

**Stalinism and the Soviet-Finnish War of 1939-40:  
Crisis management, Censorship and Control**

Malcolm L. G. Spencer  
St Catherine's College

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the degree of DPhil in History  
University of Oxford, Hilary Term 2015

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This thesis examines the extent to which the Soviet regime under Stalin had the institutions and agents in place at the close of the 1930s to cope with the crisis of war in Finland; to be in command of the military campaign, while simultaneously controlling the direction of the official narrative about the fighting; and to censor

conflicting interpretations, experiences and information channels, which might expose the Red Army's woeful performance on Finnish territory. This mobilisation of press, propaganda and censorship organs in the face of widespread international condemnation and domestic disquiet constituted a significant challenge for a regime still dealing with the sudden reorientation of the Communist International, required after the Soviet Union's conclusion of a non-aggression treaty with Nazi Germany in August 1939. An international perspective is central to this thesis, with a view towards assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the public face and private practice of Soviet information controls.

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**Long Abstract**

In both western and Russian historiography the Soviet-Finnish War of 1939-40 enjoys, at best, only a passing reference in any narrative of the period and is poorly integrated into existing scholarly analyses of the Soviet regime under Stalin. It is my contention that this conflict offers an invaluable opportunity to test for continuity and change in the *form* and *function* of the Stalinist system. Between the disastrous efforts of its forces and the condemnation of the international community, the Kremlin was confronted with the serious challenge of how to portray the events of the war in the media, while managing domestic and international opinion over the course of the fighting.

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Although it is not my intention to provide an exhaustive account of the military dimensions of the conflict, or a blow-by-blow description of the success and failures of Soviet, Finnish and other international forces embroiled in the conflict, these developments will form a backdrop to the wider events, institutions and actors with which this study is occupied. I will attempt to trace how these various elements collectively operated and interacted in the context of the escalating crisis, drawing on a wide range of Soviet and non-Soviet sources. Party speeches, press materials, surveillance reports and other internal state documents will be triangulated against the available evidence from memoirs, interviews and contemporary correspondence to build a more complete picture of this turbulent period. The use of new and previously unexploited evidence from this understudied episode will offer the opportunity to challenge existing assumptions about the Soviet system and shed new light on the aspirations and actual achievements of Stalinist control.

This remains a localised view in temporal scope alone. A case study with blurred edges; the goal of this thesis throughout is to focus a spotlight on the international dimensions of Soviet history in order to better illuminate the foreign and domestic concerns of Stalinist regime in this period. The interplay between domestic politics and international diplomacy will be considered by the first chapter, as it aims to introduce Stalin as the principal actor in our narrative, dominating both the decision-making process and public presentation of Soviet policy. This chapter will set the scene for the rupture in relations between Moscow and Helsinki, while attempting to incorporate the Finnish debacle into broader trends in the Kremlin's foreign affairs in these decisive months of 1939. The importance of the Stalin's Baltic concerns has traditionally been overlooked within the literature, with attention instead focused on Moscow's protracted negotiations with Paris and London, and the sudden, unexpected understanding it reached with Berlin in the summer of 1939. These major shifts in the Kremlin's diplomatic relations with the western powers had a dramatic impact on the ability of foreign communist parties and their Soviet counterparts to adjust effectively to the official line. It was an unresolved situation that would be further tested by the unexpected deterioration in Soviet-Finnish relations, which spilled out into open conflict on 30 November 1939.

Chapters two and three will continue to follow the chronological contours of the Soviet-Finnish War, though each will be equally thematic in approach. Looking beyond the *Vozhd's* direct influence (or lack thereof) on events, we will consider three essential elements of Stalinist control in this period: the supporting cast among the leadership, the official script, and the stage direction provided by the centre. The second chapter will introduce the first of these elements, bringing other principal

characters onto the stage, before exploring the part played by Stalin's 'inner circle'. The second chapter's attention to the activities of Andrei Zhdanov and Otto Kuusinen will then allow the introduction of a second key element of control – the importance of language and ideology at the outbreak and escalation of the fighting. The chapter provides a close study of the official script for the war – circulated by the Kremlin through the domestic and international communist press – while giving due attention to that script's many shifting priorities and rhetorical twists and turns. In particular, the chapter will seek to demonstrate a persistent failure by the existing scholarship to acknowledge the importance of an established *terminology of terror* in the presentation of opponents by communists at home and abroad.

Chapter three focuses on the third element of Stalinist control via its treatment of lower level functionaries and the more indirect stage direction from the Kremlin to which they responded. Tracing this process, the chapter will concentrate, above all, on the activities of the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS) and the interaction between its offices in Moscow, London and New York. Signals relayed from the centre in Moscow played a crucial but inconsistent role in mobilising this key institution of state during what proved to be a period of significant change in the Telegraph Agency's role and responsibilities within the propaganda machinery. This thesis will trace how, from the early stages of the relationship between the Telegraph Agency leadership and Stalin, the responsibilities of TASS became broader and more rigorously exploited. Eventually emerging as a global mouthpiece, pseudo-espionage network, tool of foreign policy, and versatile propaganda weapon for the Soviet Union, it was employed by a regime desperate to limit the damage caused by global

condemnation of the invasion and the faltering position of the Communist International.

Turning our gaze inwards, chapter four will offer a view of proceedings from the Leningrad region and seek to understand the extent to which the crisis impacted on the daily life and outlook of Soviet citizens close to the front-line. It will demonstrate that the engagement of the population with Soviet press campaigns and the official portrayal of the war was often selective, with many people responding as much to familial connections and a sense of civic duty, as to an explicit loyalty (or disloyalty) to the regime, or any credence given to the official line. The complexity of individual responses to the war is preserved in the abundance of surviving letters and gifts gathered for Soviet troops, and the attention paid to public commentary, gossip and rumours in the records of party and state surveillance organs. The chapter questions whether the failure of the regime to produce a consistent line on the conflict had a discernable impact on popular attitudes to the fighting. In addition, unofficial sources of information that permeated amongst the population continued to operate in parallel to the official channels of information about the fighting. Taken together, popular engagement with these sources indicates how a critical awareness about developments at home and abroad persisted for many Soviet citizens, something that had not been quashed by the high point of repressions witnessed at the end of the 1930s.

The final chapter will reflect on the closing stages of the war and the concerted effort made by the Party to rewrite its history, going to great lengths to silence any conflicting voices that might undermine the new narrative. It was a narrative that

focused, principally, on the myth of the 'Mannerheim Line' and the Red Army's overcoming of a seemingly impenetrable set of defences built with the guidance and material support of Finland's European partners. While the public face of the conflict was uniformly positive, privately, Stalin and his subordinates pored over the mistakes made and the lessons learned in a striking interplay that reveals the military capacity, leadership tactics and political preoccupations of the General Secretary. The relative candour with which those present could speak in this context is contrasted with the general uniformity and orthodoxy on display in regional discussions and public displays of popular support for the Soviet 'victory' and a widespread failure to come to terms with the (actual) human costs of war. The chapter closes with a look at the treatment of Soviet prisoners of war, incorporating new archival and memoir evidence gathered in the course of my research. It remains a particularly sensitive aspect of a conflict, which, more generally, fails to maintain a prominent place in contemporary understanding and acknowledgement of this difficult period.

## Acknowledgements

My interest in the Soviet-Finnish War and its impact on the international communist movement initially grew from my own perceived ignorance and the nagging itch of intellectual curiosity. As an undergraduate, my first forays into the archives of the Communist Party of Great Britain uncovered references to a war of which I maintained no prior knowledge. I soon realised that I was not alone in that regard. It is a topic that continued to fascinate the more I delved into its history. Almost a decade later, while I still make no claims to be an authority on every facet of the war, I have at least satiated my own scholarly interest. I hope, too, that I can offer some perspective on the conflict for the reader, whatever their previous experience of this turbulent period.

This current thesis is the culmination of many years of hard graft. Though it is intended to be the product of individual endeavour, its completion would not have been possible without the generous support, academic insight and guiding hand of family, friends and comrades-in-arms. Throughout my research, I have been incredibly fortunate to be able to draw on the knowledge and experience of my supervisor, Bob Service. It is to Bob that I credit, first and foremost, with the planting of a seed, which promptly bloomed into a passion for historical research and a desire to delve into the Soviet archives. He remains a great teacher, mentor and friend.

Jon Waterlow, as both a friend and colleague at Oxford, has been a regular source of direction in my efforts to navigate the many challenges of historical research and a fledgling academic career. His sharp wit, scholarly eye and

sympathetic ear have been much appreciated in recent years, and his commentary and critique have contributed immensely to this thesis.

My thanks to David Brandenberger, Arch Getty, Colin Gregory-Moores, James Harris, David Priestland, James Ryan and Christopher Stolarski for their willingness to read sections while still in progress, and for the helpful advice and encouragement they offered so unreservedly. The attendees of the regular DPhil Writers' Workshops, organised by the Humanities Division at Oxford, provided first-rate feedback and important lessons on how to effectively shape my academic prose. Special mention is reserved for the workshop's co-ordinator, John Miles, for introducing me to life and career of Bertolt Brecht. Stephen Wand has patiently and expertly managed the unenviable task of proofing my work (any outstanding errors, of course, remain my own responsibility). Additionally, this thesis has benefited hugely from the final shaping and polishing facilitated by my examiners, Dan Healey and Matthew Lenoe. Their critical feedback, comprehensive commentary and professional perspective have helped bring this project to a fitting close.

Many scholars that I have met along the way have immeasurably enhanced my time in the Russian archives. Their insights into the workings and records of the former-Soviet Union have contributed enormously to this project. In particular, my thanks go to the cohort of British and North American researchers who provided welcome comradeship during my first period of research in Moscow. Furthermore, my ability to overcome the challenge of learning the Russian language at such a frenetic pace would have been insurmountable were it not for Bart Leenhouts,

Katerina Polyakova and the rest of the staff and students of the Petrion Language School in St. Petersburg.

Finally, and most significantly, it is the unwavering love and support offered by my family that has allowed me to selfishly pursue my desire to, one day, become a 'proper historian'. For this reason and countless others, I dedicate this work to my parents.

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## Introduction\*

So much the worse for him who took the comedy seriously, who only saw what happened on the stage, and not the machinery behind it.<sup>1</sup>

Arthur Koestler, *Darkness At Noon*

On the whole the English intelligentsia have opposed Hitler, but only at the price of accepting Stalin. Most of them are perfectly ready for dictatorial methods, secret police, systematic falsification of history etc. so long as they feel that it is on 'our' side.<sup>2</sup>

George Orwell, Letter to Noel Willmet

## Setting the Scene

On the 25 May 1940, a handwritten memo left the personnel department of the General Post Office, destined for the desk of Roger Hollis of the British Secret Services. The author, G. A. Harlow, attached to the note a specimen copy drawn from private correspondence recently intercepted on their way to William ('Willie') Gallacher. Harlow's expressed aim was to direct MI5's attention to a sudden increase in the volume of mail directed to Gallacher, a prominent member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).<sup>3</sup>

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\* An important element of scene setting takes place at points throughout my thesis. For my introduction, I first seek to situate the Soviet-Finnish War within its international context via two parallel and interwoven narratives, which together offer a view of the complex and interrelated nature of events during this turbulent period. For readers seeking the discussion of research aims, a review of the existing literature, an outline of sources used, and a summary of chapters, see pp. 11-47.

<sup>1</sup> A. Koestler (trans. D. Hardy), *Darkness At Noon* (London, 2005), p. 144.

<sup>2</sup> P. Davison (ed.), *George Orwell: A Life in Letters* (New York, N.Y., 2013), Letter to Noel Willmet, 18 May 1944, pp. 232-233.

<sup>3</sup> National Archives (NA), KV2/1753 (Gallagher) 164b.

He was not acting entirely on his own initiative. In collaboration with the postal service, warrants to seize and search Gallacher's mail had been routinely issued by the state throughout the first half of the 1930s, citing the 'interesting and useful information' they had yielded about the communist revolutionary movement.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately for MI5, on the 14 November 1935, a marked shift in his position within both the revolutionary movement and the political landscape of the country occurred; Gallacher's election as Member of Parliament for West Fife secured the CPGB's first parliamentary seat in over ten years.

This unexpected improvement in the CPGB's political fortunes immediately raised the question of whether such invasive surveillance could be justified now that its target was an elected government official. Willie Gallacher was no longer a political agitator on the fringes of British politics, lacking the legitimacy and platform of a seat in the House of Commons. The dilemma moved MI5 to cancel their official supervision of the Gallacher household's correspondence – earlier warrants had sanctioned the postal service to include the mail of his wife Jean and other close associates in their checks – though an unofficial monitoring of the volume of mail was tacitly encouraged. Even after this was ostensibly ordered to stop the following year, Harlow's actions demonstrate that he understood the importance of keeping the state well informed of any sudden shifts in the activities of such a high-profile communist.<sup>5</sup> By the spring of 1940 this need was reaffirmed due to the rapid deterioration of relations between London and Moscow since the previous summer.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, NA, KV2/1753 105a.

<sup>5</sup> NA, KV2/1753 126a, 126b, 134c.

A frosty state of affairs between Westminster and the Kremlin had continued to cool after the inexplicable reconciliation of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union under the provisos of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Their carving up of Central and Eastern Europe at the diplomatic table in the late summer of 1939 eventually sparked war on the continent, as international audiences witnessed the division of Poland between German and Soviet troops in September. While Allied forces settled into a state of ‘phoney war’ with the Axis powers, the often overlooked advances of Soviet influence across Moscow’s neighbours to the west and north suddenly spilled out into open conflict.<sup>6</sup> The invasion of Finland on 30 November 1939 ignited a further flashpoint in the Kremlin’s foreign relations. Contemporaries perceived the subsequent match-up as a David and Goliath struggle for survival for ‘little Finland’, which at once drew forth the sympathies of much of the international community. Despite the public outcry, Britain and France proved reluctant to intercede militarily. However, by the conflict’s conclusion, both countries were on the brink of direct intervention against the Soviet Union; a scenario not envisioned since the Russian civil war twenty years earlier.<sup>7</sup>

Even as Moscow faced a rapid deterioration in its relations with the Allied powers, the Kremlin could rely on at least one source of vocal support within the

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<sup>6</sup> E. Hobsbawm, *The Ages of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London, 2013), p. 155.

<sup>7</sup> Parallels with foreign intervention during the civil war do not end there. Former Russian émigrés, members of the White Armies that battled with Bolshevism after the October Revolution, saw the war as ‘an ideal chance to reopen the armed struggle against the Soviets’. Mannerheim, as Commander-in-Chief of the Finnish defence efforts, initially declined the offer, preferring the war’s portrayal as one of a small, beleaguered nation defending itself against Russian imperialist aims. However, with the reversal of Finnish fortunes in February 1940 he consented to the formation of a ‘Russian National Army’ from Soviet prisoners of war. Under the command of émigré officers, the first detachment went into battle in March 1940, working behind the Soviet front and inciting Red Army soldiers to desert. Though the war came to an end shortly afterwards, they had, in the short time available, encouraged three hundred men to defect. P. Robinson, *The White Russian Army in Exile 1920-1941* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 226-227.

British government. For the duration of the war with Finland, Willie Gallacher was belligerent in his defence of the Soviet Union, attracting in return the frequent and biting criticism of his peers in Westminster.<sup>8</sup> His contentious stance put MI5 on surer footing. Monitoring of his movements throughout the war revealed an increasingly untenable position for Gallacher and the CPGB, with the war inspiring vehement protest among even his own constituency of West Fife:

It is reported that the love for Willie Gallagher has cooled a great deal among his [constituents] in Fife. That the Fife Miners Executive had passed a resolution sympathising with Finland, and declared both Stalin and his pal Gallagher 'Hypocritical Humbugs'.<sup>9</sup>

The Red Army's actions in Finland, though limited and indecisive, had a far from negligible impact on the entire revolutionary movement.

Behind the front lines of the fighting the British Secret Services had a further role to play. The opportunity to interrogate Soviet prisoners of war under Finnish custody elicited recorded testimony and evidence of widespread disaffection towards Soviet power. This was carefully scrutinised in the event of Britain and the Soviet Union coming to blows.<sup>10</sup> Though privately neither the Foreign Office, nor chiefs of staff anticipated this possibility for much of the conflict, it became impossible to discount the outcome entirely, especially in view of the speed with which events were unfolding and the growing impetus given to preparations by their French allies.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> His ability to draw forth ridicule and overt hostility from his fellow MPs is visible even from the relatively clinical parliamentary reports of the day: 'Will this spouter of stale sedition go and join the Moscow forces?' No reaction to this attack is recorded from Gallacher, the transcript instead abruptly moves on to the next matter of business. *Hansard*, Vol. 357, 6 February 1940, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> NA, KV2/1038 (Pollitt) 407c.

<sup>10</sup> N. Tolstoy, *Stalin's Secret War* (London, 1981), pp. 150-155. For the original report, delivered to the Foreign Office on 7 March 1940, see NA, FO371/24850 (Foreign Office) 185-208.

<sup>11</sup> P. Doerr, "'Frigid but Unprovocative': British Policy towards the USSR from the Nazi-Soviet Pact to the Winter War, 1939", *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (2001). So invested were the French in the Finnish cause that Prime Minister Édouard Daladier resigned following his

Following the cessation of hostilities on 14 March 1940, these former Red Army prisoners would go on to attract the same close attention of the Soviet authorities as their British counterparts. The Kremlin opted to immediately repress any potentially infectious individuals on their return to Soviet custody, determined that their testimony and experiences of the Finnish front would remain quarantined from the rest of the population.<sup>12</sup>

Silencing men and media alike, the Soviet regime did its best to limit the damage caused by the debacle. Shortly after agent Hollis received word on the recent surge in postal traffic directed to Willie Gallacher, two thousand kilometres away in Leningrad, Communist Party boss Andrei Zhdanov received a classified report from the Soviet Union's respective ministry of internal affairs, the NKVD. As with the British example above, the report arrived with an enclosed attachment. Unlike the copied specimen intercepted on behalf of MI5, the handwritten letter it contained was being delivered to its intended recipient. It included no postmark and had bypassed the domestic postal service entirely. However, its arrival in the hands of Zhdanov was no less dependent on a pervasive network of state surveillance and an apparent degree of individual initiative.<sup>13</sup>

The letter contained a plea for clemency from a former Red Army officer. Captured by the Finns, imprisoned for the remainder of the war and then returned shortly after hostilities were halted, the author, Ivan Andreevich Gromov, was placed

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government's failure to come to Helsinki's aid. For a review of recent doctoral research on French involvement completed by Finnish historian Henrik Tala, see 'Edouard Daladier and the Winter War (1939-1940)', accessed on 20 February 2014 at

<http://theogreofthetale.wordpress.com/2012/05/29/edouard-daladier-and-the-winter-war-1939-1940/>.

<sup>12</sup> Tolstoy, *Stalin's Secret War*, pp. 149-150.

<sup>13</sup> RGASPI, f. 77, op. 3, d. 121, ll. 42-44. The only insight into the rather unorthodox manner through which this appeal began its journey to Leningrad is the small postscript added by the author: 'I hope that this letter will reach you, it was thrown from my window'.

directly into the custody of the NKVD. Gromov's subsequent sentencing to five years hard labour in the Soviet penal colonies of the NKVD-Gulag system was a bitter blow after his service to the state. His last-ditch appeal to Zhdanov, head of the Leningrad party apparatus and a leading figure in the city's mobilisation for war, arrived after many months of his not knowing the likely fate of himself and his men.<sup>14</sup> In light of the desperate manner by which the author sought to send his appeal, it is not immediately clear why either the guards of Pechlag Camp or the NKVD determined it prudent to forward this particular piece of correspondence.<sup>15</sup> It is a source that raises more questions than it answers.

Though the Soviet-Finnish War of 1939-40 occupied a relatively narrow space both geographically and chronologically, it impacted, if only briefly, on the hearts, minds and activities of millions of people. A tragicomedy that unfolded on the world stage, the conflict elicited a huge range of responses from audiences, whether opponents or advocates of the international communist movement. Yet its prominence, like the fighting, was short-lived and the war has not remained in the wider public consciousness. As a result, the machinery operating behind the scenes of this theatre of war has also elicited scant attention from scholars.

Originating on opposite sides of the acute political divide that persisted between Westminster and the Kremlin in these months, the cases of Gallacher and Gromov together take a small step towards addressing that shortfall. Furthermore,

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<sup>14</sup> The handwritten appeal was delivered with a typed copy provided alongside the original. The details it contains indicate the fate awaiting the many Soviet POW's returned from Finnish captivity. See Chapter 5: Silencing the Past, pp. 226-230.

<sup>15</sup> This letter was discovered among the personal files of Andrei Zhdanov. It was held within a loose collection of civilian applications for change of sentence and rehabilitation, filed together for the period 4 November 1939 to 18 September 1947. The tight chronological confines of the Soviet-Finnish War regularly guided my exploration of more ambiguous descriptions within the *opisi* of party officials and state institutions.

notwithstanding the distance between London and Leningrad (or, indeed, the penal camps of Pechlag), their stories still share a number of important points of comparison. Each emerges from the shadows of a system of surveillance and information-gathering operating in defence of the state.<sup>16</sup> Even as preliminary sketches within an interwoven narrative, they offer rather striking examples of government subterfuge and extra-legal activity that – contrary to Orwell’s claims of widespread approval of such methods amongst the English intelligentsia – were still intended to operate under conditions of absolute secrecy, masked from the public eye. It is a telling reminder that current anxieties over personal privacy and the threat of a ‘big-brother’ state are somewhat naïve. Though the technology may be different, the penetration of the private sphere in defence of the public is not a new phenomenon.

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This opening panorama has been pieced together from disparate sources found within the state archives of Britain and the former Soviet Union. As evidence of the bureaucratic procedures and extra-legal activity of their respective regimes during the interwar period, these sources signal the importance of understanding the form and function of institutions in both an official and unofficial capacity. The linkages between institutions and their agents rely on well-defined hierarchies and lines of communication in order to function. However, one should not discount the potential for individual initiative to be displayed by those agents, or a readiness to anticipate

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<sup>16</sup> The comparison is not without precedent. For example, Peter Holquist has demonstrated the importance of the Great War for establishing these practices as common across many of the belligerent nations. See P. Holquist, “‘Information is the *Alpha* and *Omega* of Our Work’: Bolshevik Surveillance in its Pan European Context’, *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 69, No. 3 (September 1997), pp. 443-46. Furthermore, many of the features closely associated with the Stalinist system of rule first appeared during the formative experience of the Russian civil war. See D. J. Raleigh, *Experiencing Russia’s Civil War: Politics, Society and Revolutionary Culture in Saratov, 1917-1922* (Princeton, N.J., 2002), p. 2.

shifts in the priorities of the state, even in the context of a regime's unspoken aims. In the specific context of a crisis on the scale of the Soviet-Finnish War, those priorities are liable to change rapidly and run counter to past practices.

Additionally, the episodes presented above exemplify the international dimension of the communist movement and its ability to impact upon both the foreign and domestic priorities of the wider political community.<sup>17</sup> The influence of the Soviet Union extended beyond its borders. It had long pushed the governments of the capitalist west to battle against its forces in an atmosphere of 'cold war', well before any unravelling of the Grand Alliance that followed the defeat of Nazi Germany in the spring of 1945.

It is essential that we acknowledge the shared and overlapping historical context from which both Gallacher's and Gromov's stories emerge, not to mention the rapid turn of events to which all the actors involved were forced to react. More generally, focusing on a relatively confined episode in terms of its chronology and geographical locus will allow proper consideration of how it was not merely a question of historical contingency influencing developments, but the *speed of change* that had a dramatic impact on the Soviet regime's ability (or inability) to respond to and manage the crisis. A central theme of this study is a consideration of how much the Soviet Union suffered from the impact of 'time-lag' in its attempts to establish a degree of institutional normality and a coherent narrative after the upheaval of the 1930s and outbreak of war in Europe.<sup>18</sup> In the case of our introductory scene setting, it

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<sup>17</sup> 'Russian history cannot be written satisfactorily on the basis of Russian archives alone.' See R. Service, *Spies and Commissars: Bolshevik Russia and the West* (London, 2012), p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> The concept of 'time-lag' is taken from evolutionary biology. It is concerned with the extended time required for any organism to evolve and adapt to its environment via natural selection. It is possible

becomes clear that decisions have to be made and actions taken that might undermine official practice. This was especially true in the context of a post-war settlement that returned Britain and the Soviet Union to a state of uneasy détente, neither side able to anticipate the drastic rearrangement of alliances that would take place after Hitler's commitment of his forces to the invasion of the USSR in the summer of 1941.

Crisis becomes a lens through which to study a number of important dimensions of Soviet history. Centred upon the years 1939-40, one of the aims of this thesis is to shift attention away from the established narrative of the 'Great Patriotic War' and encourage the incorporation of earlier events into a broader history of the Soviet Union's participation in the Second World War. That history should seek a continuous, unbroken view, from the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression treaty, through the division and assimilation of eastern and central Europe between these two former foes, before the subsequent shattering of peace with Hitler's initiation of Operation Barbarossa on the 22 June 1941. The centrepiece of this brief interlude before all-out war was the short and militarily indecisive conflict between the USSR and Finland, lasting a hundred and five days from November 1939 to March 1940. It was a war never officially declared, facilitated by secret protocols and backroom deals between Moscow and Berlin and ignited by subterfuge and false cries of indignation. The forces on the Soviet side were poorly trained and dependent on inconsistent and ill-defined lines of communication. Away from the front lines, the official presentation of the war was delivered in an equally contradictory and surreptitious manner.

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that the environment may itself have experienced dramatic changes by the time the evolutionary process has responded to initial conditions, thus leaving the organism poorly adapted to its present surroundings. See R. Dawkins, *The Extended Phenotype: The Long Reach of the Gene* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 35-38.

## Research Aims

The focus of this study is not upon the military dynamics of the war. Instead, it is the war's ability to influence events, interpretations and interactions between agents and institutions within the Soviet Union and the wider international communist movement that is my primary concern. In particular, this thesis will consider to what extent the conflict rapidly changed the environment in which the Soviet system was operating. It relies on understanding both the pre-existing nature of the Soviet state, alongside innovations that were swiftly brought into play during a crisis operating well outside the complete control of the Kremlin. This will provide a window into the Stalinist system, which was undoubtedly 'totalitarian' in its aspirations, if not in its achievement.

This thesis examines the extent to which the Soviet regime under Stalin had the institutions and agents in place at the close of the 1930s to cope with the crisis of war in Finland; to be in command of the military campaign, while simultaneously controlling the direction of the official narrative about the fighting; and to censor conflicting interpretations, experiences and information channels, which might expose the Red Army's woeful performance on Finnish territory. This mobilisation of press, propaganda and censorship organs in the face of widespread international condemnation and domestic disquiet constituted a significant challenge for a regime still dealing with the sudden reorientation of the Communist International, required after the Soviet Union's conclusion of a non-aggression treat with Nazi Germany in August 1939. An international perspective is central to this thesis, with a view

towards assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the public face and private practice of Soviet information controls.

The Kremlin was not alone in struggling with the challenge of how to present the war publicly, with initial assumptions about the ideological implications for the invasion proving lamentably misguided for many on the extreme political left. So powerful was the impact of the crisis that bitter enemies found common ground over the question of the spread of international revolution anticipated by the conflict. Even as Leon Trotsky's great rival, Joseph Stalin, secretly manoeuvred to have him silenced once and for all, the exiled former People's Commissar expressed public approval of the Red Army advance into Finland from his home in Mexico.<sup>19</sup> As a result, Trotsky faced criticism within his own movement and outright mutiny amongst his US followers, many of who preferred to break from the 'Fourth International' than be seen to condone the conflict on ideological grounds.<sup>20</sup> Trotsky struggled to reconcile his political and ideological preconceptions with the rapidly unfolding events in Finland: 'We cannot foresee (*sic*) all the military episodes, the ups and downs of purely tactical interest, but they don't change the general "strategical" line of events.'<sup>21</sup>

British communists loyal to Stalin, already reeling from the news of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, grappled with the realities of civilian casualties and the bombing of Helsinki. The public façade of the Party remained orientated to Moscow

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<sup>19</sup> A. O. Chubaryan and H. Shukman (eds.), *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War 1939-40* (London, 2002), p. xxi.

<sup>20</sup> A measured criticism of the invasion only came after the conclusion of peace, when he finally conceded to pressure from the Fourth International. Robert Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929-1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement* (Durham and London, 1991), pp. 286-287.

<sup>21</sup> Hoover Institution (HI), TC 10/88, (5 January 1940).

as best it could in the context of the unravelling situation. Privately, its leaders tentatively acknowledged the unfortunate outcome of Soviet air raids and advised that the broader question of Finland was best avoided in public debate.<sup>22</sup> Thus, besides offering a perspective on the international dimensions of this conflict, this thesis will also pay careful attention to how the complimentary role of ideology – operating not as a fixed view of the world, but allowing for a shifting and adaptive response to events – at times produced a relatively pragmatic approach to the war amongst communists loyal to Moscow. Such pragmatism was not a new phenomenon, but relied on rhetorical tropes and evocative imagery with changing points of emphasis. It was an ideology that was not solely shaped by the tenets of Marxism-Leninism, but drew on a collective history stretching back to the revolutions of 1917 and the civil war struggles between ‘Reds’ and ‘Whites’.<sup>23</sup>

Regardless of one’s political orientation, class or occupation, the war was many things to many men.<sup>24</sup> Even within the borders of the Soviet Union the war drew condemnation and celebration alike. It could be a chance of redemption for the politically compromised, or a final straw for those who had experienced the repressions of friends and family earlier in the decade. Some sought personal gain and professional advancement; some preferred to bury their heads in the sand or dismissed

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<sup>22</sup> The circular ‘Speakers’ Notes on Finland’, issued by the Propaganda Committee shortly after the outbreak of the hostilities, reveals an immediate awareness of the potential damage the war could have on the British Party’s position. Labour History Archive (LHA), CP/IND/MONT/18/01 (Montague).

<sup>23</sup> James Ryan (Cardiff University) has recently contributed important research in this area for the years of revolution and civil war in Russia. His insistence on the complex and shifting nature of ideology, visible in the Bolshevik struggle for power, is one that I share. James Ryan, *Lenin’s Terror: The Ideological Origins of Early Soviet State Violence* (London, 2012), p. 186. My thanks go to James for providing a copy of a forthcoming article, ‘The Sacralization of Violence: Bolshevik Justifications for Violence and Terror during the Civil War’, which helped inform this thesis’s treatment of the early relationship of the Bolsheviks to state-sponsored violence.

<sup>24</sup> For a range of contemporary sources reacting to events in Finland, see ‘The Winter War. Contemporary publications, press reports, comments and news, 1939-1940’, accessed on 3 April 2015 at <http://www.histdoc.net/history/press.html>. A more satirical view of proceedings in the Baltic is offered via contemporary cartoons of the period. See R. Douglas, *The World War 1939-1945: The Cartoonists’ Vision* (London and New York, N.Y., 1990), pp. 20-29.

the war as Moscow's concern alone. Many more maintained wild theories and desperately tuned their ears to the rumours that spread through unofficial channels of communication, subverting state censorship of correspondence and media alike. Yet for all these nuances of ideas and experiences, challenges to notions of state in its operations and offices, insights into the political and ideological precepts of the actors involved, the war, and this interim period in general, remain very much on the fringes of academic study and popular understanding. This thesis, therefore, aims to fill that gap in our knowledge and to use this case study as a means to advance our understanding of the information controls at the disposal of the Kremlin, the responsiveness of central and regional institutions to signals from Moscow, and the circulation of alternative narratives and unofficial information amongst low level actors in response to hesitation, prevarication, backtracking and even silence on the part of the ruling regime.

