

STALIN AS WAR LEADER

Clive Pearson assesses the Soviet dictator's war record.

Right: The marriage took place on 23 August 1939; divorce came on 22 June 1941, much to Stalin's surprise.



As leader of a highly centralised dictatorship Josef Stalin inevitably played a pivotal part in every area of the Soviet war effort during the Great Patriotic War (1941-45). Hence he bore direct responsibility for the course of the war and its outcome. At the end of the titanic struggle he paraded himself as Generalissimus and war hero. Yet the truth is rather mixed. Why, for example, did Stalin allow himself to be 'surprised' by Hitler in June 1941 when it was clear what German plans were? Why did the Soviet leader continue with failed military policies for so long? On the other hand, what were the decisions taken by Stalin, particularly after 1941, that steered Russia away from catastrophe to triumphant victory?

The collapse of the old Soviet Union in 1991 has allowed historians to gain access to archives and to better answer these questions. Richard Overy's *Russia's War*, published in the 1990s, was ground-breaking. Other books written

more recently such as *Thunder in the East* by Evan Mawdsley and biographies by Simon Sebag Montefiore and Robert Service give us a greater understanding of Stalin's real thought processes and enable us to appreciate more clearly why certain decisions were made.

The Pre-war Period

The Soviet elite was imbued with the idea that war with the capitalist powers was inevitable. Partly for this reason, Stalin had embarked on a course of rapid industrialisation, through his Five Year Plans, so that by 1941 Russia's economy easily rivalled the other great powers of Europe. Unfortunately, the same could not be said with regard to military preparedness. The responsibility for this lies with the suspicious and vindictive Soviet dictator. His purges of army and air force commanders in 1937-8 had the effect of undermining morale and paralysing ini-

tiative. In addition, Soviet forces were hardly prepared for modern warfare. They lacked radios in their tanks and aircraft to co-ordinate any attack and there were very few transport vehicles to ferry the troops around quickly. Time was therefore needed before Soviet forces would be ready.

By the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939 Stalin believed he had bought precious space and time. He rather rashly pronounced, 'I know what Hitler's up to. He thinks he has outsmarted me. But actually it is I who have outsmarted him.' He thus took advantage of this agreement to extend Soviet frontiers westward. The old defensive line, the Stalin line, which had run along the previous Soviet frontier was abandoned (in line with the idea of 'offensive strategy') and moved up to a new frontier. But the plan soon began to unravel when Hitler made short shrift of his opponents in the west and was quickly able to point his armies eastward. By 1941 Soviet forward

Right: A map showing the distribution of German and Soviet forces in July 1941. At this stage Stalin denied his military commanders any flexibility. He only changed his tactics in August 1942.

