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Observations on General A. A. Vlasov and  
the so-called "Vlasov Army".

The Russian Lt. Gen. Andrei Andrejevitch Vlasov fell in German captivity in the so-called "Volokhov-pocket" in spring 1942. The author of this paper met him personally on 7 August 1942, because he was interested in getting in touch with prominent Russian prisoners of war not for the purpose of interrogating them in the usual sense of the word but to carry on a free and easy conversation face to face with them and thus to obtain first-hand information on the general mood prevailing in the Soviet Union during the war and the living conditions there. General Vlasov had been described to me as being particularly fit for such a purpose because of his sincerity and judiciousness. As a soldier he enjoyed the reputation of having played an outstanding and decisive role in the military operations which had led to the rescue of Moscow from the German assault in the fall of 1941.

The expectations of the author had not been frustrated by Vlasov's personality and his attitude. At that time he was a man of 42, but looked much older, whose outer appearance and behavior were typical for a Russian of peasant origin. His whole demeanor bore a natural dignity; he expressed his views in a clear, definite, and well-weighted manner; altogether he evoked the impression of being an honest and reliable man.

At the beginning of our conversation Vlasov showed a certain reserve which he gave up as soon as he recognized the true intentions of the author and became aware of the fact that in spite of war the author had kept friendly feelings for his people.

Thus, trustful relations between Vlasov and the author were established from the first conversation. In the course of time they became still closer because of the author's increasing conviction of Vlasov's honesty.

In spite of the deep disappointment which Vlasov had experienced in the following years during his intercourse with the Germans, he remained true to the basic ideas which he expressed in his first conversation with the author and which induced him to try to get along with the Germans.

In order to understand Vlasov and the aim he pursued, it is necessary to know his origin and his mental development. He was born in Central Russia as the son of a Russian peasant's son. By diligence and stamina his father had succeeded in exceeding the average level of the Russian peasantry by achieving a certain grade of prosperity which - though a very modest one - sufficed under Soviet rules for blaming and treating

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him as a "Kulak". Thus, Vlasov's father became a victim of the Soviet government's ruthless policy of collectivization, by which the most valuable part of the Russian peasantry had been exterminated and the rest transformed to slaves of a social system that is based on the principle that the people exist for the benefit of the state and not the state for the benefit of the people.

This experience, which he never forgot, had a decisive influence on the formation of Vlasov's character. His basic attitude toward the Soviet regime was not determined by the fact that he owed to that regime his personal account but by the great disappointment which he felt in view of the discrepancy between the contents of the original promises which the Communist party and the Soviet government had given to the Russian people and particularly the Russian peasantry, and the hard lot they really got. This disappointment was extremely deep because the Soviet regime took power at a time when Vlasov was still young and had been caught by the enthusiasm evoked among the Russian youth by the false ideals proclaimed by the Bolsheviks. He used all the opportunities the new regime offered him; he joined the party in order to extinguish the stain on his past resulting from the fact that he was a descendant of a wealthy peasant, and after having enlisted in the army he, in the course of time, by ability and stamina, honestly fulfilling the duties assigned to him by his government and the party achieved the high military position that he was holding when the Germans unleashed the war against the Soviet Union.

Any doubts about the correctness of his government's policy appeared to him as idle at that time because there were no indications that a change of the regime was conceivable, and, moreover, it could not be denied that the Soviet Government had succeeded in achieving some cultural and economic progress. Thus, wide circles of the population began to hope that an amelioration of the general living standard and a mitigation of the harsh governmental methods would follow in due time.

Vlasov was deeply shocked at the brutal purge executed by the Soviet government in 1936-38 and the shooting of the most prominent marshals and generals in June 1937, so much the more as he had been jailed for some time himself. On the other hand, this experience was new evidence that any resistance is hopeless when it is directed against a regime which considers itself as being strong enough to dare such encroachments against its own citizens.

Vlasov's case was the same as with many other Russians: not before the catastrophe of 1941/42 had happened did they become aware of the fact that there were still possibilities to free the Russian people from despotism and to make available to them the blessings of a democratic regime.