Interacting with the many dimensions of this thesis – the international, the ideological, the concern with information control and interplay between actors at each level of the political and social hierarchy – will be the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS). Its story, like that of the Soviet-Finnish War, is underdeveloped and its importance often overlooked entirely in the scholarly literature. Why this has occurred requires an assessment of the current state of the historiography, acknowledging the limited presence that this key institution of state and the war more generally have maintained within the literature.

## Literature Review

Historians, according to Eric Hobsbawm, ‘are the professional remembrancers of what their fellow-citizens wish to forget’.<sup>25</sup> Regrettably, where the Soviet-Finnish War is concerned, its place in the public consciousness has been maintained by neither popular engagement nor persistent and rigorous professional interrogation of the past. For both western and Russian scholars alike, it emerges from a period of history that largely remains a dead spot of scholarly inquiry.<sup>26</sup> The reasons for this are determined by particular aspects of the war and its lasting impact on the histories of both these groups. The underdeveloped nature of this topic also points to broader trends within the historiography that deserve to be addressed.

In Russia, there is a strong cultural element that still guides the literature and the country’s present understanding and engagement with its recent past. Any sense of the Second World War beginning with Germany’s invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939 – or the Soviet invasion, which followed on 17 September – is overshadowed by popular commemoration of the Great Patriotic (or Fatherland) War. Commencing

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<sup>25</sup> Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, p. 103. This concise definition recently appeared in a discussion of ongoing attempts to interrogate central and eastern Europe’s recent past and explore the problem of ‘remembering communism’. M. Todorova (ed.), *Remembering Communism: Genres of Representation* (New York, N.Y., 2010), p. 15. This study surveys the methodologies and findings of numerous disciplines within the spectrum of humanities and social sciences. Its central concern remains one of how scholars contribute to and understand this process of remembering – conveniently sidestepping the more loaded terminology of ‘memory’ – a question equally pertinent to our present study.

<sup>26</sup> The obvious exception is Finland, for whom the war remains an important part of their national history. However, the historiography and popular understanding of Finland’s experience of the broader Second World War is not without its own points of contention. See V. Kivimäki, ‘Between Defeat and Victory: Finnish Memory Culture of the Second World War’, *Scandinavian Journal of History*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (September 2012). Although this thesis is concerned primarily with Moscow’s side of the story, Finnish works in translation will be referenced where appropriate and when they help clarify many of the myths and distortions offered by Soviet sources.

with the Nazi invasion on 22 June 1941, it remains a distinct and far more loaded notion of the Second World War.<sup>27</sup>

Those few works specifically related to the Finnish War have typically centred on archival collections and other primary source material. One of the most important contributions to the topic to appear from Russia in the last two decades is the verbatim transcript of Stalin's post-conflict meeting with his military leadership to assess the lessons of the war and the inadequacies of the Red Army. Appearing in Russian, Finnish and English editions, as a source, it still remains poorly integrated into either western or Russian historiography. Though admittedly published after the last major study of the war to appear in English – Carl Van Dyke's monograph on the military developments of the campaign<sup>28</sup> – the full transcript of the meeting deserves wider recognition as a revealing source for specialists in military history and for its contribution to our understanding of Stalin's military capacity, leadership style and political preoccupations.<sup>29</sup>

The seventieth anniversary of the war's conclusion provided further 'revelations' in the form of documentary evidence held within the former archives of the NKVD in Moscow and Leningrad. These collections offer precious insights into the channels of information that, bypassing much of the military leadership, informed the political centre of developments at the front and among the civilian population,

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<sup>27</sup> A. Applebaum, *Gulag: A History of the Soviet Camps* (London, 2003), p. 373.

<sup>28</sup> C. Van Dyke, *The Soviet Invasion of Finland, 1939-40* (London and Portland, Oregon, 1997).

<sup>29</sup> Chubaryan and Shukman, *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War*. For the Russian edition, published with accompanying analysis of war across two volumes, see O. A. Rzheshhevskii, O. Vehviläinen and E. N. Kulkov, *Zimniaia Voina, 1939-1940* (2 vols., Moscow, 1999).

who remained under constant surveillance.<sup>30</sup> Despite the invaluable contribution these sources could make to our understanding of high politics and popular opinion in this period, they too have not been exposed to rigorous analysis. Furthermore, astute interrogation, both of the archives from which they are drawn, and the broader materials available to us, reveal additional shortcomings and challenges to the investigation of the Soviet-Finnish War on the basis of official documents.<sup>31</sup>

Western writing has not escaped the influence of this sharp demarcation point for the Soviet Union's entry into the Second World War. As a synthesis of post-Soviet scholarship, the *Cambridge History of Russia's* third volume is typical of the kind of periodisation that has taken place. The book's chapter progression jumps from David Shearer's treatment of 'Stalinism' – up to and including the end of the 'Great Terror' – through to John Barber and Mark Harrison's study of the 'Patriotic War'. The events following the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (including the occupation of territories of eastern Europe and the war with Finland) are reduced to a few passing remarks. The Finnish campaign is initially summarised as a mere 'attack' and there is little sense of a prolonged expenditure of manpower or military capacity.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> S. K. Bernyev and A. I. Ruspasov (eds.), *Zimniaia Voina 1939-1940 gg. v Dokumentakh NKVD* (St. Petersburg, 2010); A. V. Sakharov, V. S. Khristoforov and T. Vikhavainen (eds.), *Zimniaia Voina: Issledovaniia, Dokumenty, Kommentarii* (Moscow, 2009).

<sup>31</sup> See below, pp. 32-42.

<sup>32</sup> R. Suny (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Russia, Vol. III: The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 2006). Though the chapter goes on to recognise the impact of incompetent military leadership on army losses during the Finnish War, this limited commentary is still overshadowed by the authors' primary concern with the disastrous consequences of the 'Patriotic War'.

Too often the chronological demarcation points of the Stalin era rigidly adhere to this pre and post-1941 structure.<sup>33</sup> This is further exacerbated by an obsession with the highpoint of mass repressions witnessed in the 1930s, now forever laden with the language and framework of Robert Conquest's pioneering study, *The Great Terror*.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the Soviet-Finnish War sits awkwardly between these two defining episodes in the Soviet experience under Stalin; mass repression and total war, topics that continue to dominate both the professional scholarship and popular responses to the history of this complex and contentious epoch.

A further conscious desire to whitewash this period from memory has its roots, too, in the events and implications of the conflict. From an earlier Soviet perspective, it is an episode that proved a disaster in public relations. It tarnished the prestige of the leadership, with Stalin by now firmly established as the dominant figure at the centre of power (this power dynamic would prove both a help and hindrance to the regime's ability to effectively manage the war with Finland).<sup>35</sup> The results of the Soviet Union's rapid militarisation risked being brought into question given the rush and rupture of society caused by industrial expansion in the 1920s and 1930s. The conclusions drawn by the Kremlin on the state of military preparations up to that point have demonstrated how the war provided a wake-up call. The subsequent efforts to combat the deficiencies of the Red Army would prove vital to the defence of the USSR against Hitler's invading forces in the summer of 1941. An often-neglected point, the very timing of 'Barbarossa', was seemingly justified in Hitler's eyes by the

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<sup>33</sup> For a recent exception, see T. Johnston, *Being Soviet: Identity, Rumour, and Everyday Life Under Stalin, 1939-1953* (Oxford, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> Originally published as R. Conquest, *The Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Thirties* (London, 1968). This study will hereafter reference the most up to date edition. See R. Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (London, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> Though Stalin's pre-eminent position is established within Oleg Khlevniuk's study of the pre-war Stalinist regime, he does not extend his analysis to the war years. O. V. Khlevniuk, *Master of the House: Stalin and His Inner Circle* (New Haven, Connecticut and London, 2008).

realities of Soviet military preparations revealed in the midst of the Finnish campaign.<sup>36</sup>

Equally undermined was the position of the Soviet Union's numerous supporters abroad, including those satellite parties that formed the network of the Communist International (Comintern). Among the Comintern's loyal followers, a young Eric Hobsbawm, as a member of the CPGB while a student at Cambridge, was tasked with producing pro-Soviet propaganda to defend the invasion of Finland from critics. The aim was to circulate a Moscow friendly line among British communists and the working classes they professed to represent.<sup>37</sup> The resulting pamphlet probably had only a very limited role to play in the course of events and their reception by British audiences.<sup>38</sup> Hobsbawm's guarded admission of this episode in his own history implies a preference to forget it all together. His insistence that the pamphlet was now long lost reflects a failure to pursue the same aims with which he defines the historian's craft.<sup>39</sup> His case is an interesting if atypical one, but this

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<sup>36</sup> 'Nothing did more to convince him in 1941 that he was justified in gambling on defeating the Russians in a single campaign than their performance against the Finns.' See A. Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* (London, 1998), p. 722.

<sup>37</sup> The pamphlet was co-written with Raymond Williams, who provides insights into the process that went into its production and the scarcity of information available to the pair when writing: 'An example of the sort of task one was given was the pamphlet Eric Hobsbawm and I were assigned to write on the Russo-Finnish War, which argued that it was really a resumption of the Finnish civil war of 1918, which had been won by Mannerheim and the Whites. We were given the job as people who could write quickly, from historical materials supplied for us. You were often in there writing about topics you did not know very much about, as a professional with words.' R. Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London, 1979), pp. 42-43.

<sup>38</sup> The former General Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Harry Pollitt, had recently fallen from grace after failing to anticipate a shift in the party line required by Moscow's negotiations with Nazi Germany. Isolated from the Central Committee and desperate to salvage his political career, he was still well placed to report on the inconsistent availability of party literature and imperfect uptake of the official line on Finland offered by the CPGB to workers in Manchester. LHA, CP/IND/DUTT/15/12 (Dutt).

<sup>39</sup> E. Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth Century Life* (London, 2002), pp. 153-154. I was alerted to a surviving copy of this pamphlet via online commentary made in response to an article by Oliver Kamm, 'It takes an intellectual to find excuses for Stalinism', accessed on 4 March 2008 at [http://oliverkamm.typepad.com/blog/2004/07/it\\_takes\\_an\\_int.html](http://oliverkamm.typepad.com/blog/2004/07/it_takes_an_int.html). Kamm secured a scanned copy from Paul Anderson, who posted a comment advertising his ownership of the pamphlet on the above

general tendency, to either consciously forget the events in Finland or ignore them for the convenience of one's narrative, is something that must be addressed within Soviet historiography and of Stalinism in particular.

Further whitewashing was a matter of urgency once a dramatic reshuffling of alliances took place amongst the Western European powers less than eighteen months after the signing of peace between Moscow and Helsinki. On 22 June 1941, the Soviet Union was dragged abruptly and unexpectedly into a second world war on the side of Britain and France. Any prevailing tensions and unresolved questions regarding the Red Army's activities in Finland – not to mention the Baltic states, Poland, Ukraine and Romania – could be conveniently swept to one side. This was as true for the Kremlin as its new allies. By the time Soviet forces finally swept into Berlin and the Nazi's dominance over Europe was crushed once and for all, the slate had been essentially wiped clean and past indiscretions relegated in favour of present political priorities.

This whitewashing does not discount the fact that failure to acknowledge the impact of earlier developments in Finland risks overlooking potential insights into the dynamics of Soviet foreign policy and domestic priorities, which could, in turn, help inform pre- and post-war analysis. For example, Alfred Rieber has offered a detailed picture of the relationship between Finland and the USSR in the aftermath of the Continuation War.<sup>40</sup> It is a relationship that can only be understood in the context of

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website on 24 July 2004. Thanks to the efforts of my supervisor, Robert Service, a copy was then secured for me from Kamm.

<sup>40</sup> During the years of the Second World War, Finland fought in three separate conflicts. The first, the 'Winter War' against the invading Red Army, lasted from November 1939 to March 1940. The second was conceived of as a 'Continuation War' from June 1941 to September 1944, 'fought along with Nazi Germany as an officially unallied "brother-in-arms" against the Soviet Union'. The third and final

the previous three decades of fractious interaction that followed Lenin's granting of Finnish independence from the former Russian Empire.<sup>41</sup> Yet, even a recent attempt to offer a more comprehensive history of Russia's Cold War, beyond the traditional assumption that it was 'generated and sustained by Washington and Moscow alone', fails to find a place in its narrative for the Soviet-Finnish War.<sup>42</sup> In contrast, this thesis will give due attention to Finland's place in Soviet security concerns at the end of the 1930s, thus providing a more complete picture of Moscow's fractious efforts to achieve its diplomatic aims with both the western powers *and* its Baltic neighbours.

From the perspective of domestic concerns, Terry Martin's study of nationalities and the Kremlin's fluctuating treatment of the national question throughout the interwar period offers an important reminder of the complicated issue of ethnicities in the region bordering Finland. Home to groups of minority communities that were all viewed with suspicion by the regime, their subsequent persecution in the 1930s – both predating and outlasting parallel campaigns from the height of the Stalinist repressions – would contribute to Finland's position as perhaps the best informed, within the European community, of the excesses of its Soviet neighbour.<sup>43</sup> In the spring of 1940, Soviet prisoners of war returned from Finnish captivity would experience at first hand the state's undiminished capacity for wholesale repression of undesirable elements. Therefore, a more general need to deal with mass repression and state 'terror' beyond the chronological confines of 1937-38

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'Lapland War' sought to drive German troops out of Northern Finland between September 1944 and April 1945, following Helsinki's signing of a separate peace with the Soviet Union. See Kivimäki, 'Between Defeat and Victory', p. 483.

<sup>41</sup> Where archival evidence informs much of this study, earlier events touching on the period of the Soviet-Finnish War are by no means as well informed by primary material. A. J. Rieber, *Zhdanov in Finland* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1995).

<sup>42</sup> J. Haslam, *Russia's Cold War: From the October Revolution to the Fall of the Wall* (London, 2011), p. xi.

<sup>43</sup> T. Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca, N.Y. and London, 2001).

begins to emerge from this attention to the Finland interwar experiences.<sup>44</sup> This study will offer an important perspective on essential elements of continuity in the Soviet regimes relationship to its own coercive activity and its capacity to exploit the language and terminology of ‘terror’ to justify its own invasion of Finland.

The general objective of addressing these various shortfalls in the literature is not merely a question of resurrecting an inconvenient truth. It represents an opportunity for developing our understanding of different dimensions of the Soviet state. Free of extensive analytical baggage and the kind of pervasive censorship that often hinders research of both the ‘Great Terror’ and ‘Great Patriotic War’, one can still draw on and consider how numerous existing studies fit into, support or contradict the nature of the system as it operated through, and subsequently emerged from the crisis, before its ultimate test in driving back the fascist advance on Moscow.

The focus of this project is on tracing the Soviet state’s ability to react to events and external responses to the conflict, while it simultaneously sought to construct an official presentation of the war and manage the proliferation of alternative and contradictory interpretations that existed. The thesis will offer a more complete and complex picture of the inter-related nature of Soviet politics, propaganda and mass media. The ‘totalising’ aims of the regime did not achieve total results.<sup>45</sup> Public opinion has been shown to be more varied, dynamic and independent

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<sup>44</sup> The kind of periodisation that separates pre and post-Patriotic War Soviet history also creates an enduring failure to properly draw together the expansion of key aspects of the Stalinist state into eastern Europe – Show Trials and all – at the assumption of communist control in the region. See K. McDermott and M. Stibbe (eds.), *Stalinist Terror in Eastern Europe: Elite Purges and Mass Repression* (Manchester, 2010).

<sup>45</sup> K. Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades: Celebrations in the Time of Stalin* (Bloomington, Indiana, 2000), pp. 1-3.

in thought than the Party desired.<sup>46</sup> The ‘propaganda state’ struggled through crises that were both self-inflicted and the result of historical contingency.<sup>47</sup>

There is more work to be done. Our attention to the closing moments in the 1930s offers the opportunity to trace developments beyond the earlier work of Peter Kenez and Matthew Lenoe.<sup>48</sup> Consideration of the shifting official line, those within the leadership responsible for its formulation, and the key institutions tasked with its dissemination will follow the manner in which David Brandenberger and Karel Berkhoff have helped illuminate the activities of the propaganda state for the years with which our present study is also engaged (though a continuity of narrative is absent as a result of the chronological confines each chooses for their respective works).<sup>49</sup> Since even Jeffrey Brooks’ attempt at a more complete overview of Soviet public culture ‘from revolution to Cold War’ suffered from a noticeable absence of extensive archival sources, this thesis offers a fertile ground for further research into the mechanics of the propaganda state.<sup>50</sup> The abundant evidence available to us from the Soviet-Finnish War includes archival sources illuminating every level of the state machinery and encompasses a view of both the domestic and international: from

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<sup>46</sup> S. Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934-1941* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 183.

<sup>47</sup> M. Lenoe, ‘NEP Newspapers and the Origins of Soviet Information Rationing’, *Russian Review*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (October 2003), pp. 614-636. Brandenberger characterises the latter part of the 1930s as beset by crises after the Terror’s undermining of the Party’s useable past. From a perpetual position of weakness, it was forced to seek ad-hoc responses to events rather than allowing long-term ideological aims to be fulfilled. D. Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination and Terror Under Stalin, 1927-1941* (London, 2011).

<sup>48</sup> P. Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929* (Cambridge, 1985); M. Lenoe, *Closer to the Masses: Stalinist Culture, Social Revolution, and Soviet Newspapers* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2004).

<sup>49</sup> While Brandenberger does not entirely neglect the events of the Soviet-Finnish war, they are sidelined somewhat by his concern with the lasting impact of the ‘Terror’ on the propaganda state. Furthermore, his generalisation of the shape of public opinion at the start of the conflict needs to be reconsidered in relation to the abundance of evidence now available. Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis*, pp. 239-248; K. Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger: Soviet Propaganda During World War II* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 2012).

<sup>50</sup> Jeffrey Brooks’ outline of public culture from revolution to Cold War draws its evidence primarily from mass media produced by the regime. See J. Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin!: Soviet Public Culture From Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton, N.J., 2000), pp. xviii-xx.

Stalin's 'inner circle' to the Oblast Committee of the Leningrad Party; from the exclusive channels of NKVD communications to the political centre, to the city militia reports collated on behalf of local government; from the Moscow offices of the Telegraph Agency, to the editors of Communist newspapers abroad, desperately trying to orientate themselves to the official line.

Earlier treatments of the propaganda machinery have tended to draw attention to the ideological form and function of literature and the narrowing of its content over time to target an audience of receptive, literate party functionaries and loyal cadres. The 'masses', those outside party membership and the tenets of orthodox Marxism-Leninism, have fallen by the wayside of scholarly concern. Instead, the preoccupation is with the Party's attempt to motivate and inculcate the faithful, over a broader mass appeal likely to fall on deaf or indifferent ears.<sup>51</sup> However, the regime's desperate attempts to manage the media during the course of the Soviet-Finnish War reveal broader concerns with popular opinion as a whole. It brings to light an institution central to the propaganda machinery that was far more interested in the successful orientation of the party line on a day-to-day basis than the production of cultural content. The Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS), long neglected in the literature, was a central component of the propaganda state. That its role and responsibilities increased significantly at the same time as its leading *apparatchik* found himself face-to-face with Joseph Stalin, points to a yet incomplete map of the interaction between politics, propaganda and popular opinion in this period.

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<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Lenoë, *Closer to the Masses*; Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis*.

This idea of looking more closely at the relationship between state and society, including the leadership's willingness to respond to public opinion and adapt policy and propaganda accordingly, requires a move beyond the kind of interrogation of NKVD and Party sources initiated by Sarah Davies.<sup>52</sup> In a more recent study by Olga Velikanova, her attempts to follow trends in the political centre's response to events in the 1920s, as well as across the wider population, go some way to responding to this need. Unfortunately, the available material does not facilitate tracing this link directly.<sup>53</sup> In contrast, the speed of unfolding events and the scale of the upheaval in Finland – a tangible threat to the Soviet order as opposed to the debate over the validity of the war-scares of the 1920s – allows us to track more closely the shifting language, narrative and propaganda produced by the state both in response to and contrary to expressions of public opinion.

Our knowledge of public opinion has been heavily dependent on the invasive surveillance state that permeated Soviet society via the various manifestations of the *Cheka*. Studying Soviet expansion into the newly acquired Baltic territories has further illuminated the methods and scale of its operation. This followed their 'peaceful' annexation, facilitated by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.<sup>54</sup> Stalin's

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<sup>52</sup> In the case of Sarah Davies' treatment of public opinion in Stalinist Russia, the fact that the majority of her archival research was completed in St Petersburg has resulted in relatively high instance of the war appearing within the cited evidence of the book. Whether this allows us to assume the conflict touched on the mass conscience of the population of the USSR in general is not considered but offers an avenue of research for this study. An important area in which this thesis responds to outstanding questions at the close of Davies' work will be our ability to better trace the regime's response to public opinion in its adjustment of propaganda and policy during the Soviet-Finnish War. Close scrutiny of a localised and highly contentious episode for the regime, as recorded in its official documents, has elicited more concrete evidence of these shifts in message and approach than the broader, more thematic study of surveillance reports undertaken in Davies' work. See Davies, *Popular Opinion*, pp. 186-187.

<sup>53</sup> O. Velikanova, *Popular Perceptions of Soviet Politics in the 1920s: Disenchantment of the Dreamers* (Basingstoke, 2013).

<sup>54</sup> A. Weiner and A. Rahi-Tamm, 'Getting to Know You: The Soviet Surveillance System, 1939–57', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2012), pp. 5-45.

satisfaction at this spread of Soviet influence would presumably have continued into Finland were it not for Helsinki's stubborn refusal to bend to Moscow's demands.<sup>55</sup>

Once established in these new territories, the channels of communication that ran through the NKVD – being directed at all times to Stalin at the centre – mirror a flow of, and fetishism for, information in any and every form that dominated the regime's thinking and operation. This 'cult of information', it will be shown, was a fundamental tenet of the Soviet state and was both a positive and negative pressure on its ability to respond to crisis.<sup>56</sup> The NKVD was not alone in its responsibility for gathering that information, but one of a number of major institutions of state tasked with its accumulation:

We had abundant information [about the situation in the country]. We received information devoted to the same question from various agencies – from the KGB, GRU [intelligence], MID [foreign affairs], TASS [media]. We had the opportunity to compare and balance it. I spent about two hours reading these documents. However, there was a mass of such information, that you could see without glasses, that primarily [the authors] wanted to please the first persons, rather than submit truthful information.<sup>57</sup>

This account of the abundance and (questionable) validity of official sources demonstrates how TASS remains one of the glaring omissions from the scholarship. It is a significant one too. The Telegraph Agency not only constituted a huge proportion of the state's official output in the press but was also heavily involved in the central direction of the media, its well-established system of censorship and other rigorously enforced checks and balances.

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<sup>55</sup> S. Pons, *Stalin and the Inevitable War, 1936-1941* (London, 2002), p. 193. See comments by Stalin in the diary entry for the 25 October 1939 in I. Banac (ed.), *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov, 1933-1949* (New Haven, Connecticut and London, 2003), p. 120.

<sup>56</sup> M. L. G. Spencer, 'Signals from Stalin The Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union in the Midst of the Soviet-Finnish War, 1939-40', *Slovo*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2013), p. 62.

<sup>57</sup> Cited in Velikanova, *Popular Perceptions*, p. 20.

## The Many Faces of TASS

The last major study of the Telegraph Agency to appear in English was Theodor Kruglak's *The Two Faces of TASS*.<sup>58</sup> Published in the 1960s, it benefited from the insights provided by journalists and pressmen with direct experience of western interactions with TASS and its personnel during the first few decades of Soviet power. However, as Kruglak acknowledges, 'TASS operations have always been surrounded with the trappings of Soviet bureaucratic mystery, marked by a reluctance to discuss its workings, silence on the subject of personnel, methods of news gathering, and how the service is financed'.<sup>59</sup> Although the prospect of greater transparency in the operation of Soviet news media emerged after the death of Stalin – as a raise in the status of journalism as an academic pursuit in the USSR coincided with Nikita Khrushchev's own daughter and son-in-law's graduation from the Moscow Faculty of Journalism – insights into the inner workings of the Telegraph Agency remained limited to the public lectures of its then director, N. G. Pulgunov.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, Kruglak is much less interested in the period with which this study is most concerned. Dismissive of the agency's Stalinist director, Joseph (Yakov) Khavinson, the author insists that the status of TASS within the Soviet media apparatus was 'temporarily downgraded' after his appointment at the end of the 1930s.<sup>61</sup> This terse summary overlooks a period when TASS witnessed a significant adjustment in its role, alongside a definite expansion of its responsibilities and personnel in the months surrounding the Soviet-Finnish War. The current thesis will pay similar attention to those key activities described by Kruglak as TASS's twin

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<sup>58</sup> T. Kruglak, *The Two Faces of TASS* (Minneapolis, 1962).

<sup>59</sup> Kruglak, *Two Faces of TASS*, p. 4.

<sup>60</sup> Kruglak, *Two Faces of TASS*, p. 5.

<sup>61</sup> Kruglak, *Two Faces of TASS*, p. 34.

‘faces’ – the first, its public role as official Soviet news agency; its second, more covert role, as a tool of espionage. Beyond this basic duality, we will seek to present a multifaceted picture of the agency’s many different ‘faces’. Since these faces were mostly masked from the general public, our knowledge of their importance for the Soviet system emerges from the archival access now available to scholars and contemporary recollections provided by those that worked within the Soviet media apparatus.

In developing our understanding of press and propaganda in Stalin’s Soviet Union since the archives first opened, scholars have acknowledged the Telegraph Agency’s importance within the state machinery.<sup>62</sup> However, the extent of its contribution to the co-ordination and control of information, both domestically and internationally, is still largely overlooked in the literature. For example, references to its broader role in publicly signaling the Kremlin’s expectations on the international stage, and the impact this could have on the diplomatic efforts of its foreign ministry, are often only noted in passing.<sup>63</sup> Its mobilization by Joseph Stalin, to deal with the careful management of press coverage of the Moscow Show Trials, demonstrates its crucial role in ‘public relations’.<sup>64</sup> It was closely incorporated into Stalin’s role as

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<sup>62</sup> See, for example, M. Lenoë, *Closer to the Masses: Stalinist Culture, Social Revolution, and Soviet Newspapers* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: 2004); K. Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger: Soviet Propaganda During World War II* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: 2012).

<sup>63</sup> P. Doerr, “‘Frigid but Unprovocative’: British Policy towards the USSR from the Nazi-Soviet Pact to the Winter War, 1939”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (2001), p. 428. For evidence of the deployment of TASS by the Kremlin in an effort to influence its diplomatic relations with Japan in the 1930s, see R. W. Davies, O. V. Khlevniuk, E. A. Rees (eds.), *The Stalin-Kaganovich Correspondence, 1931-36* (London: 2003), pp. 258-261 (hereafter ‘*Stalin-Kaganovich Correspondence*’).

<sup>64</sup> Two of Stalin’s closest confidants in this period, Lazar Kaganovich and Nikolai Yezhov, were tasked with organising press coverage of the Moscow Show Trials. Private correspondence between the three of them reveals the carefully co-ordinated publicity campaign, including the attention paid to domestic and foreign audiences alike. Strict vetting of reports was to be maintained by the Party and ‘overall supervision is to be entrusted to Comrade Yezhov’. Distribution was to be taken care of by the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union, ‘which is equipped for this’. See *Stalin-Kaganovich Correspondence*, Letter 129 (17 August 1936), p. 325.

both the arbiter of policy *and* its public presentation. The information that TASS collected, how the Kremlin exploited that information, and the way the Soviet public engaged with the agency's output, allows us to study history from above, below, and especially the interconnections between.

Official news of events at the Finnish front – collected and co-ordinated by TASS – versus popular understanding of them, reiterates the fact that the Soviet Union was by no means closed to the outside world. Consideration of how TASS formed part of the regime's response to this disparity allows a view of the mechanics of the Soviet regime from the Kremlin offices of Joseph Stalin, to the copy desk of *Pravda*, via a global information network experiencing a dramatic expansion of its role and responsibilities. Through this study's aims of both filling in the gaps and developing our understanding of this complex machinery of state, one can produce a narrative that draws together disparate treatments and seeks to move away from our current rigid periodisation, re-establishing the war's significance and potential to impact on the Soviet Union's subsequent ability to respond to the rapid advance of German forces into the 'Motherland'.<sup>65</sup>

### Sources

While the ability to trace these new developments is, in part, thanks to the 'archival revolution' that has taken place since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is

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<sup>65</sup> This recognition of earlier formative experiences of conflict having a tangible influence on the Soviet Union's treatment of war in its propaganda has been demonstrated by Brooks in relation to clashes with the Japanese at Lake Khasan on 14 and 23 July 1939. It was during these battles in the East that the slogan 'For Stalin, for the Homeland' originated, later erroneously attributed to the Second World War. See Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin*, p. 155.

equally dependent on exploiting materials that have long been available to researchers. The Telegraph Agency is an excellent case in point. The insights offered by the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System (HPSSS) – an ambitious state-sponsored initiative carried out between 1950 and 1953, which produced transcribed interviews of several hundred Soviet refugees<sup>66</sup> – are invaluable given the number of candidates with direct experience of working in the press apparatus and the offices of the Telegraph Agency. Interviewees were routinely guided towards recalling events and policy decisions that fall within the chronological scope of this study, and often specifically asked to describe their response to the Soviet-Finnish War. Additionally, since many candidates were requested to reflect directly on their experiences of the year 1940, in order to direct their recollections of daily life and routine to before the upheaval of the Patriotic War, these interviews are particularly pertinent for this thesis.

The necessary process of verifying the validity of these recollections is, of course, made easier by the abundance of archival materials that are now available to historians of the Soviet Union. The triangulation of personal accounts and professional reminiscences from the Harvard interviews can be done against the official records of the Telegraph Agency, which are preserved in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF).<sup>67</sup> Here one finds further evidence of an institution

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<sup>66</sup> For an introduction to the history of the project and contemporary efforts to draw conclusions on the nature of Soviet society from its data, see A. Inkeles and R. A. Bauer, *The Soviet Citizen: Daily Life in a Totalitarian Society* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: 1959).