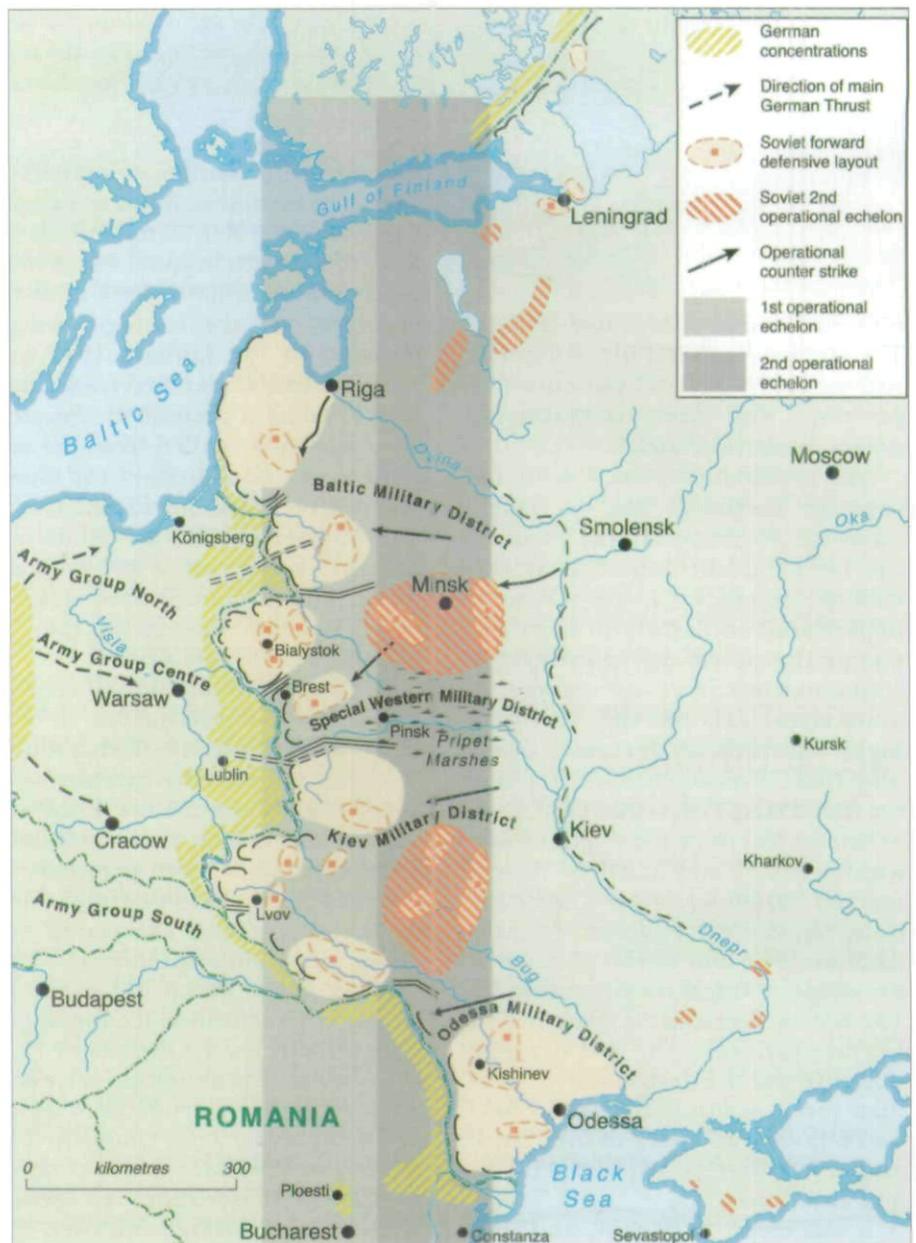
positions were still not ready and there was no second line to fall back to, as the Stalin line had been left in a state of disrepair. Yet Stalin still hoped that Hitler would delay. The Soviet Union was vast. Surely the *Wehrmacht*, too, would need more time to build up its forces. And, after all, Germany was still at war with Great Britain. But attack Hitler did.

As suggested by Marshall G.K. Zhukov, the greatest of the Soviet war commanders, Stalin's military leadership can be divided into three phases. The first phase begins with the outbreak of war and ends with the preparation for Stalingrad in September 1942. The second phase goes up until the end of the Battle of Kursk in July 1943. The final phase covers up to the end of the war in May 1945. By this time Stalin had emerged as a 'real military commander'. Through these phases we can understand how he evolved as war leader.

Phase One - Disaster

Stalin's first, almost fatal, error was not to allow his own forces to mobilise in time before the impending Nazi attack. In the West it was long believed that the main reason for this was the Soviet dictator's unwillingness to accept that he had been outmanoeuvred by Hitler. To admit that the Germans were launching an offensive now would mean that his whole strategy of buying time with the Nazi-Soviet Pact had failed. In addition, he no doubt realised that his armies were still not ready for an all-out conflict with the Führer.

However, other information from the sources has recently come to light. Perhaps another factor influencing Stalin's decision-making was the Nazi timing. Stalin received intelligence from Britain, Japan and inside the German Air Ministry regarding the date of a likely attack. All three suggested the offensive would come in the last half of June. Yet previously these sources had suggested May was the month of the attack. They were right but Hitler had delayed at the last



moment. Hence, when nothing happened, Stalin was sceptical about their usefulness. In any case the end of June seemed far too late for an attack on Russia. Furthermore, Stalin believed that the Nazi leadership was divided and that to mobilise Soviet forces pre-emptively could trigger conflict. Such thoughts undoubtedly weighed heavily in his mind.

The Nazi onslaught began on the morning of 22 June 1941. Stalin's tardy orders to mobilise spelled disaster for Soviet forces. Many army units had no chance

to react and were completely overrun. Nazi forces using their *Blitzkrieg* tactics were soon able to punch huge holes in the Soviet front line. It was easier going

“I know what Hitler's up to. He thinks he has outsmarted me. But actually it is I who have outsmarted him,”

for the Germans in the centre and northern sector as Stalin had mistakenly deployed the bulk of his forces in the south. As a result German forces were able to reach Minsk (300 miles inside Soviet territory) within a week. In that area alone

340,000 Soviet troops were lost in a couple of weeks. In addition, the Soviet air force was almost completely wiped out,

with about 4000 combat aircraft lost in the initial days.

