Chapter 8

THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR
Barbarossa to Stalingrad

John Erickson

On Sunday [22 June 1941] about 0400, the bombardment started: the attack was at 0500.

At first we thought it was the usual kind of exercises, with artillery and aircraft, including mock air attacks. So we went back to sleep. Ten days earlier there had been exercises with live firing. We never thought it could be the Germans this time. When daylight came I grabbed some binoculars and realised I was looking at a group of German planes returning from bombing our rear. . . . We ran half dressed to our unfinished defense positions.

—personal communication,
recollecion of Red Army soldier, 345th Rifle Regiment

The plight of one Soviet soldier was an instance of the condition into which the Red Army had been plunged, in June 1941, unable either to attack or defend. The ensuing haplessness laid bare a warfare state without a functioning war machine, lacking a high command, bereft of operational plans. Not that the road to the catastrophe of 1941 was without its warning signs. They were strewn from east to west, beginning in Spain in 1936, moving from Lake Khasan in 1938 to Khalkin-gol and Zhukov’s declared “victory” in 1939, the “liberation march” into eastern Poland in 1939, and the humiliating disasters of the 1939–40 “Winter War” with Finland. What they conveyed were shortcomings in Red Army organization

R. Higham et al. (eds.), The Military History of the Soviet Union
© Robin Higham and Frederick W. Kagan 2002
and performance disregarded or uncorrected, poor training, questionable morale, indifferent leadership, outmoded equipment, grave deficiencies in supply. What the war with Finland also demonstrated was dangerously defective strategy.

In this predestination of near-fatal destruction visited upon the Soviet Union by the Wehrmacht, the system, the army, and society were inextricably linked and equally vulnerable. The roots of impending disaster ran deep. From its earliest days the Soviet political leadership, engaged in an “uncompromising ideological struggle,” was unable to dispense with the military, yet, out of residual fear, was never averse to undermining or demeaning it. Stalin’s murderous military purge of 1937–38 was itself an extreme paranoid instance of that disposition. Damaging though that was, graver injury had been done to the Soviet military, the Red Army in particular, by the social and economic consequences of Stalinist collectivization and industrialization. Change and upheaval in civil society inevitably impinged on the military. Collectivization alienated the peasant recruit; industrialization overwhelmed an officer corps with technology for which they had neither appropriate education, adequate training, nor great personal aptitude. Building “a new material and technical base for war” could not be managed overnight, “the general cultural level” precluded “the training of skilled military cadres” as well as the development of “modern-day military theory.” Military matters were “administered through propaganda slogans,” party-directed military doctrine responsible for the cult of the offensive was more expressive of a political imperative than of military rationale.

“Cadres decide everything!” To its misfortune and ultimate undoing, in 1941 the Red Army showed the Stalinist slogan to be cruelly accurate. Difficulties in officer manning, education, training, retention, and performance had plagued the Red Army from the first days of its existence, but chronic problems assumed a dangerously acute form as Red Army numerical and technological expansion increasingly moved into high, hectic gear. For the failure to meet the requirements of a modern mass army, both the system and the military were culpable. The political premises and coercive practices imposed by the regime in pursuit of a “class-based army” not merely contradicted but actually obstructed and inhibited moves to a modern mass army. The military leadership understood mass largely in brute terms, whether men or machines, dismissive of the individual soldier, incapable of training and retaining officers minimally proficient in handling even a relatively undifferentiated mass. As a result Soviet soldiers became countless victims of a system combining numbing incompetence with ferocious ruthlessness.