<sup>67</sup> The interaction between the provincial offices of TASS in Leningrad and local organs of the press are also accessible within the former regional party archive, the Central State Archive of Historico-Political Records of St. Petersburg (TsGAIPD SPb). This archive holds the local records of all organs and organizations of the Communist Party and Young Communist League for Leningrad from 1917 to 1991. Although the process of declassification of documents does not appear to be either as systematic or at the same pace as the central state and party archives in Moscow (no doubt a result of its comparatively limited availability of money and man power), it has proven an invaluable depository for materials that show the interaction between the Soviet capital and its regional representatives in

tasked with the coordination of a huge network of agents at home and abroad, gathering, processing and distributing an enormous quantity of news material in the process. It is clear from the careful alignment of both contemporary accounts and official records that ordinary citizens paid attention to the news TASS provided (notwithstanding the sceptical eye that was often passed over it<sup>68</sup>). Likewise, the acknowledgement amongst the agency's employees and other Soviet newsmen that the process of sorting, censoring and creatively editing these materials before they reached the public was a key component of the agency's intervention in the media apparatus is confirmed by both the accounts of HPSSS interviewees and contemporary archival records. Furthermore, the integration of these kinds of sources – standing as they do both within and without the official hierarchy of information for which our earlier commentary is so dismissive - tempers the claim that the channels of information TASS offered the Party elites were entirely void of 'truthful information'.<sup>69</sup> On the contrary, materials uncovered in Stalin's personal fond and among the regional party leadership in Leningrad illuminate the value placed by the Party, at all levels, on the communication of information (both explicitly and implicitly) by TASS. Essentially, the agency ensured loyal communists' were able to remain informed of the (shifting) official line on Soviet-Finnish affairs in a prompt and uniform fashion.

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Leningrad, as well as evidence of popular responses to the conflict among the latter's urban and rural population.

<sup>68</sup> See Chapter 1: Politics and Diplomacy, pp. 68-70.

<sup>69</sup> The Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System (HPSSS) is now available online. See D. Brandenberger, 'A Background Guide to Working with the HPSSS Online' accessed on 20 February 2014 at [http://hcl.harvard.edu/collections/hpss/working\\_with\\_hpss.pdf](http://hcl.harvard.edu/collections/hpss/working_with_hpss.pdf). Sheila Fitzpatrick has acknowledged the general failure amongst revisionist scholars to properly engage with the Harvard Project since the 1970s. See S. Fitzpatrick, 'Revisionism in Soviet History', *History and Theory*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (December 2007), p. 79. Robert Thurston is one of the few exceptions and has made imaginative use of its materials to question how we understand popular perceptions of life in Stalinist Russia. See, for example, R. Thurston, 'Fear and Belief in the USSR's "Great Terror": Response to Arrest, 1935-1939', *Slavic Review*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (1986); R. Thurston, 'Social Dimensions of Stalinist Rule: Humor and Terror in the USSR, 1935-1941', *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (1991).

More generally, by focusing on a narrow window of events and a topic that is easily identifiable in contemporary discourse, letters, memoirs, rumours, jokes and oral reminiscences, a more accurate picture of how people responded to and remembered the Soviet-Finnish War becomes possible. The variety and complexity of public opinion that emerges from such a profusion of evidence is more reflective of reality than any scholarly concern with patterns in modes and content of speech. It allows a certain reflection that, in cases where the evidence is still in short supply (as throughout the years of the Great Patriotic War<sup>70</sup>), one should anticipate great diversity in peoples' reactions to war, rather than a tangible and over-arching collective response to such a complex and life-impacting phenomenon.

Unfortunately, for Soviet history, 'revelations from the Russian archives' have become a dominant trend in the discipline that merely reasserts the prevailing historiographical framework of this fascinating epoch.<sup>71</sup> There are exceptions of course. The acknowledgment of Stalin's role in all aspects of the regime's management traditionally considered foreign policy beyond even his scope of concern. That view has been overturned by subsequent material, appearing now in English translation: 'the Politburo protocols, and correspondence such as that between Stalin and Kaganovich, reveal, however, that even in the early 1930s Stalin followed and took decisions on Soviet foreign relations, on matters both large and small.'<sup>72</sup> Extending that work into an investigation of Stalin's involvement in the diplomacy and decision-making surrounding Soviet foreign relations at the end of the 1930s not only reiterates his central position but brings to light the integration of press and

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<sup>70</sup> Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger*, pp. 65-67.

<sup>71</sup> D. J. Raleigh, 'Doing Soviet History: The Impact of the Archival Revolution', *Russian Review*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (January 2002), pp. 16-24.

<sup>72</sup> *Stalin-Kaganovich Correspondence*, p. 14.

propaganda – yes, including that omnipresent institution, TASS – into his direction of policy. The picture that emerges is one of much greater depth and complexity, with layers of decision-making, institutional interaction, and public presentation of (and response to) policy, all of which demonstrate important elements of continuity and subtle change over time. Our opening chapter, in particular, will offer an instructive view of this process, drawing on a combination of contemporary press reports, official speeches, Stalin’s private musings and the archival documents upon which they are preserved. As with this thesis as a whole, it does not seek to privilege one source over another, but attempts to integrate an abundance of materials that can help the reader navigate a window of time that is narrow in focus, but wide in its ability to impact subsequent events.

Though they too often remain poorly exploited, the research for this thesis has established the abundance of sources available to researchers. Deposits in the UK, US and Russia have all contributed to this study, allowing for a truly transnational perspective on the war’s impact on global and domestic affairs. As noted above, the main archives of TASS for the Soviet period are currently held in Moscow and are accessible to scholars.<sup>73</sup> In addition, regional deposits in St Petersburg (formerly Leningrad) have also provided the means to trace the agency’s work across the Soviet state, considering broader questions of the distribution of information, communication and political control, between centre and periphery. The highly centralised control pursued by Moscow over the international communist movement ensures regional (and non-Russian) archival research can still elicit illuminating evidence about the

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<sup>73</sup> One notable exception appears to be those files containing correspondence between the Moscow offices of TASS and the Central Committee, A sensitivity surrounding decision making by leadership during the months of the conflict is mirrored in the still limited classification of files within the regional party archives in St Petersburg.

Soviet system as a whole. Communications, orders and instructions were distributed across TASS's network of agents. Any replication of this material within that network allows the researcher to overcome potential limits of access at central deposits in Moscow (something I am familiar with from my doctoral research), or the loss and damage of records at any one archive.

Research into activities of the TASS bureaus in London and New York will extend our focus onto the international and domestic role of the agency, and its impact on foreign affairs. In the UK, TASS's agents remained under constant surveillance by the British Secret Services, providing a unique window into their activity independent of Soviet sources. Besides offering an alternative angle on Soviet affairs, the British perspective also facilitates comparative study into the wider efforts to mobilize the media by governments in the twentieth century, raising the question of its relative 'objectivity' in both democratic countries and more dictatorial regimes. This has allowed the incorporation of national studies, such as those completed by Philip Bell on British public opinion, foreign policy and the Soviet Union, and George Kerr on wartime press censorship and politics in Canada, while emulating the methodological approach so successfully deployed by Peter Holquist in his work on revolutionary Russia and the lasting legacy of the First World War in Europe.<sup>74</sup>

Even current concerns over surveillance, foreign intelligence and the dissemination of state secrets, through both official and unofficial channels, resemble prominent facets of the activity of TASS throughout the 1930s and 40s. Amir Weiner and Aigi Rahi-Tamm recently explored the expansion of the Soviet surveillance

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<sup>74</sup> See Chapter 4: Life in Leningrad, pp. 161-167.

apparatus into the Baltic region, following Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania's annexation in 1939-40.<sup>75</sup> Their exploitation of newly accessible sources transferred to US deposits in the Hoover Institution will assist my own efforts to understand Moscow's mobilisation of its media apparatus in this same period.

Much has been made in certain circles of the methodological debates surrounding the subjective nature of archival materials. However, given the already incredibly lengthy and politically charged debates surrounding the 'totalitarian' paradigm and its suitability for describing the effective levels of control administered by the Soviet system upon society, there seems a danger in now crediting the party and state apparatus with enjoying an unparalleled ability to manipulate its records in a manner entirely geared towards the construction of a singular, official narrative. Entering the archives today and exploring their abundant resources does not give this impression. One of the greatest challenges faced during any research in the holdings of the former Soviet state is the glut of material that is preserved, giving the impression that, rather than attempting a process of selective conservation, the archives, in fact, became storehouses for every scrap of paper to cross a state or party official's desk.

Those faced with the mammoth task of preserving this material must have felt it a far safer and more manageable process to simply save everything, than consider the risky and time-consuming option of vetting and sorting every individual item. Furthermore, the Soviet system operated with an all-encompassing series of checks and hierarchies when it came to sensitive and secret material (of which almost

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<sup>75</sup> See Weiner and Rahi-Tamm, 'Getting to Know You'

everything was designated). Mark Harrison's attempts to unravel the paper trail that emerges from the NKVD's careful monitoring of this system – via the creation of classified documents for monitoring the movement of classified documents – indicates the absurd levels to which this was taken.<sup>76</sup> However, except for the case of personal *fonds* and the attempts of high-level party functionaries to self-manage their own records, a singular, state-sponsored history by no means dominates the archives. Nor do the many central and regional archives show a consistency across the board regarding what was preserved, how it was ordered and in what form it reaches us today. This is as true for material related to the Finnish War as any other subject of which I have experience from my time in the archives.

Individual initiative, though it surely existed, came at a premium few within this system had the appropriate status – or absence of self-preservation – to risk deploying. This is reflected best in the relative scarcity of documents authored by the Party that explicitly contradict official presentations of the conflict. There was a widespread hesitancy to even acknowledge the conflict as it unfolded, beyond the strict adherence to accepted terminology and implicit reference to the 'international situation'. This was exacerbated by the absence of a consistent line on the war from the centre. There was disparity between any positive spin the regime insisted on perpetuating, with persistent unofficial rumours and disquiet at home, and public condemnation from abroad. In general, silence was safer.

Censorship of conflicting views and sources is not a problem confined to the Soviet era in which they were created, catalogued and preserved. Beyond the

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<sup>76</sup> M. Harrison, *Accounting for Secrets: Evidence of ... from the Archive of the Lithuania KGB*, paper presented to the Russian and Eurasian Studies Seminar at St Anthony's College, University of Oxford, 22 October 2012.

reticence to consider the events of the Great Patriotic War within the context of the much broader Second World War, there remains uneasiness within Russia to engage with this preliminary episode and a degree of second-guessing is taking place as material continues to come to light. While the growing body of archival evidence related to the Finnish War was enriched even further on the seventieth anniversary of the conflict, here the danger of retroactive censorship or selective presentation of material remains a major concern. Given that these published materials were drawn primarily from the archives of the NKVD, it seems astounding that the collection should end so prematurely with only a handful of documents detailing the return of Soviet prisoners of war by train from Finland. No further files follow this suspiciously weighted presentation of events, and no indication is offered that many of these former prisoners were eventually destination for the Gulag.<sup>77</sup>

This is not the only instance where an apparent sensitivity to the realities of the war is still detectable in relation to archival evidence today. The published transcript of the post-conflict meeting between Stalin and his generals offers a fairly candid view of the lessons drawn by the leadership for the disastrous performance of its troops. Yet Stalin's closing remarks, included in the published editions, have seemingly been expunged once more from the records, as held within the copy available for consultation in the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI).<sup>78</sup>

Within Stalin's personal fond – listed among the same *opis* that contains documents testifying to Stalin's utilisation of TASS – other files that are helpfully

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<sup>77</sup> *Zimniaia Voina: Issledovaniia, Dokumenty, Kommentarii*, pp. 613-615.

<sup>78</sup> RGASPI, f. 17, op. 165, d. 77-78.

grouped according to country have nevertheless remained classified where sources explicitly related to Finland are concerned.<sup>79</sup> It remains to be seen whether these materials will become declassified now the purchase and digitisation of the Stalin fond has begun.<sup>80</sup> While a project of this nature is undoubtedly beneficial for the discipline in the long run, its dependence on private deals and the extensive time to replicate and catalogue documents can leave the researcher on the ground somewhat in the dark.<sup>81</sup>

There is, in addition, an abundance of freely accessible online materials that have contributed to this project. Besides increased access to the upper echelons of party and state decision-making made possible by the Stalin Digital Archive, a growing number of Russian and Finnish state-sponsored and private archive deposits have also aided my research. The output of the central Soviet press is now preserved through an almost complete database of *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* offered by East View Online. Though attention has been paid throughout to the individual and institutional agenda behind the digitisation and publication of more disparate archival deposits, they remain an invaluable resource for the researcher and should not be dismissed out of hand for fear of a temporary ‘shelf-life’ or inaccurate representation of the original source material.<sup>82</sup> Ultimately, any attempts to uncover all aspects of the war must rely

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<sup>79</sup> RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 389-395. The *opis* includes a table of contents at the front, listing page references for a series of *dela* containing materials grouped by the country they concern. Included is a page reference for those documents related to Finland. However, these apparently sit somewhere among a series of blanked out entries when the corresponding page reference is consulted within the *opis*. Unsurprisingly, attempts to request the missing *dela* met without success.

<sup>80</sup> ‘The Stalin Digital Archive’, accessed on 20 February 2014 at <http://www.stalindigitalarchive.com/frontend/node/1>.

<sup>81</sup> Raleigh, ‘Doing Soviet History’, p. 17.

<sup>82</sup> In the case of published speeches by Stalin and Molotov, references to online transcripts in English translation are provided for the benefit of the reader. When the original Russian is preferred, priority should be given to their contemporary publication in the central Soviet press (referenced in each case with the corresponding edition of *Pravda* in which they appeared). The rapid distribution of party speeches to the domestic and international press formed an essential component of the Telegraph

on a wide combination of evidence. This is something that continues to be stressed despite its routine acknowledgement in countless introductions to Soviet history published since the archives first opened. Our knowledge of events in such a shadowy and self-contained society has always been dependent on the contribution of a diverse mixture of unofficial personal accounts, memoirs and anecdotes. These function in collaboration with the records and documentation that carry an official stamp or air of archival objectivity.<sup>83</sup> Naturally, checks and balances of one against the other are essential, but this is the case for any source, whatever its content, wherever it is discovered and whoever created it. This is the real task of the historian. History, at its core, remains a discipline that strives to engage with and interrogate as many different sources as can be unearthed, in response to professional apathy and public ignorance alike.

### Structure

History had a slow pulse; man counted in years, history in generations.<sup>84</sup>

Contrary to Rubashov's assertion of history's 'slow pulse', the recent past is no longer concerned merely with the passing of successive generations. The Soviet-Finnish War lasted a matter of months; its progress must therefore be measured in weeks and days. It is a narrowing of the spotlight that not only provides a strategy for traversing the archives but also anticipates a looming challenge for our discipline. The

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Agency's responsibilities in this period. In the interest of avoiding the possibility of retroactive editing, these more immediate versions have been given priority over later printed collections.

<sup>83</sup> Velikanova, *Popular Perceptions*, p. 21.

<sup>84</sup> Koestler, *Darkness At Noon*, p. 206.

present rapid proliferation of information on a global scale necessitates the tracking of historical change in an even shorter time frame; one of hours, minutes and seconds. However, unlike the digital age we currently occupy, where records exist in an often ethereal, temporary existence, the Soviet Union is an interesting case of a modern state that embraced certain key technological innovations at a slower pace than the western powers it wished to emulate and, eventually, to eclipse.<sup>85</sup>

This process of chronicling its existence, and hoarding vast records, was on a scale never before seen in the modern age. The result is that, excepting Stalin's frustrating brevity of word and preference for conducting business face-to-face behind closed doors, much of its history survives on paper.<sup>86</sup> Access to this material has come almost en-masse in relative terms – after decades of conjecture and scholarship dependent on careful detective work and rigorous interrogation of often fragmentary, intermittent and second-hand sources – and demands a willingness to approach the past with an open mind and fresh sense of inquisitiveness (not to mention unrelenting patience and stamina).

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<sup>85</sup> Two examples are instructive for explaining the persistence of an exhaustive paper trail within Soviet archives. First, stenographic recording of meetings and speeches remained a prominent feature of the interwar years, in contrast to the advances in tape-recording technology seen in the West in this same period. For example, Nikita Khrushchev's memoir provides an account of how the Kremlin inadvertently learned of this technological disparity between Germany and the USSR in the months following the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. See S. Khrushchev (ed.), *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev: Vol. 1. Commissar [1918-1945]* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 2005), pp. 255-256 (hereafter '*Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev*'). Second, a reticence among the Soviet leadership to embrace photocopying as a viable means of duplicating official documents reflects their acute concern with secrecy and control of information. This naturally stagnated Soviet archival practices within a system that gave great stock to the proper distribution and storage of official documents, combined with a well developed system of cataloguing and cross-checking of those documents as they travelled within the machinery of state. See J. Arch Getty, "Stalinist Secrecy", paper presented at the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) Convention, San Antonio, Texas, 21 November 2014.

<sup>86</sup> Even if that face-to-face dialogue is only partly preserved in second-hand accounts, we at least know with whom and for how long Stalin met with visitors to the Kremlin. A. A. Chernobaev (ed.), *Na Priyomye u Stalina: Tetradi (Zhurnali) Zapisei Lits Prinyatikh I.V. Stalinim, 1924–1953 gg.* (Moscow, 2010).

Although it is not my intention to provide an exhaustive account of the military dimensions of the conflict or a blow-by-blow description of the success and failures of Soviet, Finnish and other international forces embroiled in the conflict, these developments will form a backdrop to the wider events, institutions and actors with which this study is occupied. I will attempt to trace how these various elements collectively operated and interacted in the context of the escalating crisis, drawing on a wide range of Soviet and non-Soviet sources. This remains a localised view in temporal scope alone, a case study with blurred edges that admittedly cannot hope to incorporate every shift in events across such a huge empire with global influence.<sup>87</sup> Its goal, nevertheless, is to continually focus that spotlight on the international dimensions of Soviet history.

The interplay between domestic politics and international diplomacy will be considered by the first chapter, as it aims to introduce Stalin as the principal actor in our narrative, dominating both the decision-making process and public presentation of Soviet policy. This chapter will set the scene for the rupture in relations between Moscow and Helsinki, while attempting to incorporate the Finnish debacle into broader trends in the Kremlin's foreign affairs in these decisive months of 1939. The importance of the Stalin's Baltic concerns has traditionally been overlooked within the literature, with attention instead focused on Moscow's protracted negotiations with Paris and London, and the sudden, unexpected understanding it reached with Berlin in the summer of 1939. These major shifts in the Kremlin's foreign relations with the western powers had a dramatic impact on the ability of foreign communist

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<sup>87</sup> For example, in early March 1940, the order to execute thousands of Polish officers in Katyn was signed by four members of the Soviet Politburo. The signatures of Stalin, Vyacheslav Molotov, Kliment Voroshilov, and Anastas Mikoyan are recorded. All involved were acutely aware of the unresolved situation in Finland. A. Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (London, 2009), p. 140.

parties and their Soviet counterparts to adjust effectively to the official line. It was an unresolved situation that would be further tested by the unexpected deterioration in Soviet-Finnish relations, which spilled out into open conflict on 30 November 1939.

Chapters two and three will continue to follow the chronological contours of the war though each will be equally thematic in approach. Looking beyond the *Vozhd's* direct influence (or lack thereof) on events, we will consider three essential elements of Stalinist control in this period: the supporting cast among the leadership, the official script, and the stage direction provided by the centre. The second chapter will introduce the first of these elements, bringing other principle characters onto the stage, while exploring the part played by Stalin's 'inner circle'. The second chapter's attention to the activities of Andrei Zhdanov and Otto Kuusinen will then allow the introduction of a second element of control – the importance of language and ideology at the outbreak and escalation of the fighting. The chapter provides a close study of the official script for the war – circulated by the Kremlin through the domestic and international press – while giving due attention to that scripts many shifting priorities and rhetorical twists and turns. In particular, the chapter will seek to demonstrate a persistent failure by the existing scholarship to acknowledge the importance of an established *terminology of terror* in the presentation of opponents by communists at home and abroad.

Chapter three focuses on the third element of Stalinist control via its treatment of lower level functionaries and the more indirect stage direction from the Kremlin to which they responded. Tracing this process, the chapter will concentrate, above all, on the activities of TASS and the interaction between its offices in Moscow, London and

New York. Signals relayed from the centre played a crucial though inconsistent role in mobilising this key institution of state during what proved to be a period of significant change in the Telegraph Agency's role and responsibilities within the propaganda machinery. This thesis will trace how, from the early stages of the relationship between the Telegraph Agency leadership and Stalin, the responsibilities of TASS became broader and more rigorously exploited. Eventually emerging as a global mouthpiece, pseudo-espionage network, tool of foreign policy, and versatile propaganda weapon for the Soviet Union, it was employed by a regime desperate to limit the damage caused by global condemnation of the invasion and the faltering position of the Communist International.

Turning our gaze inwards, chapter four will offer a view of proceedings from the Leningrad region and seek to understand the extent to which the crisis impacted on the daily life and outlook of Soviet citizens close to the front-line. It will demonstrate that the engagement of the population with Soviet press campaigns and the official portrayal of the war was often selective, with many people responding as much to familial connections and a sense of civic duty, as to an explicit loyalty (or disloyalty) to the regime, or any credence given to the official line. The complexity of individual responses to the war is preserved in the abundance of surviving letters and gifts gathered for Soviet troops, and the attention paid to public commentary, gossip and rumours in the records of party and state surveillance organs. The chapter questions whether the failure of the regime to produce a consistent line on the conflict had a discernable impact on popular attitudes to the fighting. In addition, unofficial sources of information that permeated amongst the population continued to operate in parallel to the official channels of information about the fighting. Taken together,

popular engagement with these sources indicate how a critical awareness about developments at home and abroad persisted for many Soviet citizens, something that had not been quashed by the high point of repressions witnessed at the end of the 1930s.

The final chapter will reflect on the closing stages of the war and the concerted effort made by the Party to rewrite its history, going to great lengths to silence any conflicting voices that might undermine the new narrative. It was a narrative that centred, above all, on the myth of the 'Mannerheim Line' and the Red Army's overcoming of a seemingly impenetrable set of defences built with the guidance and material support of Finland's European partners. While the public face of the conflict was uniformly positive, privately, Stalin and his subordinates pored over the mistakes made and the lessons learned in a striking interplay that reveals the military capacity, leadership tactics and political preoccupations of the General Secretary. The relative candour with which those present could speak in this context is contrasted with the general uniformity and orthodoxy on display in regional discussions and public displays of popular support for the Soviet 'victory' and a widespread failure to come to terms with the (actual) human costs of war. The chapter closes with a look at the treatment of Soviet prisoners of war, among them Ivan Andreevich Gromov, incorporating new archival and memoir evidence gathered in the course of this research. It remains a particularly sensitive aspect of a conflict, which, more generally, fails to maintain a prominent place in contemporary understanding and acknowledgement of this difficult period.

### Note on Transliteration

The importance of language and terminology is inherent to my work. Where it has been necessary to draw attention to terms in the original Russian, I have endeavoured for consistency and clarity in the romanisation of the Cyrillic alphabet. In the case of names and other proper nouns, I have, however, tended towards more recognisable and widely adopted constructions, for example, Trotsky (not *Trotskii*) and Yezhov (rather than *Ezhov*). An exception to this rule is in the referencing of primary and secondary sources, where authors' names, the titles of their work and any citations from their text closely adhere to their original formulation.

## Chapter 1

### Politics and Diplomacy

What was real – *really* real, and not theatre? Who *really* took decisions – and did not merely appear to take them?<sup>88</sup>

Vasily Grossman, *Everything Flows*

On the evening of 14 April 1940, the first session of a four-day meeting to discuss the ‘war against the White Finns’ was officially opened by the designated chair, Kliment Efremovich Voroshilov. His opening preamble acknowledged the gathering was initiated by the collective membership of the Chief Military Council, who were seeking a ‘summing up of results and taking account of the experience gained’. Suddenly, a curt remark from the room put these aims in much starker terms: ‘Point out the shortcomings’. Joseph Stalin’s characteristically direct and concise rejoinder momentarily silenced the chair and checked any sense this was to become a forum for empty praise and ebullient Party speeches.

Amongst this assembly, now cleared for airing measured criticism, Stalin would continue to operate as an astute observer, sporadic critic and all-round shrewd political operator. It is an incredibly valuable source for illuminating the tactics Stalin employed to portray himself as both the impartial witness and undoubted master of ceremonies. He would go on to remind those present of his lack of military credentials and his status as a mere ‘civilian’, while also speaking of government decision-

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<sup>88</sup> In the closing quarter of his unfinished novel, Vasily Grossman suddenly veers away from the central narrative, turning instead to a discussion of the Soviet system under Lenin and Stalin. His essay on Stalin offers an impressively wide-ranging and nuanced treatise on the nature of Stalin’s dictatorship. See V. Grossman (trans: R. Chandler, E. Chandler and A. Aslanyan), *Everything Flows* (London, 2010), pp. 203-213.

making in passive, non-committal terms.<sup>89</sup> All this was mere theatrics from an adept political actor; the goal was to expose the shortcomings of the Soviet war effort, without tarnishing his reputation or accepting any personal responsibility.

If our ultimate aim with this study is to reveal the ‘machinery behind the stage’, it is imperative we find a place, too, for the production team involved in its operation. To describe Stalin as simply an actor would be grossly under-estimating his role. He stood at the epicentre, the show’s director, producer and head of publicity. He also showed a persistent willingness to intercede in the official script – the language and terminology of party discourse – employed in both public pronouncements and private discussion. Though the ongoing and protracted nature of the fighting against the ‘White Finns’ would see that script adopt a bloody and violent language, couched in civil war imagery and a terminology of terror, this rhetoric stands in direct contrast to the pragmatic and often diplomatically sensitive dialogue on display before hostilities broke out.

Any change was predetermined, above all, by Stalin’s role as both the arbiter of policy *and* its public presentation. Tracing these earlier diplomatic manoeuvres will highlight his corresponding intervention in questions of ‘public relations’ – operating as a master of the media circus. Stalin proved as preoccupied with the often subtle and implicit signalling of shifts in the line, as the changes in policy that necessitated them. These signals were not only essential for outside witnesses, but also provided a mechanism for party cadres on the periphery, at home and abroad, to orientate to the line provided by the centre. These interrelated elements were on display in the months

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<sup>89</sup> Chubaryan and Shukman, *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War*, p. 268.

before hostilities broke out. In this chapter, after sketching the shape of Soviet foreign policy from the beginning of 1939, we will trace the diplomatic efforts to reach agreement with Helsinki and the essential role that the direction of press and propaganda would continue to have for Stalin during this process.

Of course, things did not always go Stalin's way. Though he aspired to absolute control, ensuring his subordinates were 'totally dependent' on his decision-making, key fault lines within the system emerged in the course of the Finnish conflict.<sup>90</sup> The 'dictator's curse' became a particularly acute challenge for the regime in moments of crisis. Events that were highly contentious and the subject of bitter criticism, from both within and beyond the borders of the Soviet Union, required swift and wide-ranging decisions from the head of state.<sup>91</sup> The Finnish conflict offers a unique opportunity to trace the impact of a rapidly developing and unexpected crisis, at all levels of decision-making, essential to the effective mobilisation of the propaganda machinery. An important test case, it permits consideration of both the strengths and weaknesses of a regime that was totalitarian in aspiration, if not in the level of control and influence it could truly attain.

A failure to provide clear, coherent and, above all, consistent direction for the Party on the proper line to take on Finland in these early months had wider implications for its members' relationship with the society it claimed to represent. As the diplomatic efforts stalled and news faded (or was withheld) from the front page,

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<sup>90</sup> Khlevniuk, *Master of the House*, p. 223. Although Khlevniuk's treatment of the Stalinist system ostensibly follows its development through to the outbreak of the war with Nazi Germany, events in Finland are almost entirely overlooked.

<sup>91</sup> For recognition of the inherent challenge of the 'dictator's curse' facing the Stalinist system of rule, see P. Gregory and M. Harrison, 'Allocation under Dictatorship: Research in Stalin's Archives', *Journal of Economic Literature*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (September 2005), pp. 721-761.

elements of a politically engaged and inquisitive society began to draw their own conclusions. The comments and criticism of state policy aired in this early period indicate both the healthy state of unofficial channels of communication as well as the proliferation of rumours and hearsay they fostered. In response, the regime oscillated between a strategy of prosaic and self-righteous transparency or selective and unexplained silence.

### Surveying the International Stage

Stalin's domestic and international security concerns had not diminished with the NKVD's widespread repression of enemies in 1937-8. The preoccupation with any foreign intervention of 'White Guard' forces and the hostile regimes that encircled and threatened to derail the building of socialism both predated these years and persisted beyond them. Yet, even with an outlook influenced by this pervasive ideology, pragmatism could still prevail in foreign relations. The economic and strategic needs of the Soviet state went hand-in-hand with its Marxist-Leninist make-up. In Khlevniuk's assessment of the repressive policies pursued by Stalin throughout his primacy, the dictator proved perfectly capable of vacillating between the more moderate and the more brutal, refuting the claims of historians who have mistakenly tracked these changes as indicative of rival camps in the leadership apparatus.<sup>92</sup>

Arguably, his reconciliation with Nazi Germany in the summer of 1939 was an even more drastic shift in approach to international and domestic politics. This is

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<sup>92</sup> Khlevniuk, *Master of the House*, pp. 246-262.

particularly true given the immediate impact the reconciliation of these rival regimes and ideologies had on the press, propaganda and even cultural output of the Soviet state.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, it represented one of many adjustments in policy over the course of the year that point to Stalin's willingness to pursue both long-term strategic aims and adapt to unfolding events in a more short-term capacity. Throughout this he maintained his overriding faith in the tenets of Leninism and its insistence upon 'the inevitability of war'.<sup>94</sup>

Stalin's direct intervention in foreign policy did not begin in 1939.<sup>95</sup> From correspondence with his close associates, his intervention in matters of trade and foreign diplomacy are evidenced throughout the 1920s and 30s. His willingness to pursue trade relations with even the most embittered and persistent enemies of the Bolsheviks is conspicuous.<sup>96</sup> Despite the revolutionary tenets of Bolshevism, a readiness to come to terms with the capitalist powers of Britain and France, who had collectively conspired to strangle the new Soviet state at birth, belies the economic and strategic concerns that remained an enduring element in the relations between these powers. When the advance of Soviet forces into Poland shortly followed the German invasion of 1 September 1939 (the existence of any secret protocols between these two powers as yet unknown to the outside world), the War Cabinet's acknowledgment of the desperate need for Russian softwood for its own defence efforts stayed the hand of Westminster from an immediate break with the Kremlin.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> J. V. Geldern, 'Culture, 1900-1945', in Suny, *Cambridge History of Russia*, pp. 600-601.

<sup>94</sup> A. J. Rieber, 'Stalin as Foreign Policy-maker: Avoiding War, 1927-1953', in S. Davies and J. Harris (eds.), *Stalin: A New History* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 143.

<sup>95</sup> Though this outdated impression still emerges from a recent study of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. See R. Moorhouse, *The Devils' Alliance: Hitler's Pact with Stalin, 1939-1941* (London, 2014).

<sup>96</sup> See, for example, letters attesting to Stalin's personal intervention in the question of trade agreements with Japan (1931) and the signing of a non-aggression treaty with Poland (1931-1932). *Stalin-Kaganovich Correspondence*, Letters 15-16, 19-20, pp. 83-98.

<sup>97</sup> Doerr, 'Frigid but Unprovocative', p. 425.

It is a telling reminder of the disparity between public posturing on the international stage, and the machinations and diplomacy that go on behind the scenes.