Stalin's reaction was not psychological collapse. On the contrary he stayed in charge with a full diary. Only for a couple of days at the end of June did he retreat in despair to his dacha. But he soon pulled himself together and took charge of the situation. He made an important rallying speech to the nation on 1 July. On 12 July he re-established *Stavka* (headquarters) and made himself Supreme Commander. At a critical moment he showed himself resolute and determined.

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Unfortunately Stalin's ideas on how to prosecute the war were based on those he had experienced in the Russian Civil War of 1918-21 and which had proved successful at the time. This meant that there would be fierce discipline, tight political control, and a constant offensive strategy fired up by supposed revolutionary zeal. Alongside this there developed a 'no retreat' or 'stand fast' policy. Yet this proved to be a flawed strategy in the face of the Nazi *Blitzkrieg*, which involved vast encircling movements deep behind enemy lines. According to Marshal Zhukov, the dictator had little understanding of the requirements of modern warfare. Stalin's heavy-handed control of all army movements denied his commanders any flexibility. Disasters were almost inevitable.

It soon became clear how the Soviet leader intended to keep control and discipline. In July the political commissars, or *politruki*, were reinstated in every military unit with the task of keeping a watchful eye on all commanding officers and their men. Commanders who were deemed to have failed faced the forbidding wrath of the dictator. For example, General D. Pavlov and most of his staff

were blamed for the catastrophe at Minsk and shot. Unfortunately all this had a stifling effect on initiative. In addition, in August, decree 270 ordered that the families of those who surrendered would be arrested and imprisoned. No one was exempt. The surrender of Stalin's son, Yakov, meant that the dictator's own daughter-in-law spent two years in a Soviet prison camp. Fear, if nothing else, would keep his forces fighting.

Stalin arrogantly continued with his all-out attacking strategy. In August Hitler ordered his Army Group Centre to veer south and ensnare the bulk of Russian forces in the south. Zhukov, a member of *Stavka*, then advised a strategic withdrawal and the abandonment of the Ukrainian capital, Kiev, but Stalin instead poured in further reserve forces. The result was a disaster on an epic scale. In one short campaign the Soviet government now lost around 500,000 troops.

The situation in the north was no better as Leningrad was surrounded and besieged in September. Soon it would be Moscow's turn. Stalin called on his last reserve armies and the *opolchenie* (people's militia) to make a last-ditch defence in front of the capital. However, further soviet defeats followed. The way to Moscow seemed open. But the Russian winter had set in early and by the end of November the Nazi advance had ground to a halt on the outskirts of the capital. After some vacillation Stalin showed his courage by staying in Moscow rather than fleeing. The situation had for the moment been stabilised. Indeed this was a decisive turning point in the war. Hitler's inability to take Moscow meant that *Blitzkrieg* had failed: the war was now to be one of attrition.

For Stalin these months were critical. In desperation in November 1941 he had sent Zhukov first to Leningrad to shore up the defence there and then in December had ordered him to save Moscow. Soon afterwards, with

new Siberian forces, the Soviet commander counter-attacked and sent the Germans reeling back a hundred miles. It showed just what Soviet generals could do if they were allowed some flexibility.

This victory before Moscow, however, did not herald a general turning of the tide. Stalin determinedly kept overall control and his ambitious attempt to push back the Germans all along the line led to further defeats. In the spring of 1942 the Germans launched another major offensive. It was not on Moscow, as expected, but in the south and towards the Caucasus. Again the Soviet leader rushed in forces without giving their commanders enough flexibility to meet the demands of the situation. A further concern was that Soviet troops had become dangerously demoralised by constant defeat and were no longer putting up much of a fight. Despite Stalin's decree of 'Not one step backwards!' in July the German advance seemed unstoppable. The result was that by September 1942 Hitler's forces had reached the Caucasus Mountains and were in the suburbs of Stalingrad.

