



KHRUSHCHEV AT UKRAINIAN FRONT (1943)

Khrushchev: The Illusions of War

NO nation has ever suffered more appalling losses than Russia did in World War II, when 22 million of its citizens died. Determined to keep the searing memory of that struggle alive, the Soviet hierarchy has seen to it that an endless stream of histories and first-person accounts keeps flowing from state publishing houses. But as former Premier Nikita Khrushchev makes clear in the second installment of his reminiscences in LIFE this week, some of the most fascinating material about the Soviet conduct of the war has been scrubbed out of official chronicles.

The Invisible Finns. The Soviet ex-Premier's account begins with the event that set the stage for Russia's entry into the war—the nonaggression treaty between Stalin and Hitler in 1939. Khrushchev learned of the pact when he was summoned to Stalin's dacha after a day of hunting with other members of the Soviet hierarchy. "While the trophies of our hunt were being prepared for the table," recalls Khrushchev, "Stalin told us that [Hitler's Foreign Minister Joachim von] Ribbentrop had brought with him a draft of a friendship and nonaggression treaty and that we had signed it. Stalin seemed very pleased with himself. 'It's all a game to see who can fool whom,' he said. '[Hitler] thinks he's outsmarted me, but actually it's I who have tricked him.'" Stalin hoped, says Khrushchev, "that the English and French might exhaust Germany and foil Hitler's plan to crush the West first, then turn East."

Although the pact is generally regarded as one of the most cynical agreements in history, Stalin's decision met the approval of a majority of party members as "tactically wise," says Khrushchev. However, "we couldn't even discuss the treaty at party meetings. It was very hard for us—as Communists, as antifascists—to accept the idea of joining forces with Germany."

In an effort to build a buffer for Leningrad, the Soviet Union's second largest city, Stalin at that time demanded that Finland move its southern border

the city. The Finns refused, and Stalin decided to use force. "The Finns turned out to be good warriors," says Khrushchev. "We soon realized that we had bitten off more than we could chew. The Finns would climb up into the fir trees and shoot our men at pointblank range. Covered by branches, with white cloaks over their uniforms, the Finns were invisible."

At one point, Stalin called in Soviet Defense Commissar Kliment Voroshilov for a dressing down. Voroshilov angrily retorted: "You have yourself to blame for all this! You're the one that had our best generals killed!" With that, Khrushchev recalls, the Defense Commissar "picked up a platter with a boiled suckling pig on it and smashed it on the table." The 1939-40 "Winter War" cost about 1,000,000 Soviet lives, says Khrushchev, and ended in a "moral defeat" for Stalin, though the Finns agreed to pull back about seven miles.

Pikes and Swords. Soon there came a far more serious disaster—the Nazi invasion of June 22, 1941. At first, Soviet commanders were ordered not to return the German artillery fire. Says Khrushchev: "Stalin was so afraid of war that he convinced himself that Hitler would keep his word and wouldn't attack us."

Khrushchev became the Politburo's military representative in the Ukraine, then the main theater of the German attack. At one point, he desperately telephoned Moscow to ask for weapons. Georgy Malenkov, then a member of the State Defense Committee, told him to use "pikes, swords, homemade weapons—anything you can make in your own factories." Replied Khrushchev: "You mean we should fight tanks with spears?" Malenkov answered that "you'll have to do the best you can. Light up bottles of gasoline or kerosene and throw them at the tanks."

In those dark days, says Khrushchev, when the Germans marched to within sight of the Kremlin before their attack was blunted, Stalin was "paralyzed by his fear of Hitler like a rabbit in



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WITH SOVIET TROOPS
Fighting tanks with spears.

viet generals were captured, Stalin branded them traitors and banished their families to Siberia. He refused to sign any official documents "for fear that history would record him as a defeated leader," and he grew suspicious of everyone.

Khrushchev fell under suspicion when a project in which he was involved—the offensive at Kharkov in 1942—failed disastrously. Some 200,000 Soviet troops walked into a German trap and were killed or captured. Says Khrushchev: "A few days after the disaster I received a call from Moscow. I was ready for anything, including arrest." Stalin reminded him that a gendarmier officer had been hanged by the Czar as a result of several serious Russian defeats during World War I. Replied Khrushchev: "Comrade Stalin, I remember this event well. The Czar did the only right thing. [Colonel] Myasnikov* was a traitor." Khrushchev was saved, he believes, because he had advised Stalin against overextending Soviet forces at Kharkov, and his warning had been overheard by several men in the dictator's hierarchy.

Burning the Dead. The war, and Khrushchev's fortunes, took a turn for the better with the Soviet victory at Stalingrad and then in the massive tank battle at Kursk. After Stalingrad, where German Field Marshal Friedrich von Paulus' Sixth Army was destroyed, the Soviets were unable to bury the German dead in the frozen earth. Says Khrushchev: "We gathered thousands of corpses and stacked them in layers

* Actually, the colonel's name was S.N. Myasodov. He was accused of passing military information to the Germans and executed in a 1945. Continued