In order to manage any discrepancy between the public face and private practice of power, Stalin depended on a commitment to secrecy intrinsic to the Soviet system and on his own ability to present policy in the recognisable rhetoric of the official party lexicon, endorsed by the principles of its Marxist-Leninist ideology.<sup>98</sup> Although often dismissed as a poor orator<sup>99</sup>, the importance placed on the textual distribution of speeches diminishes the significance of this criticism. On paper, it is easier to appreciate his ability to speak to a much broader audience, beyond the limited circle of high-minded intelligentsia.<sup>100</sup> Stalin could articulate an idea and hammer it home as though there were no possible alternative interpretation. He turned opinions into fact and ridiculed those who entertained divergent views. Decisively, when change came, he could side-step any insinuation that ‘mistakes’ were his responsibility alone, by grasping how to present policy decisions as the collective will of the government and the Party.

### The Eighteenth Party Congress

On 10 March 1939, the current face of Soviet policy was laid out in Stalin’s progress report to the Eighteenth Party Congress. For the unprivileged masses that

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<sup>98</sup> S. Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilisation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California; London, 1997), pp. 17-18. In line with these guiding principles, the impetus for keeping the secret protocols between Moscow and Berlin out of the public eye apparently came from the Soviet side. Similarly, any rhetorical embellishment of the published agreement was kept to a minimum on Stalin’s insistence, such was his awareness of the difficulties their respective ‘propaganda boys’ would have re-orientating public opinion. Stalin quoted in Moorhouse, *Devils’ Alliance*, p. 39.

<sup>99</sup> R. Service, *Stalin: A Biography* (London, 2005), p. 132.

<sup>100</sup> Service, *Stalin*, p. 245.

had not lined the great halls of the Kremlin Palace, the text of the speech appeared the following day, occupying much of the available print space in *Pravda*.<sup>101</sup> Here Stalin reasserted the economic priorities of the Soviet state in its international relations, making this the first point in his ‘clear and explicit’ outline of Soviet foreign policy:

We stand for peace and the strengthening of business relations with all countries. That is our position; and we shall adhere to this position as long as these countries maintain like relations with the Soviet Union, and as long as they make no attempt to trespass on the interests of our country.<sup>102</sup>

In the course of his speech, the domestic and international elements of Stalin’s outlook were closely intertwined. The economic and territorial integrity of the Soviet state went hand-in-hand with an ideological thread, centred on his long-standing adherence to the tenets of ‘socialism in one country’. The drive towards socialism was still dependent on both domestic productivity and security from external threat. This outlook was also expressed in the same language that aimed to denigrate and dismiss former enemies. His sights extended beyond a strictly Soviet audience, responding to ‘some people in the western media’ who sought to depict the ‘purge of spies, murderers and wreckers from Soviet institutions’ as having had a destabilising effect on the Soviet system. This he dismissed out of hand, citing the near unanimous support of party candidates in recent elections to the Supreme Soviet, held in the aftermath of the executions of high-profile enemies in 1937 and the beginning of 1938.<sup>103</sup> Despite this success, he implored his audience:

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<sup>101</sup> *Pravda*, 11 March 1939, pp. 2-6.

<sup>102</sup> J. V. Stalin, ‘Report to the Eighteenth Congress of the C.P.S.U.(B.) on the Work of the Central Committee’ (10 March 1939), p. 889, accessed on 17 March 2015 at <http://www.marx2mao.com/Stalin/REC39.html> (hereafter ‘Report to Eighteenth Congress’).

<sup>103</sup> Quoted in D. Volkogonov (trans: H. Shukman), *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy* (London, 1991), p. 344. My preference was for Shukman’s translation over the use of ‘certain foreign pressmen’ in ‘Report to Eighteenth Congress’, p. 914.

Never to forget that we are surrounded by a capitalist world; to remember that the foreign espionage services will smuggle spies, assassins and wreckers into our country; and, remembering this, to strengthen our socialist intelligence service and systematically help it to defeat and eradicate the enemies of the people.<sup>104</sup>

Continuity was an important theme, much more so than any suggestion of a major break with the events of the preceding two years. The state was not yet about to wither away. The justification for this was, again, in the need to acknowledge the shifting international situation and persistence of hostile forces abroad. Stalin criticised those communists who settled for slavishly adhering to the classical tenets of Marxism without realising their inability to provide real, contemporary direction in the context of ‘present-day international conditions’, having ‘overlooked the capitalist encirclement and the dangers it entails for the socialist country’.<sup>105</sup> A balancing act was required, somewhere between vigilance and scare-mongering; one that Stalin not only pursued in these public pronouncements but also in his private labours.

Earlier that year, as Stalin undertook preparations for the congress, news from abroad joined the multitude of papers on his desk.<sup>106</sup> Skimming the pages of a routine bulletin sent by the Moscow offices of TASS, his attention was suddenly caught by a press report on Germany’s strategic efforts to secure bases along the Gulf of Finland. With thick pencil strokes he began to cut down the article to its salient points, earmarking it for print in the *Izvestiia* two days later.<sup>107</sup> His swift editing excised any reference to the Finn’s possession of potential ‘bridgeheads’ for assault on Soviet territory, deflating any popular fears this news might have generated, while

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<sup>104</sup> ‘Report to Eighteenth Congress’, p. 916.

<sup>105</sup> ‘Report to Eighteenth Congress’, pp. 927-928.

<sup>106</sup> Volkogonov, *Stalin*, p. 343.

<sup>107</sup> Standard practice was to recycle TASS material of this kind throughout the Soviet press network. For example, this article also appeared in *Pravda*, 18 January 1939, p. 5.

maintaining attention on Germany and Finland as potential bedfellows.<sup>108</sup> This desire to manage popular fears of the Soviet Union becoming embroiled in the second imperialist war is consistent with his earlier editing of the *History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks): Short Course* the previous year. Huge sections of text were removed from preceding drafts, with references to the Communist International (Comintern) cut and the domestic situation in Germany and Spain downplayed. Taken together, these edits had the effect of ‘stifling the contention that there was a worldwide assault underway against socialism’.<sup>109</sup>

This is just one of many examples of Stalin utilising the press to manipulate public opinion via its back pages, where the publication of foreign TASS reports on the international stage were concentrated. By the end of the 1930s, he repeatedly resorted to micro-managing the dissemination of news articles on sensitive areas of global and Soviet foreign affairs, blocking those he considered detrimental to public opinion and carefully controlling this window into the outside world. A key reason for this direct intervention was the growing importance of the press for the state’s propaganda efforts. Though it had long been recognised as a major channel for the Party, by the late 1930s and early 1940s, the press ‘became the primary means of propaganda in the Soviet Union’.<sup>110</sup> On 14 November 1938, the Party’s Central Committee issued a directive that declared:

In Marxist-Leninist propaganda, the decisive weapon is the press: magazines, newspapers, and pamphlets. Oral propaganda can only play a

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<sup>108</sup> RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 207, ll. 24-25. Although the original report from Swedish sources in Stockholm was explicit in anticipating a German invasion force utilising Finland as a launch pad for attacking Leningrad, it was this section that Stalin opted to remove before the article’s publication in *Izvestiia* on 18 January 1939.

<sup>109</sup> Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis*, pp. 204-205.

<sup>110</sup> E. M. Thompson, ‘Nationalist Propaganda in the Soviet Russian Press, 1939-1941’, *Slavic Review*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (1991), p. 387.

secondary role in this struggle. The press offers an opportunity to make this or that truth into an immediate possession of all people in society, and it is therefore stronger than oral propaganda.<sup>111</sup>

In contrast, Stalin's complaints to close associates about the inadequacies of the *Pravda* editorial board earlier in the decade reflected certain limits to his reach.<sup>112</sup> This frustration at the newsroom's failure to anticipate the correct line may have contributed to the apparent absence of an editor-in-chief with overall responsibility for the newspaper between 1938 and 1940. Instead, the collection, censorship and circulation of information co-ordinated by TASS were of paramount significance to the dissemination of 'truths' in this period. The distribution of party speeches, foreign and domestic press and official statements all fell within the remit of this prominent state institution.

By the time Stalin stood before the Party in March 1939 he was in a confident mood. He announced with satisfaction that domestic productivity was up and international capitalism was facing yet another crisis. This was not, however, mere public posturing. Politically, his position was seen as unassailable. The system he had fashioned over the preceding decade was celebrated as supremely democratic. Upon the basis of these claims stood 'the stability of the Soviet system and the source of the inexhaustible strength of Soviet government'.<sup>113</sup> However false those claims were, they indicate a self-belief in his domestic outlook that carried through to his preoccupation with international concerns. Ideologically, he was on an equally firm footing. The second imperialist war, long predicted by the Bolsheviks, was, in Stalin's

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<sup>111</sup> Thompson, 'Nationalist Propaganda', p. 387.

<sup>112</sup> L. Lih, O. V. Naumov, O. V. Khlevniuk (eds.), *Stalin's Letters to Molotov 1925-1936* (New Haven, Connecticut and London, 1995), Letter 66 (13 September 1930), p. 215. See, also, *Stalin-Kaganovich Correspondence*, Letter 158 (6 September 1936), pp. 349-350.

<sup>113</sup> 'Report to Eighteenth Congress', p. 912.

interpretation, already in full swing.<sup>114</sup> The priority now was to keep the Soviet Union out of the conflict until it had achieved a level of parity with the capitalist world.<sup>115</sup>

His anti-war tone carried through to the back pages of *Pravda*, with TASS reports from Stockholm now exposing the popular protest of local residents to the remilitarisation of the Finnish Åland Islands, referenced earlier in the year.<sup>116</sup> It was a small footnote, but a significant one in the context of recent discussions between People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Maxim Litvinov and the Finnish envoy to the USSR, Yrjö-Koskinen. On 5 March 1939, Litvinov reported that their recent exchange had focused on two main concerns: the economic relations between the two states and the Åland Islands. The latter was clearly a more pressing issue for the Kremlin, though Litvinov sought to downplay the islands' significance for both the Finnish and Soviet governments during the meeting. Litvinov, instead, drew attention to a number of islands in the Gulf of Finland that did not appear to be of 'great value' to Helsinki, proposing a thirty-year lease to allow their use as observation points by the USSR, since control of sea access to Leningrad was an important consideration for the Kremlin. The Soviet Union would not seek to fortify the islands – another signal to Helsinki that its own efforts in this direction were not appreciated by Moscow – but promised such a display of trust on the part of the Finnish government would have a positive influence on any economic talks between the two countries.<sup>117</sup> Three days later, Koskinen had his government's answer ready for Litvinov. These islands were an 'integral part of Finnish territory'. Helsinki was unwilling to conflate political and

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<sup>114</sup> As Brandenberger points out, Stalin's confidence in this outcome was manifest in his editing of the *Short Course*, several months before the Munich accords of September 1938. See Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis*, p. 331 (Note 19).

<sup>115</sup> Rieber, 'Stalin as Foreign Policy-maker', pp. 146-147.

<sup>116</sup> *Pravda*, 11 March 1939, p. 5.

<sup>117</sup> Dmitrii Antonovich Volkogonov Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Reel 1, Box 1, Folder 1, Document 166a (hereafter 'Volkogonov Papers').

economic questions of this nature and ultimately undermine its neutrality through even a discussion of possible agreements. Finland's own ability to protect these islands should be 'enough of a guarantee' for the Kremlin. Litvinov could only reply that his government would be 'very disappointed' with this answer.<sup>118</sup>

Although Stalin's intervention in foreign policy was not new, the present situation in Europe demanded an even firmer hand. His wish to keep his options open – to maintain the peace while strengthening (business) relations with 'all countries'<sup>119</sup> – would require flexibility in the public presentation of the official line. Any adjustments needed to be on point and made with immediate effect. Freedom of movement in policy decisions was essential. This proviso was central when both Maxim Litvinov and his successor Vyacheslav Molotov were tasked with securing political and military agreements with Britain and France in the following months. Stalin made it clear he was only willing to conclude 'appropriate pacts on the basis of reciprocity' with the stipulation that '*we are conducting and will conduct our own independent line*'.<sup>120</sup> His rejection of Litvinov's suggestions for reaching a settlement with London and Paris rested, in part, on his foreign minister's inability to recognise those concessions that would tie the Kremlin's hands.<sup>121</sup> The increasing prominence of Finland (and the Baltic states) in Stalin's security concerns would also play a major part in the failure of these talks to satisfy Soviet defensive priorities in the region.

Although the existing literature typically prioritises attention on the parallel

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<sup>118</sup> Volkogonov Papers, Reel 1, Box 1, Folder 1, Document 169.

<sup>119</sup> Albert Resis draws a straight line in his analysis from this statement to the agreement reached with Nazi Germany. See A. Resis, 'The Fall of Litvinov: Harbinger of the German-Soviet Non-aggression Pact', *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (January 2000), p. 36. Likely reading ahead, it rather signalled the possibility of coming to terms with any foreign power (of which Germany was not alone in the Stalinist formulation of capitalist encirclement). The ongoing negotiations with Finland sought similar trade agreements before broader political discussions were opened, though the strategic and military overtones of their preoccupation with the Åland Islands were a consistent thread in these talks.

<sup>120</sup> Banac, *Diary of Georgi Dimitrov*, p. 111 (28 May 1939).

<sup>121</sup> Resis, 'Fall of Litvinov', p. 47.

negotiations between Moscow, London and Paris, and Moscow and Berlin, talks with Helsinki were an ongoing element that would provide a far more frustrating limit on the achievement of Stalin's strategic aims.

### Channels of Information

The recent publication of Soviet files, relating to the Soviet-Finnish War and its preceding months of diplomatic talks, reiterates the primacy given to independent lines of communication to and from the Kremlin, over a more integrated intelligence network.<sup>122</sup> Based on Sabine Dullin's summary of the apparatus tasked with information gathering 'on Moscow's behalf', not only can we now begin to analyse the role played by Lavrenty Beria and the NKVD, but we must also add the significance of TASS. The latter offers an important perspective on international developments and the intelligence gathering with which it was increasingly tasked.<sup>123</sup> Stalin would continue to track the presentation of the Soviet government's diplomatic negotiations with Britain and France in the foreign press, interceding in the publication and censorship of these reports in the domestic news.<sup>124</sup> These channels of information operated through a very limited circle and were directed, above all, to Stalin at the centre. From here the onus was on him to distribute relevant information to his subordinates; an inherent challenge for a system predicated on secrecy,

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<sup>122</sup> Dmitri Volkogonov's earlier privileged access to the archives elicited numerous copies of documents now residing amongst his papers in the Library of Congress. They contain a number of files that subsequently appeared in the collected edition produced for the seventieth anniversary of Soviet-Finnish War.

<sup>123</sup> S. Dullin (trans: R. Veasey), *Men of Influence: Stalin's Diplomats in Europe, 1930-1939* (Edinburgh, 2008), p. 158. On the growing importance of TASS, for the perspective on international developments it offered and the intelligence gathering to which it was increasingly tasked, see Chapter 3: Signals from Stalin, pp. 126-160.

<sup>124</sup> RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 207, ll. 42-46, 51.

operating in a rapidly shifting environment and headed by a leader whose preference was for their operating on a 'need to know basis'.<sup>125</sup>

The asymmetry of this system was already causing disquiet among the diplomatic corps of the Soviet foreign ministry before the major personnel shake-up that saw its head, Litvinov, replaced by Molotov in May 1939. Litvinov, writing to Stalin during his final months in office, complained of personnel shortages that hampered embassies around the world. Even those that had avoided falling under the shadow of suspicion could find their access to secret documents suspended. He acknowledged a general ignorance on the part of the commissariat about the Mongolian People's Republic, in which successive ambassadors were recruited from the NKVD and reported exclusively through its own channels.<sup>126</sup> This undermining of the role and responsibilities of the Narkomindel had begun in 1937, when the full force of Stalinist repressions began to tear through its personnel.<sup>127</sup> Litvinov was thus guarded in his complaints and knew better than to connect the difficulties facing the ministry with an overzealous pursuit of enemies.

Despite these frustrations, where foreign affairs were concerned, the change in the face of the foreign ministry that Molotov's ascendancy represented did not produce a fundamental change in decision-making. While in conversation with British Foreign Secretary Halifax, Ivan Maisky, the Soviet representative in London, was quite accurate in his characterisation of individual ministers as executing the policy of the government – even without acknowledging the primacy of Stalin in its

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<sup>125</sup> Khrushchev's insistence that by the end of the 1930s, 'if you weren't told something, you didn't ask', is discussed in Thurston, 'Fear and Belief', p. 215 (Note 9).

<sup>126</sup> Resis, 'Fall of Litvinov', p. 34.

<sup>127</sup> Dullin, *Men of Influence*, pp. 212-215.

formulation.<sup>128</sup> The legalisation of this practical reality of power had taken place two years earlier, when the Politburo rubber-stamped the hegemony given to Stalin and his inner circle in ‘resolving problems of a secret nature, including questions of foreign policy’. It is worth noting that, in Stalin’s justification for this move, he placed particular stress on how it was ‘self-evident that secret foreign-policy questions absolutely cannot be dealt with without the participation of Comrades Molotov and Voroshilov’.<sup>129</sup> From the available evidence, the exact scope of the decision-making and consultation that took place by the two original commissions named in this Politburo resolution remains unclear. However, by 1939, ‘an exclusive governing group of five people had largely supplanted the Politburo’.<sup>130</sup>

The reasons for Litvinov’s replacement are still debated.<sup>131</sup> He was summoned to the Kremlin for his final consultation with Stalin on 3 May 1939. Telegramming the official explanation to Soviet ambassadors that same day, Stalin presented it as a matter of questionable ‘loyalty’ on the part of the former foreign minister, though such a vague assessment is in line with Stalin’s guarded nature.<sup>132</sup> Although Litvinov had failed in his endeavours to broker agreements with Britain and France throughout the spring and summer of 1939 – not to mention the disappointing reply of the Finnish government to Soviet overtures – he was never operating of his own volition, but was receiving direction from the Kremlin each step of the way. Stalin later acknowledged

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<sup>128</sup> D. Watson, ‘Molotov’s Apprenticeship in Foreign Policy: The Triple Alliance Negotiations in 1939’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (June 2000), p. 699.

<sup>129</sup> Cited in Khlevniuk, *Master of the House*, pp. 229-230.

<sup>130</sup> Khlevniuk, *Master of the House*, p. 231. In the run up to the outbreak of war in Finland, the names of Stalin, Molotov, Voroshilov and Beria predominate. Zhdanov, in his capacity as head of the Leningrad Party, participated in the mobilisation of the region’s military, industrial and human resources and will also be a figure central to our story, providing a connecting thread between Leningrad and Moscow. For a summary of Zhdanov’s rise to prominence, see Khlevniuk, *Master of the House*, p. 224. For his role in press, propaganda and foreign affairs, see Dullin, *Men of Influence*, p. 233.

<sup>131</sup> See Resis; Watson; Dullin, *Op. Cit.*

<sup>132</sup> Dullin, in contrast, takes Stalin’s statement at face-value. See Dullin, *Men of Influence*, p. 241.

that his preference had been to reach agreement with the Allies, an actuality reflected in Molotov's immediate efforts to pick up where Litvinov left off. Thus, no immediate turn to Nazi Germany was made, though the protracted negotiations and foot-dragging on the part of Paris and London continued to frustrate Moscow.<sup>133</sup>

Once those talks began to operate in parallel with the diplomatic channels opened with Nazi Germany, Stalin was forced to keep his hand even closer to his chest. The effort required, when responding quickly to alternative proposals and changing circumstances between two rival camps, suggests it was carried out through the standard practice of reliance upon his tightly restricted inner circle. This placed Molotov in a position of direct responsibility for both relaying Stalin's orders and reporting back to the centre. It is worth recognising, therefore, that this personnel change between Molotov and Litvinov arose not purely because of doubts in the ability of the latter. Stalin also felt greater confidence in Molotov for the task ahead.

Promoting Molotov to the head of the foreign ministry held further benefits. It significantly shortened the communication gap between Narkomindel and the Kremlin.<sup>134</sup> It also brought to the role an official spokesman who Stalin had long held in high regard for his speech writing and ability to convey the party line. Though there was a recent blemish on Molotov's record in this regard, when Stalin mobilised the Politburo apparatus to chasten his close comrade for his report to the Eighteenth Party

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<sup>133</sup> Watson, 'Molotov's Apprenticeship', pp. 715-716.

<sup>134</sup> Molotov's status – and the access to Stalin it afforded away from the Kremlin, within the more intimate surroundings of his dacha – is reflected in the brief notes he made before his diplomatic mission to Berlin in November 1940: 'If they ask about our relations with the English, reply in accordance with the exchange of opinions at St[alin's] dacha.' Cited in Khlevniuk, *Master of the House*, p. 232.

Congress, it was not an episode that indicates any long-term loss of confidence.<sup>135</sup>

Just a few months later the new Commissar for Foreign Affairs would be tasked with publicly responding to the drastic reorientation of policy that the announcement of the ‘Treaty of Non-aggression between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics’ represented. This would be but one of many significant statements on the shifting international stage that Molotov would be required to communicate in the subsequent months.

### The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact

A major sticking point in the negotiations between Moscow, Paris and London had been the question of reciprocal guarantees of security for the independent nations of Europe. Though the threat of a German advance into Poland and Romania was of the utmost priority for all parties involved in the talks, these states proved as suspicious of Soviet intentions in the region as they were desperate to stem the advance of Nazi forces across their territory. From Moscow’s perspective, any defence of these nations’ sovereignty needed to go hand-in-hand with their own desire for the creation of a more complete security-zone, encompassing protection against ‘indirect aggression’ – namely the threat of a German sponsored coup – across the Baltic region and their Finnish neighbours to the north.<sup>136</sup> Even over the course of the ongoing negotiations, members of the British cabinet still harboured misgivings about the sincerity of Soviet aims. According to Molotov, a statement in the House of Commons delivered by the Conservative MP and member of the Foreign Office, R. A.

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<sup>135</sup> Khlevniuk, *Master of the House*, pp. 221-222.

<sup>136</sup> London and Paris, in turn, repeatedly sought Moscow’s guarantee of protection for Netherlands, Switzerland and Belgium as part of the deal. See Watson, ‘Molotov’s Apprenticeship’, pp. 704-707.

Butler, had given the impression that the Soviet Union intended to undermine the independence of the Baltic states. The text of this speech had reached the Soviet foreign minister via TASS and was published in *Izvestiia* on 2 August 1939.<sup>137</sup> The willingness of both sides to influence and often undermine diplomatic talks via the mobilisation of their respective media is an elucidative point of comparison. Stalin undoubtedly maintained a firmer hand on the direction of the form and content of material that was inserted into the Soviet press. However, confronted by Molotov's bitter criticism of Westminster's leaking of details of the negotiations to the western press, the latter could offer only lame excuses of their inability to deny every false report that appeared.<sup>138</sup>

Negotiations with London and Paris finally broke down later that month. The eventual arrival of a military delegation to Moscow failed to belie Soviet suspicions that the British were insincere in their efforts to come to an agreement. Those sent to represent Allied interests lacked the authority to resolve the key question of Soviet troop movements across Poland and Romania in the event of German aggression.<sup>139</sup> Molotov was to conclude that the British and French were merely 'playing' with the Soviet Union and turned his attention to Germany instead.<sup>140</sup> On 14 August, Moscow received confirmation from the German ambassador in residence that all its demands would be met in return for a free hand in Poland.<sup>141</sup> The process of negotiation could begin in earnest.

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<sup>137</sup> Watson, 'Molotov's Apprenticeship', p. 713.

<sup>138</sup> Watson, 'Molotov's Apprenticeship', p. 711.

<sup>139</sup> Contrast this with the positive response to Ribbentrop's willingness to conduct talks on behalf of the German government in person and with a direct line to the Führer. See Moorhouse, *Devils' Alliance*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>140</sup> Watson, 'Molotov's Apprenticeship', pp. 715-716.

<sup>141</sup> Van Dyke, *Soviet Invasion of Finland*, p. 9; Moorhouse, *Devils' Alliance*, p. 33.

As with the burgeoning ties between Helsinki and Berlin, Stalin was increasingly concerned with the latter's successful overtures to the Baltic states in recent months.<sup>142</sup> Bringing Germany to the diplomatic table had the advantage of securing agreements with a rival power that had already proven to have far more influence (and interest) in the region than Britain and France. Readjustment of the Soviet's public position, the first hint of which appeared in Stalin's speech in March, also facilitated this reorientation of policy. When the decision was reached to signal Soviet openness to negotiations with Nazi Germany in the summer, Stalin once again turned to TASS. Besides Stalin's hands-on role there is also a subtlety to his tactics that needs to be emphasised. Rather than concern himself with constructing an 'immediate truth', he instead sought to have shifts in policy and the orientation of the party line diffuse more gradually among the Soviet readership. First, selecting a fairly innocuous article on French iron ore exports to Germany, it was then heavily edited down to the salient points by his hand before its placement in *Pravda* on 28 June 1939. Appearing alongside a report on foreign spies operating in France, the impression one gets is of a shift towards a more neutral view of countries willing to deal with Nazi Germany, while simultaneously undermining the position of France in the public eye. The timing of these articles anticipated the move towards an eventual accord with Hitler that took on increasing significance after the continued failure to reach agreement with both Britain and France.<sup>143</sup>

To the question of how important this kind of micro-management was and whether the readers of Soviet newspapers were even engaged with the kind of stories that Stalin took to editing, the evidence available does indeed suggest this material

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<sup>142</sup> For more detail see Watson, 'Molotov's Apprenticeship', p. 697.

<sup>143</sup> RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 207, l. 61. See also *Pravda*, 28 June 1939, p. 5.

played an important role, not only for the diplomatic corps of rival powers,<sup>144</sup> but also for faithful adherents of the party line and among the more general readership of Soviet news, at home and abroad. A precedent was well established before this period. In 1928, a TASS bulletin detailing the movements of the exiled Leon Trotsky appeared in the central and regional press and elicited angry responses from a number of readers. The implication was that references to his personal wealth reflected a generally elevated standard of living amongst the party leadership. As one respondent suggested, ‘from a political standpoint it would be best not to publish such telegrams...or, if you must, not to give Communist Party members such fat stipends.’<sup>145</sup>

By the end of the 1930s, a fairly routine presentation of news from abroad had been incorporated into the back pages of the Soviet newspapers; the model established by the central press also emulated by their regional counter-parts. A typical six-page edition of *Pravda* in 1939 would concentrate its international coverage on the penultimate page of the newspaper, providing a digest of recent TASS bulletins and their loosely credited foreign news sources. Likewise, *Leningradskaya Pravda* can be found following a similar format, though on a slightly smaller scale given the paper’s shorter total page count. Duplication of news frequently took place between central and regional newspapers, a product of the central control enjoyed by the Telegraph Agency over the distribution of all foreign press reports. Thus the Soviet press,

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<sup>144</sup> Irrespective of the failure of recent diplomatic talks, trade relations with Britain persisted even after the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. However, on 10 September 1939, the Kremlin again mobilised TASS to issue a statement in *Pravda*, complaining about disruptions in Anglo-Soviet trade. These concerns were addressed in a subsequent meeting between Maisky and Halifax on 24 September. See Doerr, ‘Frigid but Unprovocative’, p. 428.

<sup>145</sup> Example taken from M. Lenoe, ‘Reader Response To the Soviet Press Campaign Against the Trotskii-Zinov'ev Opposition, 1926-1928’, *Russian History*, Vol. 24, Nos. 1-2 (1997), p. 107.

notwithstanding the partisan coverage the regime might have fostered, offered a regular window into the outside world for the Soviet readership.

Although there was a healthy degree of scepticism regarding the validity of reports from TASS, a genuine interest in the world outside Soviet borders ensured that many tuned in regardless.<sup>146</sup> With its (at times) less ideologically charged language (the more sensationalist bulletin headings often distinct from the dry delivery of their actual content) and sourcing of foreign press reports – conveniently failing to acknowledge many of those newspapers were the official organs of foreign communist parties<sup>147</sup> – the regime was seeking to maintain an air of objectivity that may have also appealed to readers with less overt political interests. Attuned to the potential for shifts in policy, some even went so far as to claim an ability to ‘read between the lines’, though their ignorance of Stalin’s active role in the process reasserts a sense of the regime’s ability to influence opinion through even these peripheral channels:

When I read news of international events, I read between the lines. I suppose I could say that I liked to read international news most of all, especially the articles that were buried at the bottoms of the pages. I liked to read what they called ‘telegrams from abroad’, which were the latest communications from the branches of TASS in foreign countries... When I read these articles, I could see in what light the government regarded foreign events, and from that I could judge for myself what was the matter.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> See, for example, Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System (hereafter ‘HPSSS’), Widener Library, Harvard University, Schedule A, Vol. 31, Case 415/(NY)1035, p. 28; Schedule A, Vol. 15, Case 305, p. 55; Schedule A, Vol. 35, Case 96/(NY)1493, p. 36; Schedule A, Vol. 35, Case 386/(NY)1495, p. 51, accessed on 22 April 2012 at <http://hcl.harvard.edu/collections/hpsss/index.html>.

<sup>147</sup> During the Finnish War the *Daily Worker* in London and New York were regularly cited newspapers, the official organs of the CPGB and the Communist Part of the USA (CPUSA) respectively. The Scandinavian communist press also provided an important source of Soviet friendly print via Norwegian, Danish and Swedish newspapers.

<sup>148</sup> HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 15, Case 305, p. 58.

The importance of TASS and the channels of information it administered would continue to grow after the securing of new diplomatic ties with Germany. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact proved a significant shock for the international communist movement and its constituents amongst the many satellite parties who were tuned to the Moscow line.<sup>149</sup> Stalin's cautious stage-direction at the negotiations with the German delegation on 23 August 1939, insisting that evidence of the cordial toasts raised to the pact's conclusion be cleared from the camera's viewfinder, ultimately proved mere window-dressing for the unfolding crisis.<sup>150</sup> The abject failure of the Comintern to lead the reorientation of these parties further marginalised its apparatus in Stalin's eyes.<sup>151</sup> The Communist International's decline would facilitate the rise of the Telegraph Agency as an official mouthpiece for Soviet policy through the turbulent months to come.

In spite of these concerns over the public reception of the line, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact seemingly checked the increasing penetration of Germany into the Baltic. The potential for certain misunderstandings would still be manifest in the relations between these former rivals.<sup>152</sup> The spheres of influence that Moscow and Berlin secretly agreed upon provided breathing space that Stalin had failed to achieve from proposed agreements with London and Paris. However, in order to secure those

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<sup>149</sup> The cases of the British and French parties are the most notable. See D. Priestland, *The Red Flag: Communism and the Making of the Modern World* (London, 2010), p. 203.

<sup>150</sup> Moorhouse, *Devils' Alliance*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>151</sup> Litvinov's guarded complaints of the difficulties facing the administration of the foreign ministry after the widespread repressions suffered by its staff is mirrored by a letter sent to Stalin by the head of the Comintern, Georgi Dimitrov, on 25 November 1938. See Banac, *Diary of Georgi Dimitrov*, pp. 90-91. Dimitrov insisted that the burden placed on him by the recent arrest of a member of the ECCI secretariat, 'will be beyond my capacity to sustain for any prolonged period'. Stalin was unsympathetic to any damage caused; the priority given to rooting out enemies had seen him personally sign one list for execution that included three hundred Comintern operatives during the wave of repressions that hit the organisation in 1937. With those amongst the arrested including the heads of the Propaganda Department, the Organization Department and the Press Section, one has to wonder whether the Comintern was in any fit state to respond to the unfolding crisis in the Autumn of 1939. See Conquest, *Great Terror*, p. 408.

