorable light. In the cities, for example, those who stayed under occupation and those who returned from evacuation regarded each other with distrust and suspicion heightened by prejudices and shortages of basic necessities.

*Fortress Dark and Stern*<sup>2</sup> explores in detail the interrelations of state and society, the mobilization of precious resources for production for the front, and the extreme privations ordinary people endured. The authors astutely characterize the ties between town and country, when they write that “the food shortage was exacerbated by the labor drain from the countryside, and the inability to retain labor in industry a consequence of the lack of food” (215). Their book is invaluable not only for the depth of their research and their compelling thesis that “the military prowess of the Red Army ... was determined by the people on the home front who supplied the armaments the soldiers needed,” but also because they show why “the outcome of World War II was decided ... in the east” (369), not on the beaches of Normandy as popular imagination would have it. In their conclusion, they lament that, “in defeating fascism, the Soviet people ... also enabled the Stalinist system to consolidate itself and reassert its authority” (378).

My main regret about the book, besides its skimpy contextualization of the relevant military operations, is that authors Goldman and Filtzer did not include at least one chapter on the influential role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) during the war. Were not many people seeking spiritual comfort in the face of death everywhere? Joseph Stalin himself, the former seminarian turned atheist, understood this reality when he relaxed the systematic persecution of the ROC in hopes of gaining its support for the war effort. On the plus side, from a historiographical point of view, the authors helpfully refute the argument put forward by Sean McMeekin<sup>3</sup> that the victory of the Red Army over the Wehrmacht was the result of the matériel contributions made via the US Lend-Lease Program.

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2. The title is borrowed from a poem by Nikolai Tikhonov.

3. In *Stalin's War: A New History of World War II* (NY: Basic Books, 2021).