Phase Two – Soviet Counter-Attack

By the end of August 1942 Stalin at last realised that to continue with his present command system was courting disaster. So he appointed Zhukov as his deputy and conceded that *Stavka*, of

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which the dictator remained a part, would agree on strategy together. He soon appointed two other generals of exceptional ability to *Stavka*. They were Aleksandr Vasilevsky as his chief of staff and Aleksei Antonov as his chief of operations. Decision-making

would be made on a more collegiate basis and disagreement with the dictator would be tolerated. This new method would soon bear fruit in a dramatic turnabout in the war.



Left: A German tank rolls over a Russian trench, during the Nazi invasion in 1941.

ing, his new team decided to let the Germans continue their advance. New Soviet armies would be built up, thoroughly trained and prepared but kept in reserve until the propitious moment came for a mighty counter-punch. It was to be *Blitzkrieg* in reverse.

The resulting defeat of German forces at Stalingrad was a decisive turning point in the war. Zhukov prepared his forces for 45 days before launching two powerful pincer movements, which trapped 330,000 German forces inside the city. In January 1943 the hapless German commander, von Paulus, finally surrendered. It was a catastrophic blow for the Third Reich. Stalin celebrated by making himself Marshal of the Soviet Union. He wore his new tunic until the end of the war. The new strategy was working.

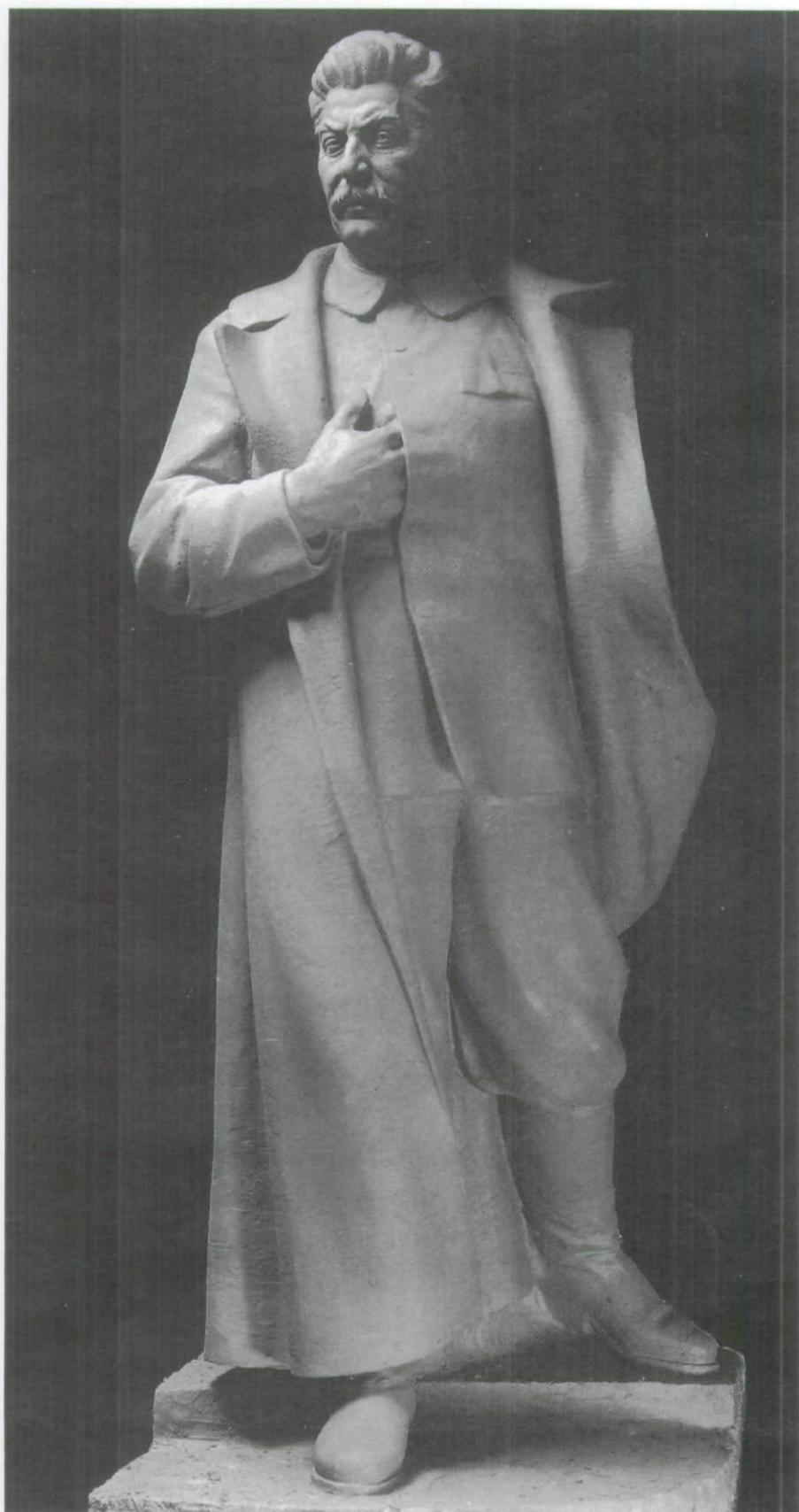
Further *Stavka* attempts to ensnare more German armies now largely failed. There was no significant breakthrough. So by April Stalin sought counsel with his team to decide the way forward. The *Stavka* knew that the Germans would next launch a concerted attack towards the Russian salient around Kursk. Stalin wanted to launch a pre-emptive offensive immediately. Zhukov and the other generals disagreed. They came up with a different approach. There was to be no offensive but Soviet forces would wait and adopt a policy of 'defence in depth'. The Russian army would absorb the attack and, with forces held in reserve, launch a massive counter-attack. The new Stalin accepted the advice. The result was that the Soviet leader avoided another probable defeat.