For this purpose Vlasov had allied himself with the Germans but

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not because he felt any sympathies for the regime which had existed in Germany at that time. He honestly believed that a decisive defeat inflicted upon the Red Army would cause an overthrow of the Soviet government and that the Germans would achieve this goal. But, on the other hand, he was deeply convinced that the Germans would never succeed without the active help of the Russian people. Thus, in his opinion, the Germans and the Russian people were natural allies, at least for the time being. In his view, such an alliance did not represent a danger for a future Russia because he was convinced that although the Germans were able to defeat the Red Army with the help of the anti-Communist part of the Russian population they would never be in a position to conquer the vast country and to put it under their rule.

Vlasov, therefore, tried to convince his German partners of the following:

- 1) the German Army were not strong enough to inflict a decisive blow on the Soviet Union;
- 2) the German Army would obtain a victory only after allying itself with the anti-Communist Russian element;
- 3) a great number of anti-Communists were at hand among the Russian prisoners and deserters in Germany who were willing to fight against the Bolshevik regime;
- 4) military formations of volunteers should be created under his leadership and German control;
- 5) such formations would fight against the Soviet dictatorship with stamina and enthusiasm;
- 6) the knowledge of the fact that both Russians and the other nationalities of the Soviet Union had allied themselves with the Germans to combat the Bolsheviks would vastly increase the number of the deserters from the Red Army;
- 7) after the first decisive successes even high Soviet commanders would abandon the Red Army and join the volunteers because many of these commanders would think as he, Vlasov, did; so, for example, his friend, Marshal Rokossovsky, had never forgotten that the OGPU (the Soviet Secret Police) had broken several of his ribs while interrogating him during his arrest;
- 8) a Russian National Committee should be established and enabled to make an appeal to the peoples of the Soviet Union;

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- 9) this appeal should contain the statement that the National Committee had reached an agreement with the German government about the integrity and the independence of the future state which would be created on Soviet territory after the collapse of the Bolshevik regime;
- 10) the National Committee should give all the peoples of the Soviet Union the guarantee of unrestricted self-determination and declare that after the overthrow of the Bolshevik regime they would get full freedom to decide whether they preferred to abide in a Union or to become independent;
- 11) the immediate abolition of the collectivization would be the most important step in order to win over the Russians, particularly the peasantry.

In his conversations with the German side Vlasov had never left it in doubt about his conviction that the success of the proposed action entirely depended on the fulfillment of the above-mentioned conditions. He used every opportunity to emphasize that he and his followers regarded themselves as voluntary allies and not as mercenaries of the German Army. He repeated again and again that a clear political program about Russia's future must be made public in order to win over the peoples of the Soviet Union and induce them to fight Bolshevik despotism side by side with the Germans.

Much evidence was at hand that Vlasov's views were correct and that the existing proportion of strength between the Red Army and the German forces would have changed decisively if his proposals would have been accepted. As it is known, the discontent of the Ukrainian population with the Soviet regime was so great at the beginning of the war that the invading German troops had been acclaimed as liberators, the population received them with flowers and food and built triumphal arches for them. The Ukrainians appeared to be sure that the Germans came to liberate them from the Bolshevik rule and to abolish the hateful collectivization. The Red Army demonstrated a similar attitude; hundreds of thousands of its members preferred German captivity to fighting.

The German leadership did not utilize the vast possibilities for psychological warfare which had been offered to it. The German behavior destroyed the confidence and the hopes with which the German troops had been received by the native population. The German leadership let the Russian prisoners of war die from starvation and privations. The system of collectivization had not been abolished. The treatment of the population after the introduction of the civil administration had made it evident to everybody that the German leadership had decided to apply colonial methods to the occupied territories of Russia and the Ukraine.

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Vlasov was well aware of these facts. Nevertheless he believed that he would succeed in persuading the Germans to stop these blunders and to change their methods.

But Hitler and his henchmen had no understanding of such considerations. All the efforts undertaken by judicious military and civil persons in order to convince Hitler of the necessity to change his policy toward the population of the occupied Russian and Ukrainian territories were vain. He believed that the Soviet Union could be defeated by military means alone; he was afraid that any concession he would make would be interpreted as a proof of weakness; he was determined to exploit the occupied territories by colonial methods and by using brutal force.

