Most people who write or speak about the Soviet Union like to start with an apt quotation from Lenin. I shall resist the temptation. Instead I shall quote Trotsky, since he is unfashionable and does not get much of an airing these days. But it was indeed Trotsky who encapsulated the whole essence of military morale when he wrote:

First of all you must build the morale of your own troops. Then you must look to the morale of your civilian population. Then, and only then, when these are in good repair should you concern yourself with the enemy’s morale. And the best way to destroy the enemy’s morale is to kill him in large numbers. There’s nothing more demoralising that that.

Well, there is a lot in what he wrote – and it was Trotsky who was responsible for the morale of the Red Army. In the chaos of 1917, he spread his agitators through the remnants of the Tsar’s army and rallied them to the Bolshevik side. To the civil population he sent more military agitators in special propaganda trains, whistle-stopping over the whole railway system to preach the Bolshevik message. It was the only medium available other than rumour. Newspapers were not being printed, Popov had not really invented the wireless so there was not any reliable medium other than face-to-face propaganda. And it worked, the Red Army was built on promises – it did not matter that they later turned out false – and the white armies were beaten – killed in large numbers.

And that is how it has been going for almost 70 years. The media have improved but there is still a heavy reliance on face-to-face agitation – and the message is very little altered. Soviet propaganda preaches that the people and the army are one – are united in a mystical

* Lately Defence and Air Attaché, Moscow
trinity of the peasants and workers, the intelligentsia, and the armed forces. Together they stand invincible against the capitalist enemy. The armed forces are continuously hyped as the sure shield of the homeland with, also, an internationalist obligation to protect the gains of socialism wherever on the globe they are threatened by imperialism, neo-imperialism or internal reaction. Soviet media claim incessantly that the Soviet soldier (and they mean the sailor and the airman as well) is the proud inheritor of the traditions of the great October Revolution, of the Red Army in the civil war and in the greatest war and victory of all military history, the Great Patriotic War of 1941–45, and that he now serves in the office of a line of fortifications protecting these glorious achievements, et cetera.

This is all very well, but what we want to know is, ‘Does it work? Is he any good? Will he advance on day one of World War III or will he flee the field at the first trumpet blast from NORTHAG or 2 ATAF?’.

On 26 October 1949, Major General Richard Hilton spoke at the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies. He had just returned from the Soviet Union having done the job I was to do 30 years later. The Chairman on that occasion was Earl Wavell. General Hilton would have agreed with my views. He judged that Soviet military morale is a curate’s egg – no reason to think that it is all bad but whether it is really sound would depend on the circumstances of any test. He suggested that their principal motivation was a harsh discipline, maintained by the NKVD/KGB and that leadership in all the Soviet services is of a doubtful quality – that officers lead neither from the front nor from the back. That in most respects they do not lead at all. They tend just to ignore the troops and actually get on themselves doing the jobs that have to be done. And if the system as a whole is not working as well as it should, then the remedy is more and yet more political education.

Those were broadly General Hilton’s conclusions. I was strongly tempted to change a few names and include the transcript of his lecture as printed in the RUSI Journal for 1949. Nothing essential has changed it seems over the last 37 years. I find that I can only echo those conclusions. And a most interesting thing was that Earl Wavell in his summing up on that day in 1949 said that nothing appeared to have changed since he had been in Russia for the annual manoeuvres of the Tsar’s army in 1911 and 1912.

What can we make of it then? In spite of all these seeming deficiencies, we know that the Russian soldier of the First World War was renowned for great courage and stoic endurance, that the Red Army