The long expected German attack came in July 1943. Waiting for them were eight lines of elaborate defence networks stretching back for 150 miles. Hitler launched his forces against the neck of the salient attacking from north and south. Despite employing his very best SS troops, as well as the new heavy-weight Tiger tanks, the assault was soon blunted. Within a fortnight the huge battle was over and Nazi forces were forced to withdraw. For Stalin this further victory meant that in just over six months he had achieved a decisive turnaround in the war. All this was undoubtedly due to the new decision-making strategy.

Why had Stalin continued with his failed strategy for so long? The main reason was undoubtedly that he was out of touch with modern warfare, but his former stance had also suited his system of rule. Pride and arrogance were also fundamental reasons: to change policy meant loss of face and the necessity of sharing power with his generals. Stalin also believed that constant attack would wear down the Nazi forces in a war of attrition which only the Soviets could

win. Perhaps he was right in this assumption, though it was a dangerous viewpoint given the sheer scale of Soviet losses so far.

In September 1942 Stalin proposed his usual immediate offensive with fresh reserve troops at Stalingrad. Zhukov and Vasilevsky muttered something about the need for 'another solution', whereat Stalin famously turned round and asked 'what other solution?' This change in style was fundamental. Instead of attack-



Left: Sergei Merkulov's statue of Stalin. Did his record from 1939 to 1945 really justify such an heroic and glorious image?

completely changed. In imitation of the Germans, the army was now based on the idea of fast moving tank corps along with new mechanised corps containing self-propelled artillery. The airforce, too, was reorganised to allow it to concentrate its units for close support of major offensives. The result was that Soviet forces were now able to match the *Wehrmacht* in the field.

Phase Three – Soviet Victory

In this final phase from July 1943 to final victory in May 1945, Stalin matured and evolved into something approaching 'a real military commander', according to Zhukov. Although in general he still shared in strategic policy decisions, his personal understanding of combined arms operations and modern military technology had grown and meant that he had truly emerged as a 'worthy Supreme C-in-C'.

Stavka's planned counter-attack after Hitler's withdrawal at Kursk punched a huge hole in the German central front. Other co-ordinated attacks followed. By September 1943 the Soviet leader was gleefully hinting that the war might be over in months. But the Germans again managed to stabilise their front, and to allow them to dig in could have serious consequences. Better-equipped and organised Soviet armies were now able to launch a series of further well-prepared offensives and wrong-foot the Germans. By November 1943 Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, had been liberated and soon other great victories followed.

The start of 1944 saw the first of Stalin's 'ten crushing blows' of that year. First of all, in January Leningrad was liberated from its Nazi stranglehold. In May Zhukov launched the spectacular Operation Bagration. German Army Group Centre was taken completely by surprise when Soviet armoured units were unleashed through the Pripet Marshes. The advance became swift and by the end of September Soviet troops had entered the Baltic States, Poland and Rumania. Stalin's role in all this had

Changes, however, were not only happening at the top. At Stalin's insistence the hated *politruki* (political commissars) had their powers reduced in the autumn of 1942. Commanders, too, were no longer executed for failure. He

at last understood the need for greater self-reliance and flexibility in his commanding officers.