From the first, Hitler harbored a deep distrust against Vlasov. He flatly refused to commit himself to a decision concerning the future fate of the occupied territories. He considered the formation of a voluntary army under Vlasov's leadership as a potential danger because he was afraid that the volunteers might turn their arms against him in an appropriate moment. The endeavors of informed German politicians to convince Hitler of Vlasov's honesty and utility failed just as the efforts of the military commanders to explain to him that military considerations necessitated the observance of Vlasov's proposals. Rosenberg, Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories, played a particularly ominous role because his plan was directed toward a dismemberment of the former Russian Empire and he, therefore, rejected Vlasov, considering him as a representative of the aspirations of the great Russians.

Vlasov himself never made a secret of the fact that he was a great Russian by birth and descent. History had taught him that the leading role among the peoples of the Soviet Union was allotted to the Russians. But, in his opinion, all these peoples had suffered equally under the Soviet regime and, therefore, were bound to stick to the common cause and conclude a strong alliance in order to overthrow the Bolshevik dictatorship. After the fulfillment of that task they would obtain ample opportunity to maintain their rights. He used to describe the necessity of a unified force to fight Bolshevism as follows: "A man can't strike while his fingers are apart, he has to form a fist before striking".

In spite of Hitler's negative attitude, the German Army, in the course of time, secretly accomplished the formation of various national detachments of volunteers which particularly consisted of Georgians, Turks, Tatars, etc. Although the Nazis were still continuing their political blunders both in the occupied territories and with respect to the Russian prisoners of war and workers at home the number of volunteers who enlisted was astoundingly great. It would have run probably in the millions if these blunders had been avoided.

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Only after the great setbacks the German Army had suffered in Stalingrad and later could Hitler be induced to make a slight change in his attitude toward Vlasov. For two years Vlasov had been put off or fed with empty promises. Eventually, in the fall of 1944 the decision was taken to proclaim Vlasov officially as the leader of the Russian volunteers and to appoint him as the head of a National Committee which had been solemnly inaugurated in November 1944 in Prague.

Characteristic of Hitler's mentality was the fact that nobody else but the SS became entrusted with the political supervision of the so-called "Vlasov-action". On the part of the German Army, the former German military attache in Moscow, General Kossring, had been appointed as "General of the voluntary formations".

After so much time had been uselessly wasted, Germany, in the meantime, was definitely doomed. The Vlasov-action came too late and could bear no fruits whatsoever. The planned formation of two voluntary divisions ran aground because of the insufficiencies conditional to the general situation in Germany at that time. Vlasov's prestige was in the decline. His former confidence which he had tried to maintain as long as possible was gone now. He was disappointed, exasperated and frequently mentioned the intention to commit suicide.

A short time before the Russians began their last advance toward Berlin, Vlasov and his staff had been transferred to Karlstad (Czechoslovakia) and later on 16 April 1945 to Pussen in Bavaria where he surrendered to the USA forces in May 1945. His further fate is known: after the German capitulation he was extradited to the Russians, who transferred him to Moscow and hanged him there together with his closest collaborators such as Malyshev, Froelich, Gilevskov, etc.

The political lessons which can be drawn from the Vlasov-action are the following:

- 1) Vlasov was a big asset in German hands; if the Germans would have used him honestly and purposefully in skilful psychological warfare the most beneficial results would have been achieved;
- 2) the war against the Soviet Union could have been won with the help of the Russian anti-Communists but not without it;
- 3) the German failure to defeat the Soviet Union was particularly due to the fact that the German leadership did not possess the faculty to conduct psychological warfare; Germany's military strength was insufficient to fulfill that task alone;

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- 4) to win the Russians over, the Germans had to convince them by practical deeds that they were waging the war not against the Russian people but against the Bolshevik rulers;
- 5) in order to convince the Russians of the honesty of the German intentions the German government should have proclaimed a clear program on the future status of Russia under an adequate consideration of the wishes of the peoples of the Soviet Union with regard to their independence, the restoration of private property and the abolition of collectivization;
- 6) the disappointment which the Russian population experienced in dealing with the Germans had shaken its hope that real help could be expected from the outer world in its struggle against the Bolshevik dictatorship; nevertheless, the discontent of the peoples of the Soviet Union with their present rulers is so deep-seated and so great that they would support every effort from abroad which would appear to them as fit to free them from the hateful regime. This task, however, can not be achieved by military means alone. Skilful psychological warfare is absolutely necessary and must be conducted simultaneously.