<sup>152</sup> See Chapter 3: Signals from Stalin, pp. 130-131.

gains, these commitments in principle would have to be realised by concrete action.<sup>153</sup>

Time was an essential factor in integrating the new acquisitions. The governments that bordered Soviet territory also had to concede to their incorporation into the Kremlin's system of 'forward defence'. As Van Dyke points out, 'neither of these requirements was guaranteed by the secret protocols'.<sup>154</sup>

During the Soviet Union's on-going negotiations with the Finnish government and the incorporation of its new territorial interests in Eastern Europe, the party press was careful not to undermine these diplomatic efforts with unnecessary polemics against the Finns. Any impatience over the protracted nature of negotiations was kept in check. Stalin was now personally involved in the diplomatic talks and he still saw the potential for reaching a similar agreement as those achieved with Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. All three Baltic states had capitulated within a fortnight of each other, bending to the overt threat of reprisals that Molotov had delivered at the "negotiating" table.<sup>155</sup> Estonia's signature of a mutual assistance treaty was secured on the 28 September, Latvia on the 5 October and Lithuania followed on the 10 October 1939. Again, after the relative success of the Polish campaign and the apparent ease with which Stalin's strategic aims were once more being realised, his self-confidence was tangible:

We believe that in our pacts of mutual assistance we have found the right form to allow us to bring a number of countries into the Soviet Union's sphere of influence. *But for that we will have to maintain a consistent posture, strictly observing their internal regimes and independence. We*

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<sup>153</sup> For a complete translation of the secret protocols and discussion of the subsequent request to extend Soviet interests into Lithuania, see E. Acton and T. Stableford (eds.), *The Soviet Union: A Documentary History, Vol. II 1939-1991* (Exeter, 2007), pp. 8-9.

<sup>154</sup> Van Dyke, *Soviet Invasion of Finland*, p. 10.

<sup>155</sup> For a more detailed overview of the strong-arming employed by Moscow to secure these agreements, see Moorhouse, *Devils' Alliance*, pp. 74-79.

*are not going to seek their sovietization. The time will come when they do that themselves.*<sup>156</sup>

His comments also indicate a continued recognition of the importance of a well-managed public relations campaign in achieving his strategic goals. While the activities of the Comintern were increasingly kept in check over the coming months, the floor was given to Molotov to address the Supreme Soviet on the direction of Soviet policy.

Molotov's speech to the Extraordinary Fifth Session of the Supreme Soviet on 31 October 1939 – published in its entirety across the central Party press the following day – spoke of the 'special character' of relations with Finland and gave an optimistic overview of the negotiations thus far. Its commentary was neither coloured by ideological polemics nor gave the impression of belligerence on the part of either country at the diplomatic table. Notwithstanding its positive spin, Molotov could not resist a veiled threat of repercussions if Soviet demands were not satisfied:

In view of all this we do not think that Finland will seek a pretext to frustrate the proposed agreement. This would not be in line with the policy of friendly Soviet-Finnish relations, and would, of course, work to the serious detriment of Finland. We are certain that Finnish leading circles will properly understand the importance of consolidating friendly Soviet – Finnish relations, and that Finnish public men will not yield to anti-Soviet influence, or to instigation from any quarter.<sup>157</sup>

Molotov's response to the interference of the US government and negative foreign press on the progress of negotiations reiterates Soviet determination to monitor the perceptions of the international community. The Soviet leadership were not operating in a bubble and public statements of this nature were carefully

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<sup>156</sup> Banac, *Diary of Georgi Dimitrov*, p. 120.

<sup>157</sup> 'Soviet Peace Policy – Speech Delivered on 31 October 1939', accessed on 7 April 2011 at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/molotov/1940/peace.htm>. See *Pravda*, 1 November 1939, pp. 1-2.

monitored by the Telegraph Agency for their reception outside the USSR.<sup>158</sup> In its haste to present the Soviet line on the state of its foreign affairs, the Moscow office, headed by Yakov Semyonovich Khavinson, had relayed the entire speech by telegraph to Reuters in London. The response was a polite reminder of the need for brevity and clarity in such global transmissions.<sup>159</sup> The priorities of these two organisations were not aligned. Moscow's concern that its voice was heard in the face of widespread anti-Soviet sentiment would continue to take priority over any respect for proper protocol in the dissemination of worldwide news.<sup>160</sup>

In July 1924, the need for effective control over the distribution of Soviet news had led the Politburo to establish the central all-Union wire service. TASS was expected to maintain strict adherence to the official party line through 'the achievement of the necessary...control over and concentration of all information in one general direction.' By the end of the decade it held a monopoly over the circulation of foreign news within the USSR, which was confirmed by both the Orgburo and Politburo in January 1928. At the same time the agency was given responsibility for the production of all international and all-Union news.<sup>161</sup> Nevertheless, study of the dialogue between TASS's headquarters in Moscow and its offices in London and New York reveals both the agency's limitations and the increasing pressures its operatives abroad would be placed under by the end of the 1930s.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> See, for example, GARF, f. 4459, op. 11, d. 1079, l. 76; d. 1212, ll. 48-49.

<sup>159</sup> GARF, f. 4459, op. 11, d. 1185, l. 37.

<sup>160</sup> GARF, f. 4459, op. 11, d. 1185, ll. 15, 18, 19.

<sup>161</sup> Lenoe points out that, despite TASS's leading role, 'in practice the major central newspapers had their own correspondents in the provinces and abroad'. Lenoe, *Closer to the Masses*, p. 20. This shared responsibility for news production is still visible at the end of the 1930s, resulting in conflicting stories from the Finnish front being propagated by at least one Soviet correspondent reporting for both foreign and domestic news outlets. See, Chapter 3: Signals from Stalin, pp. 114-115.

<sup>162</sup> See Chapter 3: Signals from Stalin, pp. 126-160.

Meanwhile, contrary to Molotov's public affirmation of the peaceful aims of Soviet foreign affairs, Stalin's preoccupation with the 'inevitability' of the USSR's embroilment in the second imperialist war continued to drive state policy and military mobilisation.<sup>163</sup> With the benefit of hindsight, Stalin would later justify the breakdown of Soviet-Finnish relations as equally unavoidable.<sup>164</sup> In reality, the foreign ministry's persistent overtures to reach agreement with Finland were a reflection of uncertainty surrounding the decision to open hostilities, rather than an indication of any concrete consensus about the plan. Regardless of the opportunities afforded by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, there was a clear disparity between the readiness of Moscow and Berlin to take the next step. When the governments of Britain and France declared war on Nazi Germany after the latter's invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939, Stalin and the Red Army command found themselves 'unprepared militarily or diplomatically to enact the terms of the secret protocols'. A scramble ensued to mobilise the necessary troops for the occupation of eastern Poland and western Belorussia by mid-September.<sup>165</sup> The negotiated settlements with the Baltic states offered a more practical means through which to increase Soviet hegemony over the region without the immediate need for full-blown occupation and the associated manpower that this would entail.

Attempts were made to carefully control news of these developments within the public sphere. The General Directorate for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press (*Glavlit*) ordered a media blackout of plans to expand military conscription when the People's Commissar for Defence Voroshilov revealed details to the

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<sup>163</sup> Pons, *Stalin and the Inevitable War*, pp. 186-191.

<sup>164</sup> Chubaryan and Shukman, *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War*, p. 263.

<sup>165</sup> Van Dyke, *Soviet Invasion of Finland*, pp. 10-11.

Supreme Soviet in September.<sup>166</sup> The only significant break with Molotov's measured review of diplomatic relations with Finland was an aggressive warning shot fired by *Pravda* on 3 November 1939. Appearing on the newspaper's front page, the article remained an isolated incident, coinciding with Molotov's patience wearing thin as the opening day of the third round of negotiations ended without agreement.<sup>167</sup> His ambiguous comment about leaving matters to the military was disregarded by the Finnish delegation and Stalin's return to the negotiating table the following day soon checked such talk.<sup>168</sup>

Notwithstanding the fact that the Kremlin was caught off guard by the speed of events in Eastern Europe, Stalin's continued buoyancy is understandable given the relative ease with which the newly acquired territories in Poland had fallen into the Soviet fold. Furthermore, even if negotiations with Helsinki were to break down, it was presumed that the Red Army would be well equipped to bring Finland in line. Any reports to the contrary had been overshadowed by the ebullience of Voroshilov at his chairing of the Chief Military Council in June 1939.<sup>169</sup> For the moment, newspapers were full of stories lauding the contribution of the Red Army to the lives of those newly liberated peoples of Eastern Europe. Road repairs were photographed in western Belorussia, as were eager crowds gathered in the cities for news from Moscow, while a ragged peasantry was portrayed greeting soldiers with open arms. An overriding sense of victory predominated. Alongside these scenes, the public campaign at home and abroad stressed the peace-loving role of the Soviet Union,

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<sup>166</sup> GARF, f. 9425, op. 1, d. 10, l. 113.

<sup>167</sup> D. Spring, 'The Soviet Decision for War against Finland, 30 November 1939', *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 2. (April 1986), p. 225. Both Spring and Van Dyke assume Zhdanov was responsible for the article. See also Van Dyke, *Soviet Invasion of Finland*, p. 22.

<sup>168</sup> Van Dyke, *Soviet Invasion of Finland*, p. 20.

<sup>169</sup> Spring, 'The Decision for War', p. 212.

voiced by Molotov and exemplified in the re-uniting of the peoples of Ukraine and Belorussia.<sup>170</sup> There was no sense in derailing such an outwardly positive mood, while ongoing talks sought to pacify the perceived threat to Leningrad owing to its proximity to the Finnish border. The pact with Germany afforded a reprieve from those concerns; it did not dispel the need to provide a more permanent solution to the Finnish problem. After all, as Maisky quite openly conceded to the British, ‘no friendship was very secure these days’, requiring that the Soviets prepare for ‘any eventuality’.<sup>171</sup>

### All Eyes on Finland

In the summer of 1939, with overtures between Berlin and Moscow beginning in earnest, Beria continued to forward key intelligence to Stalin about the strengthening of German-Finnish relations. Sergo Beria later asserted that his father remained opposed to any pact between the USSR and Nazi Germany and ‘saw to it that all intelligence tending to show that one should not trust Germany duly came to the attention of Stalin.’<sup>172</sup> However, given the intransigence of Helsinki in its relations with Moscow, information of this type also had the potential to push the General Secretary towards agreement with Hitler, as the best defence against Germany’s dominance in the region. News of German interest in a non-aggression pact with

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<sup>170</sup> See, for example, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 2 October and 17 October 1939. See, also, *Pravda*, 2 November 1939. – ‘Foreign Press on the Report of Comrade V. M. Molotov to the Fifth Extraordinary Session of the USSR Supreme Soviet’.

<sup>171</sup> Cited in Doerr, ‘Frigid but Unprovocative’, p. 433.

<sup>172</sup> S. Beria (trans: B. Pearce), *Beria, My Father: Life Inside Stalin's Kremlin* (London, 2001), p. 50.

Finland arrived on 10 July, alongside reports of Berlin's efforts to establish close contact with Sweden.<sup>173</sup>

After the de-facto alliance between Moscow and Berlin removed any prospect of Germany providing a block to Soviet interests in the Baltic, the Finns looked elsewhere for support.<sup>174</sup> Helsinki's stubbornness in negotiations was motivated in part by a persistent hope of either their Scandinavian neighbours or the forces of Britain and France coming to their aid in the event of war with the Soviet Union. International commentary was also influential, with few voices amongst the foreign press expecting negotiations to break down completely.<sup>175</sup> Nevertheless, throughout October, Beria forwarded intelligence to Stalin, Molotov and Voroshilov that showed Finland was finding itself increasingly isolated. The interception of telegrams to London from the English envoy in Finland revealed that Swedish promises to Helsinki amounted to nothing more than 'moral support'.<sup>176</sup>

TASS continued to keep a watchful eye over developments in Finland. Its back page bulletins on Helsinki's foreign relations were by no means a new phenomenon in 1939.<sup>177</sup> This was just one aspect of a much larger process in which TASS channelled a constant feed of press reports from outside the Soviet Union into the propaganda machinery. While Stalin's direct receipt of the information channels

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<sup>173</sup> *Zimniaia Voina: Issledovaniia, Dokumenti, Kommentarii*, Document 4 (10 July 1939), pp. 150-151.

<sup>174</sup> Although the Finns would not have known the nature of the secret protocols, from October the Germans now insisted they 'would hardly be in a position...to intervene in the Russian-Finnish conversations'. A note circulated amongst its diplomats by the German Foreign Office ordered that conversations express sympathy 'for the Russian point of view' and 'refrain from expressing any sympathy for the Finnish point of view'. Tolstoy, *Stalin's Secret War*, pp. 131-132.

<sup>175</sup> O. Vehviläinen, *Finland in the Second World War: Between Germany and Russia* (Basingstoke, 2002), p. 41.

<sup>176</sup> *Zimniaia Voina: Issledovaniia, Dokumenti, Kommentarii*, Document 15-16, pp. 165-167.

<sup>177</sup> TASS bulletins throughout 1937-38 kept Soviet readers abreast of relations between Finland and Germany. See, for example, 'German Propaganda in Finland', *Pravda*, 31 January 1938, p. 5.

provided by TASS was also not a recent innovation at the end of 1930s – in 1926 the New York office sent him American news reports of his interview as the new leader of the USSR<sup>178</sup> – the value of the Telegraph Agency for Stalin and the scope of its operations would grow exponentially with the outbreak of war in Europe and eventual breakdown of relations with Finland.

In this changeable political climate, and particularly with regards to Finland, the public face of friendly relations with Germany also had to be handled with new sensitivity. Again, Stalin's use of the TASS network offers a crucial window into his responsibility for managing relations between Berlin and Moscow in the press. While privately, Hitler and Stalin divided up Eastern Europe and the Kremlin worked towards a negotiated settlement with the Finns, publicly, it made an about turn. Explicit articulation of a link between the interests of the Finnish and German governments was carefully avoided in the press. The Party was expected to immediately adjust itself to the new line. Molotov's address to the Supreme Soviet, for instance, referred only to an increase in the 'amount of outside influence on the part of third powers' over Finland, neglecting to name Germany among them.<sup>179</sup>

In general, the international community were unable to keep pace with rapidly moving events during this period. Their attempts to untangle the diplomatic web between Hitler and Stalin only strengthened the latter's confidence. He privately ridiculed the 'naivety' of foreign reporters, amused by their inability to effectively trace the course Eastern Europe was heading under the direction of its two new

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<sup>178</sup> RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 726, ll. 137-138. The accompanying letter was written by the head of the New York bureau, Kenneth Durant, who had joined the agency in 1922. He continued to hold this post at the outbreak of the Soviet-Finnish War and through the duration of hostilities. See GARF, f. 4459, op. 38, d. 104, l. 233.

<sup>179</sup> 'Soviet Peace Policy – Speech Delivered on 31 October 1939'.

masters.<sup>180</sup> Stalin was privy to a huge information network via TASS's collection of material on domestic and international developments. The number of archived articles that related to Finland alone during this period covered nearly one hundred and fifty pages of newsprint between January and March 1940.<sup>181</sup> We are now in a far better position to appreciate the nature of those foreign reports that had passed directly through to Stalin's office, indicating how well informed he was of the international stage and of global perceptions of the USSR. Stalin's careful management of the public dissemination of information served to support his policy decisions. Consequently, this does much to correct past assessments of him as somewhat disengaged from foreign affairs.<sup>182</sup>

Unfortunately for Stalin, the peaceful path of diplomacy did not prove effective where the Finnish government was concerned. By mid-October, the progress of diplomatic talks, or lack thereof, was already increasingly absent from the press. Limiting output to those back page clippings from TASS, one finds Stalin's hand responsible for the restriction of foreign reports on the negotiations, despite a relatively optimistic treatment of events.<sup>183</sup> The third round of talks the following month again failed to produce a compromise that suited both parties. Stalin's personal involvement in the negotiation process made him reluctant to draw unnecessary attention to the ongoing failure to reach an agreement with the Finnish government. This mirrored a more general aversion on his part to issue public statements in the

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<sup>180</sup> RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 207, ll. 63-66, 75. This commentary is found written by hand in the marginalia of TASS bulletins forwarded to Stalin. Reports of this kind were at times both informative and amusing for the General Secretary as the occasions where he simply scrawled 'Ha, ha' in pencil testify. Rumours of Hitler's impending visit to Moscow after the ratification of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact were one such example.

<sup>181</sup> GARF, f. 4459, op. 28, d. 395, ll. 1-147.

<sup>182</sup> 'Stalin himself appears, at least from the documents now available, to have only rarely taken a direct hand in the day-to-day running of diplomacy; it was simply not his forte.' J. Haslam, *Soviet Foreign Policy, 1930-33: The Impact of the Depression* (London and Basingstoke, 1983), p. 18.

<sup>183</sup> RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 207, l. 75.

context of such a turbulent theatre of war on the continent. Beyond the more dramatic upheaval caused in the British and French Communist Parties, from his conversations with Georgi Dimitrov, it is clear that the shift from an 'anti-fascist' to 'anti-imperialist' line had not been a smooth transition among communists abroad.<sup>184</sup>

The official newspaper of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), sharing the title *Daily Worker* with its counterpart in Britain, offers a prime example of the confused and uneasy shift that took place. Ever reliant on official sources from Moscow, the editors would be in compliance with much of their coverage of Finnish affairs. The wider content of the newspaper displayed a willingness to embrace the new anti-imperialist line while still relying on explicitly anti-fascist and anti-German content to describe European events for its American readership.<sup>185</sup> It points to the often delayed and inconsistent channels of communication that persisted between Moscow and its satellite parties abroad. This challenge would continue to exacerbate attempts to orientate themselves to the party line through the months of fighting in Finland.

Knowledge of the breakdown in communication between Finland and the USSR would eventually filter through to the Soviet public, intensifying fears of war. A new aggressive tone became evident shortly after the first Soviet troops moved into Lithuania in mid-November.<sup>186</sup> The watershed revelation followed just a couple of days later. With talks reaching a standstill on the same day as the arrival to the

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<sup>184</sup> A. Dallin and F. Firsov (eds.), *Dimitrov and Stalin, 1934-1943: Letters from the Soviet Archives* (New Haven, Connecticut and London, 2000), pp. 163-165.

<sup>185</sup> See, for example, *Daily Worker* (New York), 6 November 1939, p. 6. Includes a cartoon of a worker depicted sweeping away 'imperialists', one of whom clearly represents Hitler; *Daily Worker* (New York), 7 November 1939, p. 6, 'Polish Refugees Kiss Soviet Troops As They Enter USSR Fleeing Nazis'.

<sup>186</sup> *New York Times*, 14 November 1939.

Kremlin on 10 November of Otto Kuusinen – a Finnish communist in exile and leading figure in the Comintern – the threat of war increasingly brought Finland sharply into focus.<sup>187</sup>

A report provided by the TASS office in Helsinki quietly signalled the announcement of an ‘Anti-Soviet Campaign in Finland’, published simultaneously in both *Pravda* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda* on 16 November. The choice of this report, among a series sourced from the Finnish offices of TASS since 3 November, sought a degree of objectivity while distancing the regime from any shift in relations between the two countries. As Spring asserts:

They are not evidence that the Soviet public was being prepared for the war between the failure of the negotiations and the Mainila frontier incident on 26 November. If the substance of these short reports were to be believed, Finland would shortly find itself bankrupt as a result of the burden of mobilisation and would be forced to come to some kind of *modus vivendi* with the Soviet Union. The corollary of this was that military action would not be required: it was only the Finnish government which was trying to provoke it.<sup>188</sup>

The change in tone that became evident from 16 November coincided with Stalin’s order to the Leningrad Military District (LMD) to mobilise along the border just the day before. The press, however, opted to deflect public attention away from this deployment of force. The first of a series of cartoons appeared in the back pages of *Komsomolskaya Pravda* on 18 November, ridiculing Finnish preparations for war and the backward nature of their troops.<sup>189</sup> Moscow was treading carefully. Any shift in mood that is evident in the press was still limited to the back pages. After all, a

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<sup>187</sup> See Spring, ‘Decision for War’, p. 218.

<sup>188</sup> Spring, ‘Decision for War’, p. 218. Van Dyke oversimplifies this shift, dating its beginning on the 3 November with the assumed publication of Zhdanov’s front-page polemics in *Pravda*. Van Dyke, *Soviet Invasion of Finland*, p. 22.

<sup>189</sup> *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 18 November 1939.

commitment to peace was still an integral part of the self-constructed façade the foreign ministry presented. Despite the claims' duplicity, Stalin's priority was in maintaining the Soviet Union's neutrality. Otto Kuusinen's presence at this stage was therefore likely to have been in a consultative role. Dimitrov's diary acknowledged the initial meeting with 'Jos V.' on 10 November in vague terms and, according to Stalin's own meeting register, it lasted little over half an hour.<sup>190</sup> Any scheme for Kuusinen to head the puppet 'People's Government of Finland' (established immediately after the outbreak of war) could not emerge until after the negative response of the General Secretary of the Finnish Communist Party (SKP) Arvo Tuominen was received from his residence in Stockholm.<sup>191</sup>

Over the course of the next two weeks, Stalin and Kuusinen would meet at the Kremlin an additional five times. Various members of his inner circle and the military leadership would be present at each point, while on Stalin's instruction, strategic plans were drawn up by the army and navy.<sup>192</sup> It is unclear when exactly the decision to open hostilities was made. However, throughout the evening of the 22 November, Stalin met with his general staff before a final audience with Kuusinen that concluded well after midnight.<sup>193</sup>

Publicly, the Finns continued to be portrayed as the aggressors by the Soviet press. *Komsomolskaya Pravda's* humorous, ramshackle depiction of its troops – a cartoon depicting a battered train cart, hauled by a donkey, as three simple-looking drivers attempt to decipher the 'plan' of action upon reaching the Soviet border – still

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<sup>190</sup> Banac, *Diary of Georgi Dimitrov*, p. 121; Chernobaev, *Na Priyomye u Stalina*, p. 279.

<sup>191</sup> K. Rentola, 'The Finnish Communists and the Winter War', *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 33, No. 4 (October, 1998), p. 598.

<sup>192</sup> Van Dyke, *Soviet Invasion of Finland*, pp. 22-24.

<sup>193</sup> Chernobaev, *Na Priyomye u Stalina*, p. 281.

came with the ominous caption: ‘They have arrived...’. The threat of war was now perilously close.<sup>194</sup> In more sober terms, a published letter (of questionable origin) credited to a young Finnish worker and ‘friend of the Soviet people’ supported this imagery. The letter also signalled the beginning of a concerted effort to distinguish between the people and the political administration of Finland, which would later be integral to a carefully engineered image of a polarised Finnish society, perpetuated throughout the war. The author’s anti-imperialist language was notable, as was his insinuation of lengthy Finnish preparations and provocation of war, with earlier diplomatic efforts between the two sides whitewashed by the claims of the Finnish bourgeoisie being in the pocket of the French. What is perhaps most striking is the assumed persecution this young Finn anticipated from his own government in response to such a public display of support for the USSR:

Young Finnish workers have always been a friend of the Soviet Union. No police ban, no savage repression (*nikakie svirepye repressii*), no terror (*nikakoi terror*) will be able to destroy the hearts of the Finnish youth or their love of the great socialist country...<sup>195</sup>

The explicit language of ‘repression’ and ‘terror’, the idea of an invasive police state, smacks as being the height of hypocrisy in light of the Soviet regime’s own violent re-ordering of society having recently reached a crescendo at the end of 1930s.

Nevertheless, this language would continue to shape the Soviet presentation of Finnish society at war, stamping the military and political situation in the region with Stalinist rhetoric and echoing the recent Soviet occupation of Poland and *Pravda*’s condemnation of the ‘bloody terror practiced by the Polish gentry’.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 24 November 1939.

<sup>195</sup> *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 24 November 1939, p. 4.

<sup>196</sup> Thompson, ‘Nationalist Propaganda’, p. 392. The Soviet media’s recourse to a terminology of terror in the treatment of opposition elements is an important element of longstanding continuity that will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

In the final few days before hostilities erupted, a carefully co-ordinated campaign to further discredit the Finnish government and the treatment of its population also emerged from the daily TASS bulletins, printed in Soviet newspapers and their communist counter-parts abroad. In Leningrad, with its proximity to the border ensuring the city would remain centre stage throughout the fighting, local party leaders began to pay close attention to the signals these bulletins provided. Though they were most probably unaware of the decision for war, their frantic efforts to engage with the new conception of a divided Finnish society reflected a keen awareness of the need to speak on point and according to the precepts of the political centre.<sup>197</sup>

Yet whatever noise the press made, and however much it insinuated a Finnish hunger for war, it could not rely upon its opponents to fire the first shot. Once the decision for military action had been reached, a new challenge presented itself to the regime: How to start a war with Finland, a tiny nation whose total population was barely more than that of Leningrad, without being cast as the aggressor?

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<sup>197</sup> See Chapter 4: Life in Leningrad, pp. 169-171.

## Chapter 2

### Crisis-management, Censorship, Control

The greatest triumphs of propaganda have been accomplished, not by doing something, but by refraining from doing. Great is the truth, but still greater, from a practical point of view is silence about the truth.<sup>198</sup>

Aldous Huxley, Forward to *Brave New World*

So a prince has of necessity to be so prudent that he knows how to escape the evil reputation attached to those vices which could lose him his state, and how to avoid those vices which are not so dangerous, if he possibly can; but, if he cannot, he need not worry so much about the latter.<sup>199</sup>

Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

The preceding chapter established Stalin at the centre of our narrative. It also began to construct a picture of the various strands of information and intelligence gathering that were directed to that nexus of power. Stalin constructed policy and the public presentation of the official line on the basis of these carefully controlled channels of communication, further shaped and internalised through the complexities of his ideology and instinctive response to world events. The failure to reach a diplomatic agreement with Finland in the autumn of 1939 meant navigating uncharted waters in the days ahead. Opening hostilities with a small, independent nation risked further undermining a widely declared policy of peace, already tarnished by the advance of Soviet forces into Eastern Poland.

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<sup>198</sup> A. Huxley, *Brave New World* (London, 2007), p. xlvi.

<sup>199</sup> N. Machiavelli (trans: George Bull), *The Prince* (London, 2003), p. 51.

The memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev offer an important window into how the Kremlin attempted to solve this problem. While Khrushchev's assertion of Stalin's culpability for ordering the opening of hostilities with the Finns might smack of being a self-serving manoeuvre on the future General Secretary's part, key elements of his story are corroborated by available archival sources. Following this narrative thread reveals how small the circle remained that were privy to the decision for war. Even if Khrushchev was not yet at the apex of power, he certainly moved in those circles in this period:

When I came to Moscow from Kiev in those days, I rarely had any time to spare. More often Stalin would call me and tell me to come see him. Sometimes I would find Stalin alone. It was easier then to have an exchange of opinions and for me to lay out my views and express the needs that I always had to talk about when I came from Ukraine. More often when I ended up in Stalin's presence, Molotov, Voroshilov, and Kaganovich were also there. More rarely Zhdanov, who was usually in Leningrad. Also Beria and Mikoyan on occasion. That was the circle of people I encountered in Stalin's presence more often than others.<sup>200</sup>

These were the names that regularly occupied the meeting register for Stalin's Kremlin office.<sup>201</sup> Taken together, their attendance constituted some ninety percent of the time given to state business during the daily entries recorded in 1939.<sup>202</sup> By the end of the 1930s, Stalin had gathered a select group of close comrades that were unwavering in loyalty and shared the same uncompromising political outlook of their boss. Their role in the unfolding drama is the focus of our attention in the next chapter. In the course of the hostilities with Finland, the men responsible for the mobilisation of the state's military capacity and media apparatus would also join their number. Both groups would have an essential part to play in the impending crisis.

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<sup>200</sup> *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev*, p. 249.

<sup>201</sup> Chernobaev, *Na Priyomye u Stalina*, pp. 278-296; Khlevniuk, *Master of the House*, pp. 266-271 (Appendix 2). As Khlevniuk notes, Stalin also regularly conducted meetings in his dacha.

<sup>202</sup> Khrushchev, by contrast, is recorded as having spent just under eighty hours in meetings, a mere three percent of the total for 1939. Khlevniuk, *Master of the House*, p. 270.

## Stalin and the Inner Circle

Though Khrushchev is vague in dating a return to Moscow during the autumn of 1939, he describes an initial call to Stalin's apartment in the presence of both Molotov and Kuusinen, who had already established an agenda for the Finnish question in advance of his arrival. Following Kuusinen's appearance earlier in the month, Khrushchev's first entry on the register is 22 November 1939. It was a particularly busy day for the boss, with Molotov, Voroshilov, Beria and Kuusinen attending a short briefing in the early hours of the morning before business was resumed again later that same day.<sup>203</sup> It was only during that afternoon's session that Khrushchev joined larger gatherings, of the political leadership initially, followed by broader sections of the military general staff. They, too, had departed shortly before a late night consultation between Stalin and Kuusinen ended the day.

Continuing to track these movements in and out of the Kremlin, we can pinpoint Khrushchev's following reference to their first collective encounter on the 23 November 1939:

One day in late autumn 1939 when I came to Moscow, Stalin invited me to visit him at his apartment: 'Come on over and we'll have something to eat. Molotov and Kuusinen will be there.' Kuusinen was then working for the Comintern. I went to the Kremlin, to Stalin's apartment. A conversation began, and from the direction it was taking I sensed that it was a continuation of a previous conversation that I knew nothing about.<sup>204</sup>

Both Molotov and Kuusinen had arrived earlier that evening. Kuusinen departed shortly before Khrushchev's entrance, only to rejoin proceedings shortly after half

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<sup>203</sup> The date therefore appears twice in the register. Chernobaev, *Na Priyomye u Stalina*, p. 281.

<sup>204</sup> *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev*, p. 249.

past nine.<sup>205</sup> Continuing the discussion from the previous days' meetings, they were preoccupied with the question of Kuusinen's anticipated role in Finland.<sup>206</sup> Stalin's insistence on introducing policy face-to-face, with only those members of his inner circle concerned with carrying it out, naturally limits our knowledge of that dialogue. Khrushchev's ignorance of how events had proceeded in his absence reiterates the 'need to know' basis of these plans. Stalin held a significant monopoly over the information channels that travelled through to the centre; his careful guarding of that control would have serious consequences for the development of the war and the blockages in communication his generals would complain of following its conclusion.<sup>207</sup>

### The Shelling of Mainila

Despite Khrushchev's absence at the actual decision for war, he *was* privy to who was given the task of establishing a suitable precedent for initiating hostilities – Grigory Ivanovich Kulik, head of the Main Artillery Directorate.<sup>208</sup> This version of events is corroborated by the arrival of both Khrushchev and Kulik to the Kremlin on 25 November 1939.<sup>209</sup> More importantly, consultation of the register for Zhdanov's offices in Leningrad places Kulik in the city on the day of the artillery bombardment that formed the central episode of the 'Shelling of Mainila'.<sup>210</sup> This would provide the

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<sup>205</sup> Chernobaev, *Na Priyomye u Stalina*, p. 281.