Stalin caused wholesale changes to be made throughout the Soviet armed forces after 1941. Army organisation was

been pivotal. According to Vasilevsky, he was in his prime and had become an 'effective military co-ordinator'.

The Soviet dictator now felt so confident of his military abilities that he took control of the central theatre of operations himself. Stalin may also have feared that, as Soviet forces neared Berlin, one of his military commanders might steal all the glory. He egged on his commanders to go ever faster towards their final goal of the German capital. Perhaps concerned that the Western Allies might get there first, he turned the capture of Berlin into a race between Generals Zhukov and Konev. The whole campaign was rushed and improvised and resulted in heavy loss of life – but this had never been a concern of the Soviet dictator. On May 2 1945 German forces in the Nazi capital surrendered.

An exhausted Stalin revelled in his role as victorious warlord and had himself appointed Generalissimus – although he complained that his new white uniform made him look like 'a hotel waiter! Yet the truth behind victory lay not just with military strategy.

Total War

For Stalin the economic forces had always been as important as the military. During the Civil War he had seen how the whole of society had been mobilised for the conflict and how the means of production had been completely subsumed to that end. Two days after the German attack in June 1941 the order for the transportation of large numbers of factories, machines and manpower to beyond the Ural Mountains was given. Eventually as many as 25 million workers and their families were moved east. As a result, in the second half of 1942, the rump Soviet economy was able to out-produce the Germans in artillery, tanks and aircraft by a factor of two or even three to one. The USSR had become a successful war economy. This, then, explains in good part the turnaround in Soviet fortunes.

Stalin left no stone unturned in order to mobilise the population. He was able

to utilise the whole of urban society for the war effort. All men aged from 16 to 55 were enrolled. Women were seconded to war factories and into agriculture. Gulag (prison camp) labourers, of whom there were at least two million, made an important contribution towards production.

The Soviet dictator was astute in exploiting his new Western Allies for the war effort. Under the Lend-Lease scheme, America and Britain agreed to provide vast quantities of vital supplies. Most important of these were communications equipment (350,000 radio sets were sent to Russia), fuel, vehicles (200,000 Studebaker army trucks) and railway requisites. All these made a vital difference and allowed Soviet armies to co-ordinate their efforts and carry out their constant 'deep offensive' strategy from Stalingrad onwards.

As war leader Stalin also had to be a diplomat working with these new allies. At Teheran in November 1943 and at Yalta in February 1945 he opportunistically exploited the divisions between Churchill and Roosevelt, and the latter's naïve idealism. He thus avoided an open breach when Soviet forces occupied Eastern Europe and secured his main aim of Soviet security. In the end he conceded very little but gained a great deal. In this area the Soviet dictator was mightily successful.

Conclusion

Stalin was indeed crucial in winning the war for the Soviet Union. He had a decisive role in the centre co-ordinating military and economic strategy. Through his secure grip on the government, party apparatus and the economy he was able to avoid collapse and turn defeat into triumph. He was under no delusions as to what would be required to survive in modern warfare. Total war was a concept he had learned in the

early years of Soviet power under Lenin. American diplomat Averill Harriman thought Stalin 'the most effective of the war leaders'.

As supreme military commander he was flexible and able to adapt to circumstances. He built up a team of remarkable quality in *Stavka* and used them to help win the war. He learned from them and developed as commander himself. At Teheran the British chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Sir Alan Brooke, was impressed and thought Stalin had a 'brain of the highest military calibre'.

Yet for all this Stalin's legacy was far from heroic. His self-deception with regard to the timing of the Nazi attack nearly resulted in catastrophic defeat. His incompetent handling of Soviet forces in the first 14 months of the war had tragic consequences. All this meant that losses were far heavier than they need have been. A relieved Stalin might savour his victory celebrations – but 27 million Soviet war dead could not.

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“Eventually as many as 25 million workers and their families were moved east,”

Issues to Debate

- What is the most important factor that explains Stalin's victory in the Great Patriotic War?
- Do you agree that Stalin was the 'most effective of the war leaders'?
- What was it about the Soviet system that allowed Stalin to quickly mobilise the country for total war?

Further Reading

- R. Overy, *Russia's War* (Penguin, 1999)
 E. Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War 1941-45* (Hodder Arnold, 2005)
 S. Sebag-Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Russian Tsar* (Phoenix, 2003)
 R. Service, *Stalin: A Biography* (Macmillan, 2004).

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