<sup>206</sup> K. Boterbloem, *The Life and Times of Andrei Zhdanov, 1896-1948* (Montréal and Ithaca, 2004), p. 201. Boterbloem dates this earlier meeting as 15 November, after Zhdanov's return to Moscow on the overnight train from Leningrad. A seven-hour meeting ensued with Stalin, Molotov, Voroshilov and Kuusinen present.

<sup>207</sup> Chubaryan and Shukman, *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War*, p. xvii.

<sup>208</sup> *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev*, p. 249.

<sup>209</sup> Chernobaev, *Na Priyomye u Stalina*, p. 281.

<sup>210</sup> RGASPI, f. 77, op. 4, d. 77, l. 15.

pretext the Kremlin needed for cutting diplomatic ties with the Finns and opening hostilities at the close of the month. Without a hint of shame, the Soviets laid the blame for the apparent death of Red Army troops, caused by this pre-emptive strike, squarely at the feet of the Finnish forces amassed on the border.

According to the Soviet version of events, troops of the Leningrad Military District were stationed on the border with Finland within a kilometre of the village of Mainila. On the 26 November 1939, at 3:45pm, the Soviet position reportedly came under fire from Finnish artillery. A total of seven shots were fired, resulting in casualties among whom three privates and one non-commissioned officer were killed, and ‘seven privates and two men belonging to the military command’ were wounded.<sup>211</sup> The Finns immediately completed their own investigation in response to these claims. The next day, replying to Molotov’s condemnation of the incident, their preliminary findings revealed the source of the shots had been Soviet territory. They suggested both sides withdraw from the border and establish a joint commission to further investigate the nature of events.<sup>212</sup>

The significance of this episode is not purely in revealing the mechanisms of decision making within the Kremlin. It provides an opportunity to study how the regime then controlled the spread of public knowledge about the events at the Finnish border, paid close attention to popular reactions and ultimately questioned its own ability to construct a believable narrative for the public to digest. There is hesitancy in

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<sup>211</sup> ‘Note of Molotov to Yrjö-Koskinen, 26 November 1939’, accessed on 10 April 2011 at <http://www.histdoc.net/history/molotov261139.html>. The original Russian is reproduced in a collected edition of documents related to the Soviet-Finnish War. See E. A. Balashov (ed.), *Prinimai Nas, Suomi-krasavitsa! : “Osvoboditel’nyi” pokhod v Finliandiiu 1939-1940 gg.* (St. Petersburg, 2010), p. 23.

<sup>212</sup> Van Dyke, *Soviet Invasion of Finland*, p. 24.

the manner in which the Party and press operated over the next few days that would seriously undermine their ability to effectively control domestic perceptions of the war.<sup>213</sup>

Zhdanov was called back to Moscow the day after the incident; over the course of the previous month he had supervised military preparations in Leningrad as head of the regional military council. He was not new to such work, having taken an ‘active interest’ in naval affairs as he ascended to the top of the Leningrad apparatus, and proved instrumental in pushing for the improvement of the region’s defences in the spring of 1939. His world-view was closely aligned to the prevailing mood of suspicion about the threat of invasion through the Baltic region, and he insisted on an ‘uncompromising line’ during Finnish negotiations over the territorial concessions that were seen as essential in meeting the defensive needs of the country.<sup>214</sup> More important, however, in the course of the conflict, would be Zhdanov’s role as the Party’s political advisor to the front and mouthpiece for the Soviet forces in Finland.<sup>215</sup> He provides a key bridge between the centre of power in Moscow and its

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<sup>213</sup> Unfortunately, there is almost no accessible archival evidence related to the episode from Soviet sources. One would anticipate some reference to the shelling amongst NKVD files from the seventieth anniversary edition. However, the only vague reference made by any document in this collected edition is in the form of an undated report offering Finnish responses to ‘past events’ (*proishedshimi sobytiyami*) at the Finnish-Soviet border recorded on 27 November 1939. See *Zimniaia Voina: Issledovaniia, Dokumenti, Kommentarii*, Document 40, pp. 200-201. The Volkogonov papers include a copy of a report forwarded to Stalin, Moloto (*sic*) and Voroshilov that is dated 26 November. It includes little identifying information, beyond being credited to K. Meretskov (Commander of the Leningrad Military District and in overall charge at the start of the Finnish campaign) and a subordinate, Melnikov. As an official contemporary source, it seems rather suspect, misspelling Mainila and offering no information beyond that published the following day through TASS. Since Meretskov was not in Moscow in the days leading up to the shelling, he may have been ignorant of the Kremlin’s plans and hastily produced this note to inform the centre of the version of events he received in Leningrad. Alternatively, this may have been a draft prepared to give weight to the published reports of the shelling that were quickly dismissed outright by the Finns. See Volkogonov Papers, Reel 1, Box 1, Folder 5, Document 9.

<sup>214</sup> Rieber, ‘Zhdanov in Finland’, pp. 4-14.

<sup>215</sup> Boterbloem, *Life and Times*, p. 202.

expression at the limits – both geographically and figuratively – of Soviet control during this crisis.

In the meantime, the act of ‘provocation’ that would be so vehemently advocated by Molotov as the precedent for breaking diplomatic relations with Finland had failed to even make the front page of the three main newspapers of the central party press.<sup>216</sup> It is very difficult to square this low-key announcement of the events of 26 November the following day, with the sheer scale of the response the Party generated to fill its pages over the next few editions. Each newspaper began painting an image of collective anger felt across the Union, incorporating sound bites from every corner of the country:

The brazen provocation of Finland’s military has caused a huge perturbation among the workers of our country. Rallies at night shifts in Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev works unanimously adopted a resolution strongly approving the note of the Soviet government.<sup>217</sup>

Meetings were prepared in factories and among regional party organisations to spread the word of this ‘provocation’ by Finland and generate support for the Soviet Union’s diplomatic response. Photographs showed the attentive faces of citizens undergoing their collective education about the events that had brought the country to the brink of war. This was a well-coordinated affair, with party activists on the ground responding immediately to the official news as it appeared in print and over the airwaves.

Attempts were made across the Leningrad region to host meetings in key establishments in the urban centres, gathering thousands of people to hear the official line and reassure the Party of the united will of the Soviet people.<sup>218</sup> Reports from the

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<sup>216</sup> See *Pravda; Komsomolskaya Pravda; Ivestiia*, 27 November 1939.

<sup>217</sup> *Pravda*, 27 November 1939, p. 2.

<sup>218</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3633, ll. 167-171.

countryside were slower to appear, by which time dangerous rumours were already starting to circulate about the validity of the official order of events. Some clearly wondered whether it was the Finns, or Soviets, that had fired the first shot.<sup>219</sup>

There was no place for these doubts in the press. In *Pravda*, the announcement of the shelling was published side by side with only those public responses that expressed healthy understanding of the official line, taken from meetings held throughout the previous night in the factories of Leningrad, Moscow and Kiev. In contrast, within the pages of *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, any response to the news of the shelling was delayed until the following day. It was an early sign of the Party's inability to mobilise the entire propaganda machinery to react in unison to such a controversial episode. Not that it was particularly tolerant of these failures. The editor of *Smena*, the regional paper of the Leningrad Komsomol, was required by the city committee to explain the five-hour delay of the 27 November edition. In their defence, the paper's staff pointed to the difficulties involved in mobilising the workforce late into the night, fuel shortages and the breakdown of transport that further delayed getting the copy to print.<sup>220</sup>

The over-all impression is of the limited 'facts' being overshadowed by a groundswell of popular outrage and hurriedly organised shows of support in anticipation of the official reaction from Moscow. The reliance on a fairly generic response from citizens willing to voice their outrage at the Finns were guided through careful management by those party delegates heading the meetings and quickest to organise support. This began in the centres of Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev where

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<sup>219</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3633, ll. 172-175.

<sup>220</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3394, ll. 191-192.

any rapid mobilisation of the Party was easiest, but later spread as far a field as Alma-Ata, Minsk and Lvov.<sup>221</sup> Reporting on these scenes, *Pravda* offered the following view from the fringes of Soviet power:

Today crowded meetings took place in the cities, villages and towns of Kazakhstan in connection with the brazen onslaught of the Finnish military...Comrade Bukurov spoke at a rally of miners from the Kirov mine in Karaganda. He said: 'The provocation failed. Soviet troops have displayed necessary composure on the Finnish border. When needed, the Red Army, and with it the entire Soviet people will be able to answer a devastating blow to the cowardly provocateur soldiers.'<sup>222</sup>

The limited evidence of any informed, articulate responses beyond sound bites of Soviet rhetoric emphasises the lack of information provided by the regime over the course of negotiations and in the immediate aftermath of the Mainila incident. Even those who genuinely took the Kremlin's version of events at face value could offer little to the conversation. This was a knee-jerk response, the precedence for which was well established in the course of the 1930s, when the penetration of Stalinist culture into the press was solidified. The result was the political centre becoming more and more disengaged with the wider public. Instead, newspapers were increasingly geared towards sustaining 'the legitimacy of the party *among its members*'.<sup>223</sup> This was clearly not the end of the story. The expectation remained that, once this information was in the hands of the party membership, it should then be distributed orally amongst the wider population, through gatherings, reading circles and organised lecture cycles. That the regime struggled to develop a coherent strategy for achieving this will become clear by the war's ever diminishing profile in the press and the negative reports of public opinion that would continue to flood into the centre from a huge variety of sources.

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<sup>221</sup> *Pravda; Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 28 November 1939.

<sup>222</sup> *Pravda*, 28 November 1939, p. 2.

<sup>223</sup> Lenoë, *Closer to the Masses*, p. 254.

Without any firm or consistent channels of information (and direction) via the press, the more zealous-minded agitators could still be inclined to fill in the gaps. The recollections from one contemporary suggest this was a definite risk in these opening days of uncertainty:

For example, before the Soviet-Finnish war our *politruks* [political commissars\*] began an open campaign against Finland. They spoke about the Finnish threat to Leningrad and the necessity of protecting ‘the peaceful Soviet population’ from the Fascist invaders. Listening to such talks we were sure that very soon Finnish territory will be attacked. The Army newspaper ‘Red Star’ wrote only about the Soviet-Finnish negotiations concerning the Karelian Isthmus. It did not contain such juicy phrases as we heard from our *politruks*. One day we were informed that Finnish troops had bombarded the Soviet border and had openly attacked Soviet army units. Therefore, the Soviet army was forced to counter-attack. Personally I accepted that information as a big lie because for two months before the attack, day after day, we heard nothing but slander about Finland.<sup>224</sup>

Even at the risk of this recollection being delivered with the benefit of hindsight, there was clearly a huge gap between the press coverage of Finnish events and the palpable sense of impending war that is detectable among the rumours and hearsay being circulated in the Leningrad region during the preceding weeks.<sup>225</sup> On 3 November 1939, with heightened surveillance in play during the festivities for the twenty-second anniversary of the October Revolution, one overzealous housewife was overheard announcing that Finland had already declared war on the USSR. Defeat for the Soviets was also anticipated, thanks to the expectation of support for the Finns from Britain, France and Sweden.<sup>226</sup> This battle between official and unofficial channels of

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\* A supervising political officer, responsible for the ideological education and organisation of military forces.

<sup>224</sup> HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 36, Case 333/(NY)1582, p. 32.

<sup>225</sup> See, for example, reports of rumours circulating in the town of Pushkin that suggested there was no prospect of an agreement being reached between the USSR and Finland. TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3569, l. 105.

<sup>226</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3569, l. 126. Four related *svodki* from the regional apparatus of the NKVD are included in this file. All focus on popular responses to the anniversary celebrations of the

information, further distorted by their dissemination across factory floors and collective farms, would continue through the conflict.

The diplomatic exchanges that followed this opening salvo was merely a smoke screen to mask the deployment of Soviet troops and rebuff claims that the Red Army was now intent on seizing Finnish territory by force. Molotov made hollow promises that the Kremlin would not blow the episode out of proportion:

The Government of the U.S.S.R. have no intention of exaggerating the importance of this revolting act committed by troops belonging to the Finnish Army – owing perhaps to a lack of proper guidance on the part of their superiors – but they desire that revolting acts of this nature shall not be committed in future.<sup>227</sup>

The Kremlin continued to pay careful attention to the international theatre. As the Baltic fleet monitored Swedish manoeuvres in the Gulf of Finland, still fearing intervention on behalf of the Finns, Moscow's interest was also on how much weight Molotov's words carried amongst foreign public opinion.<sup>228</sup> The TASS offices in New York received a telegram, in the aftermath of the Foreign Minister's radio address on 29 November, requesting word on the American press' response and extent of the text's exposure among its readers.<sup>229</sup> The American *Daily Worker* fought a valiant battle on the Soviet regime's behalf. It was aided in no small part by the advantage afforded to its editors by the time-difference between Moscow and the East Coast. There is none of the hesitancy visible in the Soviet press' treatment of events on the

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October Revolution and the mood of the local population recorded during the festive period. See TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3569, ll. 100-140.

<sup>227</sup> 'Note of Molotov to Yrjö-Koskinen'.

<sup>228</sup> Van Dyke, *Soviet Invasion of Finland*, p. 26.

<sup>229</sup> GARF, f. 4459, op. 11, d. 1079, l. 76.

Finnish border. News of the Mainila incident and the casualties involved dominated the front page on the 27 November, cabled in from Moscow.<sup>230</sup>

Back in the Soviet capital, the regime was increasingly aware of the inadequacy of its treatment of these events. Molotov's commentary offered little beyond vitriolic hyperbole at the actions of Finland over the last few months. Decidedly vague about the shelling of Mainila, it was a further sign of the regime's caution over how effectively it had engineered this 'smoking gun'.

In the past few days outrageous provocations by the military of Finland began on the Soviet-Finnish frontier, including even artillery firing on our troops near Leningrad, which caused grave losses in Red Army units...they replied to our proposals by a hostile refusal and brazen denial of facts, by a derisive attitude toward the victims we have lost, by undisguised striving to keep Leningrad under the direct threat of their troops.<sup>231</sup>

Not risking the explicit mention of an impending state of war between the two sides, the reaction to 'hostile foreign press' was one of blanket refusal that the Soviet Union had any intention of 'seizure or annexation' of Finland or 'interference in her internal and external affairs'. The blame was instead laid squarely at Finland's door.

Although, in words at least, the breakdown in diplomatic relations was not yet being equated with further hostilities, the visual imagery that *Pravda* adopted portrayed both sides with weapons clearly drawn. In a cartoon that would establish a striking visual language later recycled by the same artists after Nazi Germany's invasion of the USSR, the clawed hand of the former tsarist general, Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim –

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<sup>230</sup> *Daily Worker* (New York), 27 November 1939.

<sup>231</sup> 'Radio Speech of comrade V. M. Molotov, Chairman of Council of People's Commissars of USSR at November 29, 1939', accessed on 11 April 2011 at [http://heninen.net/sopimus/molotov1939\\_e.htm](http://heninen.net/sopimus/molotov1939_e.htm). The full text of the speech was published in *Izvestiia*, 30 November 1939. For a complete transcript see, also, Balashov, *Prinimai Nas*, pp. 241-242.

eagerly grasping at Leningrad – was about to be dealt a blow by the butt of a Red Army rifle (See Fig.1 and Fig. 2 below).<sup>232</sup>



Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.

While the defence of the Soviet Union's peaceful intentions filled column inches in the aftermath of the incident, the NKVD was on hand to report to the centre their efforts to gauge worker's reactions to Molotov's speech. Here the regime was privy to just how ineffective its manipulation of the truth had been. Davies' treatment of public opinion under Stalin has considered evidence of this nature primarily from the position of Leningrad, where the majority of her research was concentrated. Recently released documents from the Moscow archives of the former-NKVD allow similar work to be done in relation to the capital. At the centre of her earlier thesis was the assertion that whatever questions exist over the objectivity of these sources,

<sup>232</sup> (Fig. 1.) *Pravda*, 30 November 1939, p. 5; (Fig. 2.) 'Graphic Witness: Visual Arts and Social Commentary – World War II Soviet Posters', accessed on 28 October 2014 at <http://www.graphicwitness.org/undone/rp01.jpg>.

given their particularly formulaic structure and the culture of misinformation endemic among Soviet society, they typically insisted that negative responses to policy were in the minority.<sup>233</sup> This is not borne out by a report compiled on the 30 November 1939. Among the commentary recorded by the NKVD, twelve positive, politically correct responses were over-shadowed by fifteen negative, ‘counter-revolutionary’ comments. These ranged in severity from defeatism, anticipating the threat Finland’s bombers posed to the Kremlin, to the appearance of a number of voices that either questioned the validity of the Soviet’s order of events or went so far as to place the blame for the incident squarely on the shoulders of its own forces.<sup>234</sup>

Our government needs these incidents. Is it not possible that our scouts gave a Finnish officer 1000 roubles and suggested a shot be fired on the USSR. Thus, the incident was created.<sup>235</sup>

Although surveillance reports of this type were principally reactive to changes in policy or public statements that had already been implemented, the regime could not fail to respond to such negative commentary. Indeed, there was a palpable sense in Leningrad that events were spiralling out of control. Their failure to provide an official and believable view of events on the Finnish border, motivated the Party apparatus to provide increasingly frequent summaries of the popular mood, marking not only the day but also the hour of their collection. With multiple copies distributed to the regional leadership, Zhdanov’s hastily scribbled markings testify to the fact these were being read – and reacted to – by the political centre.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Davies, *Popular Opinion*, pp. 9-19.

<sup>234</sup> *Zimniaia Voina: Issledovaniia, Dokumenti, Kommentarii*, pp. 207-210.

<sup>235</sup> *Zimniaia Voina: Issledovaniia, Dokumenti, Kommentarii*, p. 209.

<sup>236</sup> See Chapter 4: Life in Leningrad, pp. 178-180.

Molotov's rhetoric had already begun to waver over the strength of the Soviet Union's presentation of events. Away from public scrutiny, that same hesitancy had an impact on the narrative adopted by the Leningrad Military District on the eve of preparing its troops for war. This was less to do with an established orthodoxy emerging on how to treat the Finnish affair, and more a result of the Party ensuring it maintained tight control over how its general staff rallied the troops for the upcoming campaign. The task of supervising this was given to Zhdanov, the local political advisor to the Leningrad Military District under the command of Kirill Afanasievich Meretskov.<sup>237</sup> It was Zhdanov who made extensive corrections to Meretskov's final communiqué issued to the forces of the LMD on the eve of the invasion, setting the tone for the upcoming war.

The most noteworthy change was the wholesale removal of any reference to the numbers or rank of those casualties reported at Mainila. If the regime was showing concern about its ability to convince the general public about the validity of this story, then this was equally the case in relation to its own troops. To continue to perpetuate the myth of these losses would have left too many unanswered questions about just who had died at the hands of Finnish artillery. Rumours travel fast. Even through the upheavals of war, word could soon return from the front line via the military hospital bed.<sup>238</sup> The regime took the political education of its troops very seriously, extending the same surveillance endured by the civilian population to the Red Army.

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<sup>237</sup> Boterbloem, *Life and Times*, p. 202.

<sup>238</sup> Davies, *Popular Opinion*, p. 100. For corroborating evidence that this was a particular problem during the Finnish campaign, see comments recorded by the Harvard Project interviews. HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 15, Case 301, p. 51; Schedule A, Vol. 32, Case 398/(NY)1204, p. 33.

The original author of this communiqué – whether or not it was left initially to Meretskov is unclear from the draft in Zhdanov’s archive<sup>239</sup> – was confident of the ability of his troops to see through the lies perpetrated by the international press about the Soviet Union’s aims in Finland (also acknowledged and passionately refuted by Molotov in his radio address):

Every soldier of the Red Army understands the libellous, provocative nature of those statements against the national Finnish government that the USSR wants to sovietize and annex Finland.<sup>240</sup>

Zhdanov did not share this optimism and the section quoted above was removed. There was little sense in further advertising anti-Soviet sentiment when the regime was struggling to effectively formulate its own line. For now, its strongest suit seemed to be the role the Bolsheviks had played in first recognising the independence of Finland after centuries of Tsarist rule. This became the historical keynote of the Soviet position. If that freedom and independence was a gift of Soviet power then logic dictated it was up to them to defend it from the interference of bourgeois, imperialist influence.

After such a shaky start, the regime was quick to push its own interpretation of the history of Soviet-Finnish relations, drawing a straight line from the foreign intervention of the civil war era, to the imperialist sponsorship of the current bourgeois ‘oppressors’ of the Finnish people.

The aim of these vile anti-Soviet escapades stretches to the present day. Finland has become a nest of intrigue, subversion and military provocations against the Soviet Union.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Though this edited version is undated, its language matches the passage, cited by Van Dyke, from the final communiqué issued by Meretskov on 30 November 1939. See Van Dyke, *Soviet Invasion of Finland*, p. 27.

<sup>240</sup> RGASPI, f. 77, op. 4, d. 45, ll. 1-7.

While any explicit connection to Lenin's role in granting Finland independence risked tarnishing his legacy with the ignominious progress of current events, it remained an important dimension of the Soviet media campaign. However, references to the positive expression of Finnish state-hood were increasingly overshadowed by an equally backward-looking rhetoric that sought to paint the Finnish enemy as the eternal 'White Guard'.

This was a conscious attempt to resurrect the old terminology of the civil war period via the manipulation of official statements on the Finnish question. Zhdanov first toyed with the idea during his editing of the opening speech to the Leningrad Military District. Initially reluctant to rely on the label of 'White-Finnish forces' (*belofinskoye voyska*) he returned to the passage crossing out 'white' (*belo*) by hand.<sup>242</sup> In contrast, a later address to the troops – undated but among papers from December 1939 – demonstrates how that distinction would eventually be applied to differentiate between the 'Finnish people' (*narod*) and the 'white bandits' (*belobandity*) of the enemy forces: 'Rid the rightful land of the Finnish people of white bandits!'<sup>243</sup>

This was an artificial distinction, one that ignored the Finnish population's collective resistance the advance of Soviet forces would inspire. The construction of class difference and reliance on the blunt weapon of revolutionary rhetoric was a hastily prepared response to the sudden emergence of war. It depended on a long-standing and widely understood terminology that was couched in the history and ideology of the Party. Once it was re-established as the official vocabulary of the

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<sup>241</sup> RGASPI, f. 77, op. 4, d. 45, l. 5.

<sup>242</sup> RGASPI, f. 77, op. 4, d. 45, l. 6.

<sup>243</sup> RGASPI, f. 77, op. 4, d. 45, l. 82.

Party and press, it would quickly permeate through Soviet society and find eager adherents wary of the ambiguity surrounding the USSR's entry into conflict with its northern neighbour.<sup>244</sup>

### Crossing the Threshold

As the invasion began, in the early hours of 30 November 1939, the Kremlin even stumbled over the problem of how to publicly announce war. The following day, overshadowed by a front page dedicated to the memory of Sergei Kirov (on this the anniversary of his assassination in 1934), TASS reports of skirmishes along the border between the two sides strongly insinuated hostilities had been instigated by Finnish troops.<sup>245</sup> Without precedent for the absence of a Friday edition, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* simply failed to emerge from the printers on 1 December, opting to recycle much of *Pravda's* material the next day. It was a war started without declaration and, by the time hostilities were properly acknowledged, the press were already lauding the establishment of Kuusinen's 'Peoples Government of Finland'.<sup>246</sup>

Worse was to come when an apparent miscommunication among the Baltic fleet's force of long-range bombers resulted in the release of six hundred bombs on Helsinki. This incident had an immediate impact on foreign perceptions of the conflict in Finland, galvanising domestic support for the war effort, and elicited widespread condemnation of the Soviet Union among international audiences. Though Meretskov

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<sup>244</sup> For evidence that this terminology was used in correspondence between Stalin and his inner circle during the conflict, see the examples cited in S. Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (London, 2004), p. 292.

<sup>245</sup> *Pravda*, 1 December 1939.

<sup>246</sup> Tolstoy, *Stalin's Secret War*, p. 137.

would subsequently order any air operations in the Finnish theatre to avoid the bombing of population centres, Molotov and the foreign ministry had no strategy for dealing with the backlash and resorted to nothing more than barefaced lies.<sup>247</sup>

Mr. Roosevelt's suggestion that air bombardment of the population of Finland's towns should not be permitted, insofar as it is addressed to the Soviet Government, is caused by a misunderstanding. Soviet airplanes have bombed airdromes (*sic.*), but they have not bombed towns and do not intend doing so, because our Government values the interest of the Finnish population no less than any other Government does. Certainly one may fail to see this from America, which is over 8,000 kilometers away from Finland. Nevertheless, facts are facts. In view of this, Mr. Roosevelt's statement is, as can be seen, pointless.<sup>248</sup>

It is a credit to the strength of the Party's appeal among loyal communists abroad that the Communist Party of Great Britain would publicly propagate these 'facts', despite the leadership privately acknowledging that 'it may be true that some people have been killed and some buildings bombed'.<sup>249</sup>

This rapid turn of events thus had implications, not only for the Soviet press, but also among loyal cells of the Communist International. The CPGB's *Daily Worker* performed editorial somersaults to avoid alienating itself from Moscow's official line on events. Headlines were changed between morning and evening editions to avoid any insinuation of Soviet aggression or Moscow's engineering the sudden emergence of Otto Kuusinen's 'People's Government'.<sup>250</sup> Indeed, the problem of how to present the deterioration in Soviet-Finnish relations had already posed problems for the paper before the invasion. On 4 November 1939, the *Daily Worker's*

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<sup>247</sup> Van Dyke, *Soviet Invasion of Finland*, pp. 55-56, 96.

<sup>248</sup> 'Molotov's Denial of Civilian Bombings', accessed on 11 April 2011 at <http://www.histdoc.net/history/bombard1939.html>. See, also, Balashov, *Prinimai Nas*, p. 39.

<sup>249</sup> LHA, CP/IND/MONT/18/01.

<sup>250</sup> The bound copies of *Daily Worker* (London) held by the Marx Memorial Library contain multiple print runs for each day. The discrepancies between morning and evening editions are thus visible when consulted side by side. See, for example, *Daily Worker* (London), 1 November 1939; 4 November 1939; 28 November 1939; 29 November 1939; 4 December 1939.

front page led with the ominous headline, ‘Soviet Warning to Finland and Her Masters’. In subsequent prints that day, the editors offered a far less aggressive line, ‘Soviet Wants Treaty, Finland War, Says Pravda’, with a rewriting of its attached article.<sup>251</sup> There was to be no indication of the initiation of hostilities by Moscow. Blame was saved for the Finns and, eventually, the Finnish government alone, portrayed as an unrepresentative body opposed to the appeals of the Finnish people for peace. By November 29, the evening edition’s headline made this explicit – ‘Finnish People Ask For Pact’ – pointing to the hardship suffered by its workers as a result of their government’s misguided actions.<sup>252</sup>

The situation became almost farcical following the outbreak of hostilities on 30 November. Two days later, in a quick succession of leading stories, the paper leapt at the chance to celebrate ‘uprising’ in Finland and the foundation of the ‘People’s Government’, only to withdraw this view with the late edition. Having concluded that such a development needed a more popular spin, its place was taken by the declaration of a ‘call for popular government’ expressed by the Finnish communists.<sup>253</sup> With no Sunday edition, the paper’s writers returned on Monday 4 December with news of the weekend’s events and once more joyfully acknowledged the new ‘People’s Government’, ‘formed in Terojoki on *Friday* night’<sup>254</sup> [My emphasis].

Having failed to respond in a timely fashion to the shift in line that followed the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact – an error that had forced Harry Pollitt to

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<sup>251</sup> *Daily Worker* (London), 4 November 1939.

<sup>252</sup> *Daily Worker* (London), 29 November 1939.

<sup>253</sup> *Daily Worker* (London), 29 November 1939.

<sup>254</sup> *Daily Worker* (London), 4 December 1939.

step down as General Secretary – the CPGB were eager to prove their political credentials. Since the *Daily Worker* remained a valuable source of Soviet-friendly print harvested by TASS, Moscow would maintain pressure on its agents in London to provide a constant stream of material from the newspaper.<sup>255</sup> Unfortunately, with much of Europe mobilising for war, over the course of the next few months there emerged significant breakdowns, both in available channels of communication, and the alignment of the CPGB's political priorities with that of Moscow. Furthermore, the recourse to outdated and politically naive calls to an anticipated communist-friendly society in Finland would fail to generate the revolutionary upsurge hoped for by Stalin and his subordinates.<sup>256</sup>

For the time being, with the relatively simplistic formulation of civil war imagery projected onto Finnish state and society that had taken root in the official language of the Kremlin, blind recital of the new gospel suited the CPGB's committed Stalinist and politically unimaginative chief, Rajan Palme Dutt. Happy to ape the official line – drawing particular attention to 'White Finnish terror' perpetrated during the Finnish civil war – his orthodoxy was rewarded with the publication of one of the first clear statements on the war from the foreign press by *Komsomolskaya Pravda*.<sup>257</sup> This offered a signal that the new rhetoric was intended to spread beyond the limits of the Soviet Union and among the Communist International as a whole. Yet it was supported by little concrete direction from the centre. This was epitomised by the genuine challenges faced by the CPGB in its attempts to respond to the escalating

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<sup>255</sup> GARF, f. 4459, op. 11, d. 1166, l. 76.

<sup>256</sup> Rieber points to Zhdanov as a key advocate of the Terijoki government. See Rieber, *Zhdanov in Finland*, pp. 8-9. Funds for the People's Government were channelled through the Leningrad apparatus and Zhdanov continued to work closely with Kuusinen throughout the war. The pair would, however, fail miserably in their endeavours to foment revolution amongst the Finnish population or on their front lines.

<sup>257</sup> *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 4 December 1939. Originally printed in *Daily Worker* (London), 1 December 1939.

anti-Soviet opinion that undermined both its political aspirations during this period, and its relationship with the working classes it claimed to represent.<sup>258</sup>

Their counterparts in New York followed suit. Further from the action, the editors of the American *Daily Worker* persisted in a rather confused presentation of European events, both couched in anti-German sentiment and the explicit condemnation of the Finn's incitement of war with the Soviet Union. Sensationalist headlines were increasingly joined by a conscious mobilisation of civil war experience to resurrect the spectre of 'terror' in Finland. Mannerheim's prominence among the Finnish defence efforts played squarely into Soviet hands. He was the archetypal class enemy, a former Tsarist officer who had commanded White forces in Finland's efforts to secure its newfound independence in a bloody civil war that saw atrocities committed on both sides.<sup>259</sup> Interviews with Finnish émigrés in New York recalled these dark times and the 'butcher' Mannerheim, responsible for the death of 30,000 Finns 'slaughtered by the Whites'. It painted a picture of an oppressive, dictatorial regime in which murder was carried out 'by numbers'.<sup>260</sup>

Although, publicly, communist parties abroad were still actively orientating themselves to Moscow, behind the scenes the prominence of the Comintern had rapidly diminished since the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Dimitrov later revealed to Milovan Djilas the idea of dissolving the Comintern had first arisen following the Baltic states' annexation, though this was postponed to avoid giving the

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<sup>258</sup> M. L. G. Spencer, 'British Communism and its Reaction to the Soviet-Finnish Conflict of 1939-40' (University of Oxford, BA Thesis, 2008).

<sup>259</sup> For a short biography detailing the lives and careers of the two Finns with supporting roles in our narrative of the Soviet-Finnish War, see M. Rintala and J. H. Hodgson, 'Gustaf Mannerheim and Otto W. Kuusinen in Russia', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (July 1978), pp. 371-386.

<sup>260</sup> *Daily Worker* (New York), 2 December 1939, pp. 1-2.

impression it resulted from German pressure.<sup>261</sup> Stalin certainly no longer felt duty-bound to respond to the telephone calls of Dimitrov and took care to maintain a tight leash over the Executive Committee's insistence on publishing official statements on the war in Europe.<sup>262</sup> He was far more cautious of solidifying any line on the war after the about-turn required to reach a consensus with Hitler over the division of Eastern Europe. Further commentary was kept to a minimum. Dimitrov even ordered the retraction of public comments made by Mao Tse-tung in support of the recently ratified treaty with Nazi Germany, and the precedent it set for Soviet intervention in China. Mao learnt his lesson and would later keep any statement of support for the war with Finland to a secret directive.<sup>263</sup>

If the Comintern's star was in decline, then the Telegraph Agency's was almost certainly on the rise. The importance of TASS and the increasing profile of Yakov Semyonovich Khavinson, operating under Stalin's watchful gaze over foreign affairs, were solidified in the aftermath of the Red Army's advance into Finland.<sup>264</sup> On 1 December 1939, Khavinson was called to a five-minute audience with the General Secretary. The following day he returned to Stalin's office during the staged signing of a treaty on mutual assistance and friendship between the Soviet Union and the new established Finnish Democratic Republic.<sup>265</sup> Though not present in the

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<sup>261</sup> M. Djilas (trans: M. B. Petrovich), *Conversations with Stalin* (Harmondsworth, 1963), pp. 34-35.

<sup>262</sup> Banac, *Diary of Georgi Dimitrov*, pp. 119-121.

<sup>263</sup> J. Chang and J. Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (New York, N.Y., 2006), pp. 216-217.

<sup>264</sup> In spite of its recent sidelining, the Comintern would continue to demonstrate a 'servile deference to Stalin's foreign policy' throughout the Soviet-Finnish War. Through coded communication, its members were encouraged to express solidarity with the Finnish Democratic Republic and emphasise the liberating aims of the Red Army. Later directives would closely follow adjustments in Moscow's public presentation of the war, including the condemnation of international assistance to the 'White Finns' and the laudation of 'a new victory of the S.U. peace policy' at the conclusion of hostilities. According to Fridrikh Firsov, these tactics did nothing but further 'discredit the Comintern and Communist parties' in the eyes international audiences. See F. I. Firsov, H. Klehr and J. E. Haynes, *Secret Cables of the Comintern 1933-1943* (New Haven, Connecticut and London, 2014), pp. 174-177.

<sup>265</sup> Chernobaev, *Na Priyomye u Stalina*, p. 283. Although the editors of this edition point out the name entered in the register differs slightly between these two dates, from Stalin's notes to Khavinson it is

photograph that would adorn the front page of the following day's newspapers, his attendance, however briefly, at the epicentre of Stalin's unfolding propaganda campaign saw him ideally placed to anticipate the importance Stalin would now place on international perceptions of the war.

The backlash was almost immediate. Khavinson was now on hand to report directly to the General Secretary. In a hastily forwarded memo to Stalin and Molotov, an article by the Russian émigré communist – and staunch anti-Stalinist – Boris Souvarine provided a detailed portrait of Otto Kuusinen and his relations with the Kremlin. Published in Paris just two days after the signing of the mutual assistance treaty with Kuusinen's government, it shattered any hopes Stalin might have harboured for a positive reception to this thinly-veiled publicity stunt.<sup>266</sup> From this point on, the profile of Finland's new 'People's Government' rapidly diminished within the pages of the Soviet press. It certainly made no effort to share in the *Daily Workers'* attempts in New York to put on a brave face and disregard the supposed 'discovery' of Kuusinen's close ties to Moscow made by the international press:

What can be more natural than the fact that as the head of the first real people's government of Finland, a government which sets itself the task of liberating the Finnish people from a hand full of ill-starred rulers who have driven their country to war, stands the representative of a party [the Communist Party of Finland] which throughout its whole existence has defended the independence and liberty of its people?<sup>267</sup>

Instead, as quickly as Kuusinen appeared in the public eye, he swiftly returned to obscurity. His government's commendation of Stalin on the arrival of the General Secretary's sixtieth birthday celebrations, which would dominate the media at the end

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clear he was guilty of misspelling the latter's name on other occasions. See, for example, RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 207, l. 61.

<sup>266</sup> GARF, f. 4459, op. 38, d. 97, ll. 10-12.

<sup>267</sup> *Daily Worker* (New York), 4 December 1939, p. 1.

of the month, was lost in a sea of carefully managed dedications, biographical notes and congratulatory remarks. As the war progressed, periodic shows of support from workers and Soviet-friendly organisations abroad may have paid lip service to the Terijoki government, but these remained token references among the back page news clippings collected by TASS.

The general impression is of a regime averse to perpetuating negative press though ill equipped to find an alternative solution in this new and hostile environment. Rather than fabricate a positive spin, its default response was a media blackout. It mobilised the propaganda machinery according to past practices, though, so sudden was this shift, it proved ill-equipped to respond to the changes outside its control. As a consequence, it left many unanswered questions among the Soviet population regarding the fate of Kuusinen and his colleagues. Following the end of hostilities, the Leningrad district continued to monitor public remarks regarding the war and collated a summary of those issues left unresolved since the signing of peace was announced publicly: ‘What will be done now with the People’s Government of Finland?’ ‘Why is the agreement concluded without terminating the People’s Government?’ ‘Where is Kuusinen now?’ were among those highlighted by Zhdanov on receiving the report.<sup>268</sup>

Otto Kuusinen’s importance to Moscow did not diminish completely with his sudden drop in press attention. On 4 December 1939, Molotov authorised the payment of three million roubles to Kuusinen. His account shows a healthy bank-balance even at the close of fighting, though the Kremlin’s investment of money and manpower into this endeavour required some return.<sup>269</sup> He now joined in a collaborative

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<sup>268</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4040, ll. 125-128.

<sup>269</sup> RGASPI, f. 77, op. 4, d. 47, ll. 53, 60, 61.

partnership with Zhdanov that would work towards the ongoing production of propaganda material for the war effort. Funds continued to be channelled through the Leningrad apparatus.<sup>270</sup> Written correspondence between the two – limited though it was by the availability of telephone communication and intermittent meetings in Zhdanov’s Leningrad offices – reveals they endeavoured to produce material for audiences on both sides of the conflict.<sup>271</sup> Surviving examples of agitational material delivered to Finnish forces shows little divergence from the message presented to Soviet audiences at home and those loyal communists abroad.<sup>272</sup> This is hardly surprising. Kuusinen and the apparatus of the Communist Party of Finland (*Suomen kommunistinen puolue*; SKP) had lived and operated in Soviet exile since the defeat of the reds in Finland, following the newly independent nation’s bitter experience of civil war. Communist activity in the Finland was banned outright in 1930. Its remaining adherents, forced underground, continued to pursue a political agenda that relied as much on traditions of the Finnish labour movement as direct instruction from the Comintern and SKP.<sup>273</sup> The recent decimation of the SKP leadership at the hands of the Stalinist security apparatus meant just five native Finns were available to form the cabinet of the ‘People’s Government’. It was an impotent organisation, of an assumed temporary nature, which proved largely disconnected from the realities of Finnish life.<sup>274</sup> The claims of impoverishment amongst the local population, and the forced mobilisation of Finnish forces by the ‘bandits’ Mannerheim and Tanner, failed miserably to resonate with the local population. Similarly ineffective were efforts to switch their propaganda campaign to one stressing the Soviet Union’s intent to reunite

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<sup>270</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 143, ll. 2-3.

<sup>271</sup> RGASPI, f. 77, op. 4, d. 47, ll. 26, 35, 37-41.

<sup>272</sup> For a collection of these materials, see Bernev and Rupasov, *Zimniaia Voina 1939-1940 gg. v Dokumentakh NKVD*, pp. 281-291.

<sup>273</sup> T. Saarela, ‘Finnish Communism, Bolshevization and Stalinization’ in N. Laporte, K. Morgan, M. Worley (eds.), *Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern: Perspectives on Stalinization, 1917-53* (Basingstoke, 2008), pp. 118-205.

<sup>274</sup> Rentola, ‘The Finnish Communists’, pp. 599-600.

the Karelian people with the rest of Finland. Kuusinen proved unable to dissuade fears that the 'People's Government' would be of a 'soviet' type, as opposed to a commitment to the parliamentary principles professed as the official moniker of the Finnish Democratic Republic. This pledge to uphold democratic practices was hardly expressed in the actions of its activists on the ground, who sought to secure the acquiescence of any remaining residents within recently occupied territories.<sup>275</sup>

For Soviet audiences, Kuusinen showed the same attention to detail that Zhdanov undertook in the perpetuation of an artificial distinction between the Finnish people and the White Finnish enemy.<sup>276</sup> His mastery of both Russian and his native Finnish made him ideally suited as a translator. By the New Year, he wrote to Zhdanov requesting additional manpower to support the propaganda work in Soviet occupied Finland.<sup>277</sup> This is where the bulk of his energies would be spent for the duration of the fighting.<sup>278</sup>

Reaction to war across the Soviet Union – beyond the entirely positive response presented by the press – was decidedly mixed. The central and regional party apparatus, the NKVD and local militia, and the press and propaganda machinery were all on hand to measure the range of feedback from the Soviet population. It is hard though not to be drawn to the explicitly anti-Soviet sentiments the conflict incited:

The war has begun. It would be good to see the Finns take Leningrad and this discourage the Bolsheviks to fight. In Leningrad, it would produce great bitterness. Then the end of Soviet power is inevitable.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> See Van Dyke, *Soviet Invasion of Finland*, pp. 57-59.

<sup>276</sup> RGASPI, f. 77, op. 4, d. 47, ll. 27-31.

<sup>277</sup> RGASPI, f. 77, op. 4, d. 47, l. 36.

<sup>278</sup> Van Dyke, *Soviet Invasion of Finland*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>279</sup> *Zimniaia Voina: Issledovaniia, Dokumenti, Kommentarii*, pp. 251-252.

For the time being, the Kremlin was confident of its ability to keep such sentiments in check and, consequently, its war machine rolled on. However, from the very opening stages of the invasion, the Soviet leadership soon came to recognise the woeful performance of its forces. As the fighting dragged on beyond the optimistic projections of Voroshilov, the next challenge facing the regime was how to justify the continued presence of Red Army forces in Finland.

### Terminology of Terror

No matter what your ideology may be, once you believe that you are in the possession of some infallible truth, you become a combatant in a religious war. There is nothing to prevent you from robbing, burning and slaughtering in the name of your truth, for you are doing it with a perfectly clear conscience – indeed the truth in your possession makes it your duty to pursue it with an iron logic and unwavering will.<sup>280</sup>

Milovan Djilas, 'Christ and the Commissar'

The justification of the Red Army's advance into Finland had shaken, though not shattered, the resolve of the Party and its leaders. Their ability to defend the perpetuation of hostilities required further mental gymnastics on the part of loyal communists at home and abroad. There is no reason to overstate the difficulty with which many of the most committed adherents of Marxism-Leninism achieved this. In 1941, Milovan Djilas persisted in defending the Soviet invasion on the basis of the 'liberation' of the Finnish people: 'We accepted, without reservation, the explanations put forth by Soviet propaganda, not because we had to, but because we wanted to and

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<sup>280</sup> G. R. Urban (ed.), *Stalinism: Its Impact on Russia and the World* (London, 1982), p. 207.

because we genuinely believed in them'. Forty years later, still convinced of the strength of his convictions at the time, Djilas nevertheless acknowledged that seeds of doubt had been sown amongst some communists by reports of the Finnish people's disregard for socialism, and the Red Army's military record that, to put it mildly, 'wasn't spectacularly successful'.<sup>281</sup> A commitment to the self-evident truths of class warfare and the promise of socialist utopia were powerful allies in the defence of Soviet interests. As shown previously, it was a trait shared among a diverse group of adherents, from the young Eric Hobsbawm, to the outspoken Willie Gallacher, and proved strong enough to momentarily overcome even the trenchant rivalry between Stalin and Trotsky. Evidently, this was not a static world-view, but could undergo adjustment and realignment to the priorities of this turbulent period.

The reappearance of a *terminology of terror* provided a degree of continuity with the past and offered an important ideological (and emotionally resonant) thread familiar to communists from the preceding decades of Soviet power. The first hints of this strategy have been seen in the enthusiastic defiance of 'young Finnish workers' to the threat of 'terror' and 'repression' at the hands of their own government.<sup>282</sup> The self-conscious deployment of civil war labels was also central to Zhdanov's editing of public statements in the early stages of the fighting. This official script was routinely deployed among domestic and international audiences, through newspapers, radio and the public discourse of the Party. Although directed from above, it was also widely perpetuated from below.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> Urban, *Stalinism*, pp. 197-199.

<sup>282</sup> *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 24 November 1939, p. 4.

<sup>283</sup> Moving beyond the men who shaped, and responded to, the unfolding events in Finland, we now turn our attention to the language they knowingly applied and instinctively embraced to describe the conflict. Exploring the background of this essential component of the Bolshevik ideology will seek to challenge the way the literature currently deploys the same language of 'terror' to describe the assertion

## Terror by Mannerheim's Gangs

On 5 December 1939, both American and Soviet readers of the communist press could open the day's papers to reports from the Finnish front, credited to *Pravda* correspondent Nikolai Virta. An established novelist and playwright, Virta was already a prominent figure in Soviet literary circles. Awarded the Order of Lenin in 1939, he would continue to receive official recognition with the first of four Stalin Prizes in 1941.<sup>284</sup> A product and proponent of a system that insisted all artistic and cultural output be subservient to the political and ideological priorities of the state, his writing from Soviet-occupied territory embraced the prescribed rhetoric and official presentation of events. In these early days of the conflict that presentation was far from fixed, but offered the opportunity for the ambitious Virta to project conflicting views of Finnish experiences to international and domestic audiences.

For readers of the *Daily Worker* in the US, the demonising of Mannerheim's forces and their 'terrorizing' of the local population was at the centre of Virta's narrative. Widespread burning of homes by retreating Finnish officers, and the forced evacuation of their inhabitants had left towns and villages deserted. Red Army troops

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of Soviet control over its subjects. The persistent exploitation of this shorthand to describe the actions – and, by implication, motivation – of the Soviet state is flawed. While it is not my intention to diminish the enormity of the crimes for which the Soviet regime was responsible, in order to properly understand the manner in which the regime operated, and to judge the impact of its actions on society, I consider it necessary to adopt a more sober reflection of events from the perspective of the Party. A central, though often-overlooked point remains; the language and terminology of terror and repression, of mass arrests and the violent subjugation of peoples, of despotic governments and bloody executioners, was a vocabulary monopolised by the Party and employed *against* its opponents. Furthermore, its habitual use in the interwar period reveals that Stalin and his ruling circle approached challenges to their authority (both real and imagined) in much the same way, whether they were problems of a social, political or even international flavour. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a full exposition of the evolution of this strategy, incorporating a view of Soviet propaganda from the October Revolution through to our present concern with the Soviet-Finnish War, it is a topic that I have explored in depth during my doctoral research. I hope, therefore, to develop this parallel research into a standalone article in the near future.

<sup>284</sup> N. N. Skatov, *Russkaia Literatura XX Veka: Prozaiki, Poety, Dramaturgi: Biobibliograficheskii Slovar' v 3 tomakh, Tom. 1, A-Zh* (3 vols., Moscow, 2005), pp. 390-393.

faced the dangers of British mines and booby traps as they pursued the ‘Finnish White-Guard bandits’.<sup>285</sup> And yet, on the same day he wrote of the desolation and desertion of the rural and urban centres occupied by Soviet forces, in *Pravda*, the story was very different. Here life was slowly returning to normal. Terijoki, the capital of the newly established Finnish Democratic Republic was calm, with shops and the local post-office already reopening.<sup>286</sup> So blatant was his freedom with the truth that even Virta’s contemporaries amongst the cultural set couldn’t fail to spot the contradictions in his portrayal of Finnish society:

In the same issue of a newspaper there were reports that the Finns were driving out every last resident from the cities and villages and a brisk little article by Virta about a rally in Terijoki...He did not try to explain how a rally of residents could be held in a city from which the people are gone. This fact did not concern him.<sup>287</sup>

In publishing these lurid reports, imbued with a common language, the editors of foreign and domestic newspapers were not blindly following the lead of correspondents on the ground. As indicated above, these kinds of stories, which presented a strictly partisan view of the world, were the regular fare of the communist press. Any victimisation of its membership abroad, any unfair treatment of the labouring classes, any arrest or persecution of figures sympathetic to the cause was lambasted in the same choice rhetoric and with casual disregard for the facts. Thus, the *Daily Worker* in New York was no different from *Pravda* when it focused attention on: ‘Protests in Caroline Answer KKK Terror’; ‘French Communists Stand Firm Under Daladier’s Regime of Terror’; ‘People’s World Reporter Tells of Terror in Madera Cotton Strike’.<sup>288</sup> These examples are also demonstrative of the strategy

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<sup>285</sup> *Daily Worker* (New York), 5 December 1939, pp. 1, 4.

<sup>286</sup> *Pravda*, 5 December 1939, p. 2.

<sup>287</sup> E. Shvarts, *Pozvonki Minuvshikh Dnei* (Moscow, 2008), p. 254.

<sup>288</sup> *Daily Worker* (New York), 5 October 1939, p. 5; 31 October 1939, pp. 1-2; 8 November 1939, p. 5.

among the international communist press of circulating and recycling news amongst its many affiliated organs. This was particularly important for domestic Soviet newspapers, where the gathering of foreign, Moscow-friendly print contributed enormously to their regular content. Almost without exception, any reports taken from sources abroad would be published without explicit reference to their official affiliation with the local communist party apparatus. The illusion of truth and objectivity were powerful allies in Soviet journalistic practice.

Although the Kremlin remained invested in the portrayal of its peace-loving intentions abroad, the vicious and bloody portrayal of its enemies took an increasingly central place in Soviet newspapers. On 3 December 1939, a gaunt and bestial Mannerheim was depicted in *Pravda*, rounding up the hapless Finnish population by force. His smoking gun alluded to the threat of reprisals facing those who refused Helsinki's order to evacuate in the face of the Red Army advance (see Fig. 3.).<sup>289</sup> The following day this threat was placed in even starker terms. Mannerheim, now reduced to a walking set of gallows, was presented to readers as the 'executioner of the Finnish people' (see Fig. 4.).<sup>290</sup> The accompanying article sought to establish once again the historical precedent with which the regime blasted the Helsinki government as a band of White Guards, historically indebted to 'international imperialists'.<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> (Fig. 3) *Pravda*, 3 December 1939, p. 5.

<sup>290</sup> (Fig. 4) *Pravda*, 4 December 1939, p. 4.

<sup>291</sup> *Pravda*, 4 December 1939, p. 4.



Рисунок художника Кукрыницы.

Fig. 3.



Рисунок художников Дани и Долгорукова.

Fig. 4.

If editors were somewhat blasé about the inconsistencies in the depiction of Finnish experiences, they were as keenly aware as the political centre of rival versions of events appearing abroad. To merely denounce the enemy was not deemed enough in the face of widespread international criticism levelled against Soviet intervention in Finland. Moscow's position was not aided by the perpetuation of a state of 'phony war' on the continent. As a result, over three hundred foreign correspondents were operating in the country, producing a huge amount of newsprint in support of the Finnish defence effort. The effects were felt keenly by Soviet representatives abroad. Maisky, in London, wrote of 'a freezing void' surrounding the Soviet Embassy.<sup>292</sup>

<sup>292</sup> Cited in Vehviläinen, *Finland in the Second World War*, p. 55.

The communist press was unrepentant in the face of this criticism. Unable or unwilling to acknowledge their own media's widespread exploitation of similar tactics, graphic artists on the Party's payroll were mobilised to satirise the international press' recycling of anti-Soviet propaganda.<sup>293</sup> On the same day Mannerheim 'the executioner' appeared in *Pravda*, the real 'source' of anti-Soviet information was revealed (see Fig. 5.).<sup>294</sup> The *Daily Worker* in London and New York also spent a significant amount of time counteracting the fabrications of western commentators. Jumping on discrepancies in their narrative – be it the confused movement of troops on the front line or the unverified reports of Soviet losses – these 'type-writer generals' were portrayed as waging a bogus campaign on behalf of Finland.<sup>295</sup> The defence of Soviet intentions in the country continued, while any claims of civilian casualties resulting from Red Army activity were still vehemently denied.<sup>296</sup> However, the increasing decline of contemporary reports of atrocities by Finnish forces from the front page suggests a growing uncertainty among foreign communists of the validity or value of these reports for the Soviet cause. The efforts of the international communist press were increasingly transferred to the nit-picking of western media's coverage of the war.

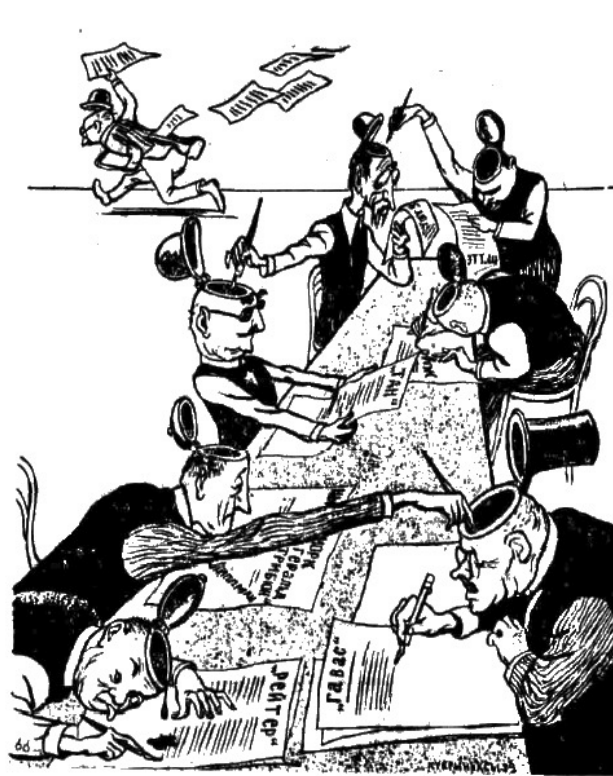
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<sup>293</sup> So closely controlled was the circulation of foreign news collected by TASS that the extent of its recycling of communist produced print may have remained concealed from those responsible for its redeployment in the Soviet media.

<sup>294</sup> (Fig. 5.) *Pravda*, 4 December 1939, p. 5.

<sup>295</sup> See, for example, *Daily Worker* (New York), 22 January 1939, p. 1; 29 January 1939, p. 1.

<sup>296</sup> *Daily Worker* (New York), 12 January 1939, p. 2. 'U.S. Press Spreads British – Faked Pictures of "Bombing of Helsinki"'. Originally reported by their counterparts in London, this exposé showed two superimposed images used by a British tabloid, *Daily Mirror*, to create a fabricated image of Soviet bombers flying over the Finnish capital.



Источники антисоветской информации.

Рисунок художника Кукрыничева.

Fig. 5.

In contrast, the explicit reference to ‘terror’ in Finland only took root in *Pravda* after the failed campaign of Kuusinen’s ‘People’s Government’ and the international outcry that manifested in the expulsion of the Soviet Union from the League of Nations. On 16 December 1939, a signal of the shift was introduced via the back pages of central and regional newspapers under the heading: ‘Orgy of white terror in Mannerheim’s Finland’. After TASS’s mobilisation during the Moscow Show Trials, the Telegraph Agency remained well equipped for facilitating this kind of publicity campaign.<sup>297</sup> Scouring the foreign press for pro-Soviet reports – or at the very least, treatments that could be heavily edited and quoted out of context if necessary – TASS continued collating and re-circulating news from communist newspapers. It formed a self-perpetuating narrative of ‘terror’ by Mannerheim’s

<sup>297</sup> See above, p. 31 (note 64).

‘White Finnish’ forces and vehement popular protest against aid to the Helsinki “government” (*sic.*) operating under the influence of imperialist powers.

The impetus for this move was not solely dependent on direct intervention by the political centre. Although an essential degree of continuity was aimed for across the central and regional Party press by the Kremlin, studying the deployment of TASS bulletins in *Pravda* and *Leningradskaya Pravda* reiterates the complementary role played by the copy-desk in this process. Editors could indulge in a certain embellishment of report headings that accompanied what were, at times, rather bland, a-political snippets of information. For example, the following January, *Pravda*’s publication of a report sourced from Stockholm was presented under the title, ‘Terror in White-Finland’. For readers of *Leningradskaya Pravda*, the same source merited cries of ‘Bloody Terror’.<sup>298</sup> Later that month, *Pravda*’s claims of ‘Mass Arrests and Shootings in White Finland’, was escalated to include reference to the ‘Peaceful Inhabitants’ as the targets of these atrocities.<sup>299</sup> They were not being given a free hand; when, where and in what format these bulletins were to be published was, generally, heavily prescribed by TASS.<sup>300</sup> In instances where *Leningradskaya Pravda* failed to follow these instructions closely, its editors could face a stern reprimand from the regional offices of the Telegraph Agency.<sup>301</sup> These may seem like small, inconsequential elements of a much broader publicity campaign, but they do show an active engagement at all levels of the propaganda machinery with the exploitation and perpetuation of this terminology of terror. TASS played a key role in this process and its gathering of viable reports extended beyond even the printed word. Radio reports

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<sup>298</sup> *Pravda*, 12 January 1940, p. 5. *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 12 January 1940, p. 4.

<sup>299</sup> *Pravda*, 30 January 1940, p. 5. *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 20 January 1940, p. 4.

<sup>300</sup> HPSSS, Schedule B, Vol. 6, Case 359, p. 4. See, also, Spencer, ‘Signals from Stalin’, p. 50.

<sup>301</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4385, l. 17.

circulated to domestic and international audiences also routinely quoted the day's bulletins from the Telegraph Agency.<sup>302</sup> Evidence from Leningrad makes it clear that stories of 'Terror in Finland' and 'White-Finns Killing Peaceful Inhabitants' were not limited to the back pages of newspapers but rang out over the airwaves.<sup>303</sup>

### Conclusion

Events in Finland took centre stage less than eighteen months after an apparent reining-in of the highpoint of Soviet repressions. The question could be asked, therefore, of how the native population understood and responded to these caricatures of a violent and repressive government and class-divided society? Could the regime be so confident in adopting this language because the terminology of terror was always explicitly allied with the activities of enemies, both real and imagined, at home and abroad?

A further possibility is that, due to the threat of repression remaining such a persistent part of life under Soviet rule, there was less reason to distinguish a highpoint of activity. True, in literature and memoir accounts, an awareness of the extreme levels reached in 1937 is visible - as public show trials and operational orders coincided – though the victim count continued to rise from one decade to the next. The lingering memory of '1937' also plays heavily on the minds of two key characters in Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate*. Both the former commissar, Krymov,

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<sup>302</sup> P. Kingston, 'Broadcasts in French from Moscow, February 1940- August 1941: An Evaluation of the Reorientation of Radio Propaganda', *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, Vol. 25, No. 2-3 (1984), pp. 201-218.

<sup>303</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4598, ll. 17-19.

now languishing in Lubyanka Prison, and the increasingly disillusioned physicist, Victor Shtrum, recall the year. References to the year throughout the book are shorthand for its impact on the world and people these characters knew, as the repressions struck Party and public alike.<sup>304</sup> Away from fictional retellings, the case of one Red Army soldier offers an extreme but poignant example of harsh realities of the state's coercive control. Nevertheless, the impact earlier repressions had on his family are framed in language that references neither a sense of 'terror', nor a particular chronological focus: 'I will not shoot at the Finns, because the Soviet powers repressed my relative'.<sup>305</sup>

Indeed, subsequent years did not see an end to the 'terror or its effects'.<sup>306</sup> The machinery of state control persisted. The NKVD was purged of Yezhov's patronage group and close associates but it did not lose its ability to maintain close watch over the Soviet population under his successor, Lavrenty Beria. The Gulag system survived and camp numbers increased – notwithstanding periodic fluctuation – through to the death of Stalin.<sup>307</sup> Even as war raged on in Finland, the execution of thousands of Polish prisoners of war in March 1940 necessitated a reestablishment of a special troika and the apparent pursuit of death by quotas once more.<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> V. Grossman (trans: Robert Chandler), *Life and Fate* (London, 2006), pp. 510-512, 807. For a close study of Bulgakov's *Master and Margherita*, as a further literary response to the 'mysterious nature of the year 1937', see K. Schlögel, *Moscow, 1937* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 10-32.

<sup>305</sup> NKVD Surveillance Report, 5 January 1940. RGASPI, f. 77, op. 4, d. 46, ll. 12-24. Though this appears to be an extreme position to take with little regard for one's self-preservation, a similar expression of pacifism is recalled by one of the Harvard Project interviewees: 'My son used to tell me in the Soviet-Finnish War literally: "Mother, I won't fire a single bullet against the enemy."' HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 8, Case 107, p. 22.

<sup>306</sup> Getty and Naumov, *Road to Terror: Abridged*, p. 215.

<sup>307</sup> Getty and Naumov, *Road to Terror: Abridged*, p. 216.

<sup>308</sup> T. Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (London, 2011), pp. 135-141.

In the aftermath of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the division of central and eastern Europe between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union provided ample opportunity for the NKVD to flex its muscles. The machinery of state surveillance and repression extended its operations to the newly occupied territories. The systematic unveiling and neutralisation of potential enemies of the Soviet regime were achieved via the penetration of society by the state security services and their growing body of agents and informants in the region.<sup>309</sup> When the numbers involved are considered for the ‘post-Terror’ years of 1939-40, it seems ridiculous to consider this as a period in which mass repressions can realistically be considered as any less significant.<sup>310</sup>

Continuity in the recourse to repression of the population was a fundamental component of the Soviet state. Many of its methods – and of course its language – remained the same in the 1920s, 30s and even outside its borders during the post-war reordering of the Soviet bloc by national communist parties loyal to Moscow.<sup>311</sup> So, too, was the Soviet media’s exploitation and portrayal of ‘terror’ to describe those opposition elements, made scapegoats by the state. This was possible thanks to the Kremlin’s commitment to absolute secrecy when carrying out its own coercive activity, and a willingness to censor all conflicting voices, be they in print or in person.

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<sup>309</sup> See Weiner and Rahi-Tamm, ‘Getting to Know You’, pp. 5-45.

<sup>310</sup> For example, during campaigns of ethnic cleansing around the border regions, figures of nearly 300,000 deportees between 1935-1937 pales in comparison to over 700,000 victims in 1939-41 as Soviet forces moved to occupy territory in Central and Eastern Europe. See C. A. Frierson and S. S. Vilensky, *Children of the Gulag* (New Haven, Connecticut and London, 2010), p. 236 (Table 6).

<sup>311</sup> See, for example, McDermott and Stibbe, *Stalinist Terror in Eastern Europe*. When in 1952 the deputy prime minister and secretary general of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party, Rudolf Slansky, was accused, alongside thirteen co-defendants, of being ‘Trotskyist-zionist-titoist-bourgeois-nationalist traitors, spies and saboteurs, enemies of the Czechoslovakian nation, of its people’s democratic order, and of socialism’, the only feature of this label particularly unique to the period was the tacking on of ‘titoism’ to pre-existing Soviet rhetoric of the Moscow Show Trials. Cited in R. J. Crampton, *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century - and After* (London and New York, N.Y., 1997), p. 262.

Among those silenced voices, one Konstantin Andreevich Rotman, a party member whose file of ‘compromising materials’ crossed the desk of the Leningrad NKVD in the summer of 1940, had reportedly lamented the ‘wrong course’ taken by the Bolsheviks after the death of Lenin. In the destruction of the old cadres that followed, during the waves of arrests and repressions, he saw through the smoke-screen of the official line: ‘In reality, there are no enemies of the people, and the Party’s policy – this Machiavellian policy, is characterised by its hypocrisy and cunning.’<sup>312</sup>

Where this Machiavellian approach proved inadequate, in contrast to past practice, was in the Finn’s stiff and unified resistance to Soviet influence and military advance. Time and again, efforts by the propaganda machinery to reply to the realities of war would be in vain. Their default strategy for selling the conflict to domestic and international audiences was woefully inadequate.<sup>313</sup> The Soviet animal was facing competition in a new, hostile and rapidly changing environment – one in which it would have to adapt equally quickly to survive.

In the absence of alternatives, the Party initially exploited the well-established terminology of terror in its treatment of events. It went hand-in-hand with the deployment of the moral force of self-justification and attempts to clearly delineate between the righteous and the abhorrent aims of the enemy. That this enemy – despite its tangible and unswerving unity – was increasingly turned into a faceless myth, offers another revealing example of the limits of the leadership’s ability to manage the rapid turn of events. In the face of public scepticism at home and abroad, a certain

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<sup>312</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4300, ll. 388-392.

<sup>313</sup> Spencer, ‘Signals from Stalin’, pp. 61-62.

degree of pragmatism was essential for the Party to evade that 'evil reputation' that could destabilise the relative acquiescence of the people and, ultimately, risk losing them the state.

### Chapter 3

#### Signals from Stalin

The principle of the State without freedom did, in fact, require exactly this: that Stalin should take every decision himself, without exception. This, however, was physically impossible, and so questions of secondary importance were decided by Stalin's trusted agents. And they always decided them in the same way – in the spirit of Stalin.<sup>314</sup>

Vasily Grossman, *Everything Flows*

The demonising of the Finnish defence forces serving under Mannerheim is a significant and neglected dimension of the propaganda war waged by the Soviet Union on both the domestic and international stage. It suggests a regime that was supremely confident in its capacity to manage popular perceptions of its own coercive activity, aided by a rigidly controlled, rigorously applied and widely accepted language and terminology. This approach relied on an ability to keep audiences, at home and abroad, ignorant of the realities of combat (and treatment of non-combatants) across the Finnish border. However, as the fighting dragged on and Red Army casualties mounted, it would become abundantly clear that this level of control was unrealistic. Conflicting stories travelled from the front line via both official and unofficial channels and the proliferation of rumours and hearsay was an ever-present test for the regime. The Soviet people had not been cowed into submission by their experiences of the previous two decades but remained engaged with the world of their direct experience and willing to challenge the official narrative.

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<sup>314</sup> Grossman, *Everything Flows*, p. 209.

Still, it would be wrong to characterise the Soviet portrayal of the war as entirely fictitious. As the fighting progressed, a more significant characterisation of the war's role in the media was its conspicuous absence. Nonetheless, the Kremlin did at least initially continue to react to events on the ground and amongst the international community. This required the deployment of another facet of its broader propaganda campaign that was similarly dependent on drawing a line of continuity with established custom and its ideologically driven world-view.

This thesis has already outlined instances where the Party attempted a more direct reaction to external events. This chapter will now seek to offer an explanation for why the war gradually faded from the pages of the Soviet press. It will continue to take account of both global and domestic activities and the intersections between them. At the centre of our narrative will be the sudden and pervasive change experienced by the agents of TASS and the increasing role they played in the Kremlin's attempts to propagate a Soviet-friendly view of events. This required the Telegraph Agency to react to both the explicit orders and the more tacit signals emblematic of Stalin's wider ability to dictate the shape of policy outside his inner circle of subordinates. Conversely, an important sense of continuity will persist in the contributory role played by the Soviet media's commitment to 'business as usual' where much of its content was concerned. Even a crisis on the scale of the war in Finland was not enough to derail many tried and tested tropes of the propaganda machinery.

Understanding the part played by these elements of incomplete adaptation and established practice on the part of the propaganda machinery requires careful

appreciation of the speed of unfolding events. Any reaction to developments in a timely fashion with a uniform and consistent line represented an insurmountable challenge for the regime in the short term. The longer the war progressed, the more detached the pre-existing form and function of the Soviet system appeared from the needs of present day circumstances. The propaganda machinery was able to evolve in the face of these shortcomings only after the war's conclusion.

The day-to-day operations of the Soviet forces have already been well covered by Van Dyke's study of the war.<sup>315</sup> Acknowledgement of the general downward trajectory of their performance against the Finns for much of the conflict will suffice for this study. Of more interest to this thesis are the limited means at the Kremlin's disposal for distracting public attention away from a campaign that was increasingly in danger of becoming an outright military disaster at the hands of a tiny Finnish force of largely conscripted, civilian reservists.<sup>316</sup>

What Moscow's story needed was an antagonist that could justify the expenditure of men and machines that were increasing every day. The skirmishing tactics of the Finnish defence forces, difficult terrain and particularly harsh climate, offered no opportunity for pitched battles where the sheer weight of numbers enjoyed by the Red Army could be wielded effectively. The operational reports issued by the Leningrad Military District gradually took up less and less front-page space while offering little to the public in terms of decisive military manoeuvres. Instead, the recourse to reports from the front that simply stated 'nothing occurred of any

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<sup>315</sup> Van Dyke, *Soviet Invasion of Finland*, pp. 35-187.

<sup>316</sup> Tolstoy, *Stalin's Secret War*, p. 141.

significance' (*ne proizoshlo nichego sushchestvennogo*) became ever more frequent.<sup>317</sup>

It was not enough that the Soviet Union was facing off against the forces of one tiny nation, however aggressive their intentions and outrageous the 'provocation' that had triggered hostilities. The core of the argument for seeking to resolve the Finnish question in the first place had been the threat of 'third power' influence over its territory. Though the danger of German aggression had been quickly brushed to one side with the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Moscow continued to justify its involvement in the Finnish conflict in terms of the proxy war being fought by imperialist forces bent on the socialist state's destruction.

Two significant developments are worth acknowledging in this respect – the testing of Berlin's patience over Moscow's's insinuations of German support for the Finnish War effort, and the Soviet Union's expulsion from the international security agency, the League of Nations. Study of both episodes reveals the assumptions and outlook of Stalin as he surveyed the European theatre of war and, once again, reinforces the significance of his role in foreign affairs. The first episode resulted from Stalin's personal intervention in the press' presentation of developments in the Finnish war effort and would continue to form a key thread of his own private self-justification for the conflict. The second, though outside the hands of the General Secretary, was nevertheless embraced by Stalin and speaks of his particular scorn for the League of Nations.

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<sup>317</sup> See, for example, *Pravda*, 28, 31 December 1939. London and New York's *Daily Worker* would faithfully adopt this line when reporting events at the front from their Moscow sources.

On 8 December 1939, a press report, detailing German and Italian arms supplies to Finland, reached TASS from their offices in Stockholm. Forwarded directly to Stalin, his manipulation of the original text is marked by its simplicity:

[Original] ‘German and Italian arms deliveries to Finland’ (*Germaniskiye i ital’yanskiye postavki oruzhiya dlya Finlyandii*)

[Edited] ‘Germany and Italy supplying arms to Finland?’ (*Germaniya i Italiya postavlyayut oruzhiye dlya Finlyandii?*)<sup>318</sup>

Rather than make an explicit statement linking the Axis powers to Finland, a subtle question mark hangs over the rumours of trade relations supporting the Finnish defence forces. Its purpose was to strengthen the vision of Finland as a mere puppet for the anti-Soviet aspirations of European nations, without making explicit accusations that could alienate Moscow from Berlin and Rome.

The article appeared in *Pravda* two days later, published alongside an ambiguous reference to the British government’s failure to confirm reports from Stockholm that Finland had placed an order for one hundred airplanes.<sup>319</sup>

Unfortunately for Stalin, the Germans took immediate offence and Hitler’s foreign minister Ribbentrop issued a prompt rebuff to any insinuations the piece made:

I asked the Russian Ambassador to see me today at 5 p.m. At the beginning of our conversation, I indicated to Herr Shkvartsev the inappropriateness of the report given out by the TASS agency yesterday, dealing with alleged armament supplies by Germany to Finland. I stressed the fact that this report had been denied yesterday by German sources. All the more did I regret that this report, apparently launched from English sources via Sweden and only designed to create discord between Germany and the Soviet Union, has been taken up in so striking a fashion by the official Russian agency...I should be grateful if the Russian Government

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<sup>318</sup> RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 207, l. 84.

<sup>319</sup> *Pravda*, 10 December 1939, p. 5. Stalin’s formulation of the bulletin’s title was clearly intended for circulation across the wider domestic press network. See, for example, *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 10 December 1939, p. 4.

would cause the TASS agency, before releasing such reports in the future, first to get in touch either with the German Embassy in Moscow or with Berlin, in order that such unpleasant incidents might be avoided.<sup>320</sup>

An abrupt retraction the following day guardedly conceded to Germany's riposte. Credited to the German news agency *Transocean*, 'reliable sources' now reported Germany had stopped 'the direct or indirect supply of military materials to Finland'.<sup>321</sup> Moscow was facing the prospect of its growing isolation in global politics. This was obviously not the first time it had experienced such a state of affairs in its chequered history of foreign relations, and with the Kremlin's primary interest in avoiding being drawn into another world war, it did not run counter to such an aim.

The need to respond to widespread condemnation from the international community had pushed Molotov to unashamed dismissal of the truth in the face of evidence where the bombing of Helsinki was concerned. In terms of the civilian population at home, it was the Party's word against everyone else's. Foreign displays of protest were not an immediate concern if the Kremlin alone determined which voices from outside of the Soviet Union reached domestic audiences. This, however, is an oversimplified analysis. The regime's monitoring of public opinion makes it clear that the official line from Moscow did not hold a monopoly over the population's understanding of events. Thus, the propaganda machinery was forced to periodically respond to the threat of 'misinformation' and 'smear campaigns' on the part of foreign press and politicians. The Soviet press' output followed much the same

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<sup>320</sup> 'Memorandum by the Reich Foreign Minister, 11 December 1939', accessed on 12 April 2011 at <http://www.histdoc.net/history/NaSo1939-12-11.html>.

<sup>321</sup> *Pravda*, 11 December 1939, p. 5; *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 11 December 1939, p. 4. Casual readers of these back page bulletins could be forgiven for overlooking the retraction. Both newspapers published the rather terse message with a vague title that gave away little of the report's content: 'Message of the German Agency Transocean' (*Soobshcheniye germanskogo agentstvo Transokean*).

pattern as those already witnessed amongst the international communist press and their battle against an army of ‘type-writer generals’ marshalled by western media.<sup>322</sup>

The following repudiation by the headquarters of the Leningrad Military District, published in *Pravda* on 14 January 1940, exemplifies this approach and reiterates the limited information the regime was willing to divulge on front line operations:

During the second three weeks’ period of military operations in Finland there has been no significant changes on the front...the foreign press, especially the French, first of all the French agency Havas, had during this set-up a large operation and steam up slanderous fabrications against the Soviet troops. This staff has no time to refute every day, every slanderous allegation by the representatives of foreign agencies. But the staff believes that it wouldn't be useless from time to time to take stock of the smear campaign of these gentlemen, and reveal their true faces...We are aware that foreign agencies are charged with their owners to engage in propaganda against the Soviet troops. They also lead this ‘propaganda’, piling up a heap of lies, to justify their existence. But what to think about propaganda that is not based on facts but on deception? Is it to systematically deceive the public opinion by this ‘propaganda’ defending ‘civilization’? We did not anticipate that the representatives of the foreign press could sink so low.<sup>323</sup>

In response, the Party sought to engineer a more Soviet-friendly sector of foreign opinion via selective publication of communist press material from abroad. These insights into international affairs, for example, underlined civil protest at the intervention of foreign powers in Finland and, on a daily basis, quietly ignored the vast majority of anti-Soviet sentiment reported by the world’s media. With increasing frequency the back pages of the central and regional press circulated TASS bulletins

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<sup>322</sup> See, for example, *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 8 December 1939, p. 1. Three front-page refutations responding to foreign reports of Soviet losses appear from the headquarters of the Leningrad Military District.

<sup>323</sup> ‘Repudiation by the Headquarters of the Leningrad Military District, 14 January 1940’, accessed on 12 April 2011 at <http://www.histdoc.net/history/NKID1940-01-14.html>. Published in *Pravda*, 14 January 1940.

detailing the growing protest 'movement' building amongst the international community against support for 'White Finland' and the 'Mannerheim band'.<sup>324</sup>

Together these bulletins fostered a palpable sense that people around the world were united in their condemnation of the war. This was undoubtedly true in some respects, but that international condemnation, according to the Soviet version of events, was never directed at Moscow. The Kremlin was aided in this regard by the uncharacteristically decisive step taken by the League of Nations within weeks of the Red Army's invasion.

The importance the regime placed on shaping the war as a conflict involving widespread foreign intervention, makes the Soviet press' decision to publicly announce the USSR's expulsion from the League of Nations seem like less of a misnomer. Though this second key development was out of the Kremlin's control, it allowed Stalin to continue to construct an image of the conflict with Finland, whose tendrils extended far beyond the borders of the two nations. In doing so he strove to re-ignite the sense of global conspiracy driven by the imperialist aspirations of Britain and France, and deflect criticism from Germany regarding Moscow's earlier willingness to stir the pot over Berlin's rumoured trade links with Helsinki.

That the League of Nations took the bold step of expelling the Soviet Union may have actually surprised Moscow. The advance of the Red Army across half of Poland had failed to generate any real response, and the Kremlin's establishment of a military presence in the Baltic was engineered after a dubious diplomatic exercise in

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<sup>324</sup> See, for example, a series of TASS bulletins in *Pravda* and *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 17-30 January 1940. On 22 January 1940, the *Daily Worker* in New York led with a front-page story focusing on American protests 'against war loans to Mannerheim'. The more general anti-war feeling in the country could be easily skewed to give the sense of anti-Finnish sentiment.

strong-arming the respective governments of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania into submission. Therefore, there was still prevarication on the Soviet media's part when it came to announcing the news. In the resolution of the League of Nations, the international body had reached a firm decision on 14 December 1939, condemning the actions of the Soviet government in Finland. The following day *Pravda* only referenced the fact that a meeting on whether to expel the USSR had taken place, without publishing its final verdict.<sup>325</sup> This was carefully buried at the bottom of an article titled, 'The League of Nations is in the service of Anglo-French Military Bloc', in which accusations were made against the two nations perceived to be leading the campaign against the Soviet Union.

Whatever debate existed in the interim, the League of Nations' decision finally made the headlines on the 16 December, both Voroshilov and Molotov having remained with Stalin till 5am that morning.<sup>326</sup> Of the TASS authorised pronouncement, distributed the same day, Volkogonov credits Stalin with having the final word, his voice ringing clearly through the text: 'In the opinion of Soviet circles this absurd decision by the League of Nations provokes an ironic smile and will scandalize only its pathetic authors.'<sup>327</sup> It is unlikely Stalin expressed any genuine concern over any long-term implications of the expulsion. It served his aims in terms of the general presentation of the war, and the League had been proven an impotent force in global diplomacy when it failed to halt Hitler's expansionist aims and the outbreak of war in Europe.

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<sup>325</sup> *Pravda*, 15 December 1939, p. 5.

<sup>326</sup> Chernobaev, *Na Priyomye u Stalina*, p. 285.

<sup>327</sup> Volkogonov, *Stalin*, p. 364.

*Komsomolskaya Pravda* caricatured the exploits of England and France and their assumed influence over the League with its usual brand of comic imagery. The League's delegates, seated so as to form the keys of a human typewriter, were depicted being eagerly pressed by two figures representing the allied powers and their 'fabrication' of the resolution on Finland.<sup>328</sup> In the final weeks of the war, Stalin's own self-confidence and caustic sense of humour would shine through in the private marginalia of a memo notifying TASS of a further petition to the League by Finland. No longer interested in giving such news print space, he merely scrawled 'Ha-ha' alongside the text and returned to his work.<sup>329</sup>

Any kind of public response to developments on the international stage, as in the case of the USSR's expulsion from the League of Nations, was still the exception and not the rule where the exploits of the Soviet military in Finland were concerned. Stalin's personal intervention in the media's portrayal of the war was not an effective way to manage coverage of its day-to-day progress. His primary focus was on improving results at the front, as the Kremlin increasingly bypassed its own general staff and directed the strategic concerns of the war from the capital.<sup>330</sup> Voroshilov would later paint a picture of the mechanics at the centre once hostilities were at a close: 'The Headquarters, or more accurately its active member Comrade Stalin, virtually conducted all operations and all the organizational work of the front.' His

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<sup>328</sup> *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 16 December 1939, p. 4.

<sup>329</sup> RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 207, l. 93.

<sup>330</sup> On 9 December 1939, a reshuffle of the military command was ordered in an effort to 'strengthen the leadership of land and naval forces'. Stalin immediately took on a more prominent role in the signing of orders in his capacity as member of the military council. Volkogonov Papers, Reel 1, Box 1, Folder 5, Documents 17-18.

report drifts toward pure sycophancy in its latter stages, crediting Stalin, above all, with ‘victory’.<sup>331</sup>

Without overstating the point, it is fair to conclude that Stalin’s privileged role in decision-making was at least a contributing factor to the media’s inability to provide a regular, detailed window on the events in Finland. With his direct intervention in both the floundering front line operations and their patchy portrayal in the press, all involved were now operating under the shadow of the General Secretary. The ‘dictator’s curse’ was a natural manifestation of the centralised control the *Vozhd*’ aspired to – and his subordinates willingly defaulted to – in the context of a crisis that undermined the established norms of the regime.

After their sudden appearance in the Kremlin spotlight, Yakov Semyonovich Khavinson and the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union exemplify this uneasy dynamic between the political centre and institutions of state. With the increased responsibility enjoyed by Khavinson and the Moscow offices of TASS came pressure to provide a regular stream of content from its agents abroad. This content was expected to offer widespread coverage of events, both domestically and around the globe, with insights into the politics, people and progress of the capitalist and developing world alike. The Telegraph Agency’s offices in London and New York were not prepared for this increase in workload. Both suffered from limited resources and a host of communication breakdowns that emanated from their attempts to maintain a line to Moscow through the European theatre of war.

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<sup>331</sup> Volkogonov, *Stalin*, p. 365.

## Establishing A Media Monopoly

The information TASS provided dominated newspapers at the central and provincial level. Those that worked within its network and the press acknowledged the extent to which content was dependent on its news distribution. This could include detailed instructions about the format it should appear in print and even which page it should occupy.<sup>332</sup> Not all the information collected was intended for public consumption however:

Only a small part of the material gathered by TASS is given to the press. Most of the material goes to the CC [Central Committee] or the NKVD. Twice a month the foreign section of TASS prepares an information bulletin on the international situation. Those pages of the bulletin which are printed on red paper go only to the Politburo and the others, printed on blue, go to members of the CC and to top officials. About half the material in the newspapers comes from TASS.<sup>333</sup>

Such an important institution, handling highly sensitive material, required management by a figure that could be trusted to maintain strict adherence to the party line. At the height of the Stalinist repressions of the 1930s, Khavinson rose to take charge of the Telegraph Agency. He remains an elusive figure within the archives, and details of his early career are scant. Yet it is clear he profited from, if not engineered, the demise of his predecessor Yakov Genrikhovich Doletsky, who was purged in 1937.<sup>334</sup> Khavinson had already shown the mark of a loyal Stalinist, blasting Doletsky's management as providing a hotbed of fascist intrigue and

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<sup>332</sup> HPSSS, Schedule B, Vol. 6, Case 359, p. 4. A number of interviews conducted by the Harvard Project were with émigrés who could draw on direct experience of work in the press apparatus and Telegraph Agency. They offer an invaluable degree of detail regarding the domestic activities of TASS throughout the 1930s and 1940s and the supervisory role it played in the Soviet media.

<sup>333</sup> HPSSS, Schedule B, Vol. 6, Case 359, p. 7.

<sup>334</sup> With thanks to Christopher Stolarski (University of Toronto) for the following reference: RGASPI, f.82, op. 2, d. 907, ll. 13-15.

influence.<sup>335</sup> He aimed to further prove his credentials by weeding out suspect elements within the organisation. Providing a systematic overview of all agents operating abroad within the TASS network, the relative ambivalence shown by Stalin in his delegation of responsibility to Malenkov suggests that, at this stage, TASS was still only operating on the periphery of his radar.<sup>336</sup>

Khavinson persevered and sought to cement his position through diligent work and careful attention to signals he received from the Kremlin. From the archives, Stalin's notes and correspondence testify that the General Secretary was often a man of few words. With the sheer volume of material he processed on a daily basis the need for brevity is understandable. Khavinson's skill was in anticipating those topics in the foreign press that caught Stalin's attention. When any such signal was forthcoming, Khavinson pressed hard on his subordinates abroad to deliver further material. Studying the interplay between both Khavinson and Stalin, and Khavinson with his agents abroad, is essential to understanding how TASS's role developed at the end of the 1930s.

### Crisis in the Comintern

The decline of the Comintern witnessed in this period is also an important factor in the increasing reliance on TASS for dissemination of the party line that followed. Any shift in responsibility between the two organisations would prove itself a far from complete transition, with Moscow continuing to operate on an ad hoc basis

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<sup>335</sup> RGASPI, f. 82, op.2, d. 907, l. 15.

<sup>336</sup> RGASPI, f. 83, op. 1, d. 89, ll. 8-10. Online transcript, accessed on 22 April 2012 at <http://www.alexanderyakovlev.org/fond/issues-doc/1015846>.

throughout the crisis period. The experience of the Communist Party of Great Britain provides an indication of just how challenging a scenario the ambiguity surrounding lines of communication produced for satellite parties loyal to the USSR. In Britain, the inadequacy of direction from the centre, vis-à-vis Moscow, undermined the CPGB's attempts to present the Kremlin's official line to audiences at home and counteract widespread criticism of the Red Army's invasion of Finland.

Even prior to the war, the disparity between TASS and Comintern direction was likely a contributory factor in the turmoil the switch to an 'anti-imperialist' stance caused amongst the CPGB leadership. Stalin first signalled the new 'anti-imperialist' line to Dimitrov at a meeting on 7 September 1939, with the Comintern secretaries approving the directive, before instructing all communist parties to immediately correct their political standpoint just two days later.<sup>337</sup> However, the delay in receiving this directive meant that General Secretary Harry Pollitt's first signal of the change arrived via a press telegram on 14 September. The conflict was now described as 'a robber war kindled from all sides by the hands of two imperialist groups of powers'.<sup>338</sup> This he opted to suppress, given its wholesale contradiction of the 'anti-Fascist' stance maintained by the British Communist Party.<sup>339</sup> Pollitt's commitment to the old line proved an error of judgement for those members of the party leadership that sided with him. Rajani Palme Dutt, quicker to anticipate the change, interpreted the telegram as an indication of the new mood in Moscow. When the CPGB's representative in Moscow, Dave Springhall, returned from the Soviet capital on 25

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<sup>337</sup> M. Johnstone, 'The CPGB, The Comintern And The War, 1939-1941: Filling In The Blank Spots', *Science & Society*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (1997), p. 29.

<sup>338</sup> Johnstone, 'The CPGB, The Comintern And The War', p. 29. Unfortunately only a typed copy of this telegram (with no indication of its original source) remains in Harry Pollitt's papers at the Labour History Archive, Manchester.

<sup>339</sup> F. King and G. Matthews (eds.), *About Turn: The British Communist Party and the Second World War* (London, 1990), p. 24.

September, carrying the same instructions from the Comintern, Pollitt's mistake was clear.<sup>340</sup> Both Pollitt and James Campbell, editor of the CPBG newspaper, *Daily Worker*, were forced to step down and publicly recant their mistakes to the Party.<sup>341</sup>

With the Comintern seemingly under gagging orders, signals from TASS communiqués became the best hope for satellite parties to anticipate the Moscow line. Unfortunately, this was an imperfect solution due to the rapidly changing nature of events in Finland. Editors had to hope a telegram would not later be retracted or information withdrawn after transmission. Such practices had evidently existed earlier in the decade:

During the Yezhoshchina, the only news printed about the purges came from TASS. At the big trials only TASS and Pravda journalists were present. Sometimes TASS sends foreign news on the teletype and two hours later sends instructions to pull the news out.<sup>342</sup>

### Moscow, London and New York

The global circulation of TASS materials was co-ordinated by a network of agents facing their own challenges. New York, in particular, had been ordered to transform its operation from a nine-hour day to twenty-four hour rolling news service in September 1939.<sup>343</sup> Moscow showed little sympathy for the strain this put on Kenneth Durant and the tiny staff under his management before the changeover.

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<sup>340</sup> Johnstone, 'The CPGB, The Comintern And The War', p. 30.

<sup>341</sup> A. Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920-43* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 258-261.

<sup>342</sup> These comments come from a former journalist and party member with extensive experience of the Soviet press apparatus. HPSSS, Schedule B, Vol. 6, Case 606, p. 13.

<sup>343</sup> GARF, f. 4459, op. 11, d. 1079, ll. 130-131.

Durant's correspondence with Khavinson gives some indication of the pressure they were under:

You will understand that this cannot be done with our present staff...It may be several days, perhaps even two weeks, before we can begin to give you an efficient service. The emergency service which we sent you during the first half of September was only done by extraordinary efforts on the part of every member of our staff, which left the personnel somewhat exhausted and unable to continue at such a pace.<sup>344</sup>

Khavinson, on finding himself increasingly under the shadow of the Kremlin, was unlikely to accept anything short of a *stakhanovite* approach to targets. It is clear from later correspondence that there existed fundamental differences in the outlook of both managers in relation to what constituted normal, humane work-conditions in the west versus those acceptable to the Soviet regime.<sup>345</sup>

Both London and New York experienced periodic disruptions in communication throughout the period. The first significant obstacle was the establishment of a British blockade on Germany that interfered with efforts to ship mail to the Soviet Union. Never a particularly quick means of contact, it put further strain on telegraph operators to provide daily updates, and issue appeals to the centre from London and New York, requesting further guidance.

The war conditions compelled us to turn at once to the use of radio (RCA) for all urgent and important news messages requiring the fastest transmission. Cables via London run through London and are subject to interruption and censorship. (In actual practice most of our cables via Northern since the war seem to have reached you without interruption.) We are using radio exclusively except when unfavourable atmospheric conditions prevent direct circuit between United States and Moscow.<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>344</sup> GARF, f. 4459, op. 11, d. 1079, ll. 130-131 (22 September 1939).

<sup>345</sup> GARF, f. 4459, op. 11, d. 1212, ll. 147-148 (17 April 1940).

<sup>346</sup> GARF, f. 4459, op. 11, d. 1079, ll. 157-161.

By the time war with Finland had broken out, events were moving too fast to anticipate the Moscow line. Primacy was instead given to channels of information travelling to the centre, over distribution of regular communiqués from Moscow for its agents abroad:

Regarding the preparation of mailers, it is necessary to raise the question of the long time in transmission. Many of the subjects mentioned in your letter (example: reaction of workers to committee of aid to White Finland) seem proper subjects for radio and cable report, rather than the present slow mail. Events move too rapidly. The ordinary mails take from three to six weeks from New York to Moscow.<sup>347</sup>

Rather than giving them free rein to switch to transmission over radio and cable, Khavinson repeatedly chastised the exceeding of London's telegram quota, attentive to the additional costs this incurred for the agency (the operating budget of TASS's foreign bureau's evidently under the same close control by Moscow as their daily working hours).<sup>348</sup> There is a notable drop in communication between London and Moscow that followed the outbreak of war with Finland. Not all of it can be accounted for by the limitations imposed by the British Navy's blockade, and intermittent problems with weather and geography affecting radio channels are alluded to in the correspondence above. TASS was facing the same problem as the Soviet media in general; needing to limit the negative press the war in Finland received, whilst hesitating over the best way to achieve this. Both London and New York suffered a lack of guidance as a result.

Khavinson's earlier audiences with Stalin were not repeated and he knew better than to risk speaking out of turn. Signals continued to come through from the General Secretary via Stalin's scribbled instructions in the marginalia of TASS

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<sup>347</sup> GARF, f. 4459, op. 11, d. 1212, ll. 210-211.

<sup>348</sup> GARF, f. 4459, op. 11, d. 1166, ll. 90, 100.

bulletins, indicating what the offices abroad should prioritise in global news and intelligence gathering. For New York, the penetration of South America by the Telegraph Agency, in an effort to increase coverage of the region, became a task that bore little relation to the realities of the resources available to Durant and his people. The impetus undoubtedly came from Stalin, who revealed to Khavinson his interest in news of German radio broadcasts in Latin America and the potential extension of Berlin's influence across the Atlantic when he authorised the publication of a TASS bulletin received from New York in February 1939.<sup>349</sup> Durant did his best to explain to Moscow the realities of the North American news service and the limits of his bureau's reach:

The New York TASS Bureau has never given an adequate service regarding internal developments in the countries of Latin America, because information about these countries is not available in New York. The press of the United States inadequately reports events and conditions in South America... You will never have an adequate Latin American service from New York alone. This must depend upon the establishment of TASS Bureaus in the important centres of Latin America...<sup>350</sup>

That Khavinson pushed the issue more than once suggests this might have been considered a better use of New York's time than repeating the English-speaking worlds' condemnation of the Soviet Union's activity in Finland. It was also a clear indication of the global coverage Moscow expected TASS to develop.<sup>351</sup>

Finland became the elephant in the room. Moscow was reluctant to draw attention to such a sensitive area of Soviet policy, and its agents abroad avoided tackling the subject without the Kremlin's official line for guidance. It is noticeable how little the topic was touched upon during the war in the few instances of extended

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<sup>349</sup> RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 207, l. 30.

<sup>350</sup> GARF, f. 4459, op. 11, d. 1212, ll. 40-42 (24 January 1940).

<sup>351</sup> GARF, f. 4459, op. 11, d. 1212, ll. 66-72.

dialogue between Khavinson and London and New York that took place. When direction from the centre eventually began to permeate through, it was broad in subject matter without recourse to specific mention of events in Europe, or Finland in particular:

The struggle in connection with the American policy vis-à-vis the USSR requires at the present time your closest attention. We should ask you to sum up the pronouncements in this connection and give a general characterisation of the various groups from this angle. We request you to record carefully and to keep us informed on all utterances of the various leaders and groups, both in favour of the USSR and against it...<sup>352</sup>

The importance Moscow now placed on these channels of information was revealed during those instances when they broke down. Frantic telegrams were issued to the London bureau and directly to Reuters when its feed was lost.<sup>353</sup> The disruption of Moscow's regular subscription to *Daily Worker* and other English news sources resulted in a similar response.<sup>354</sup> The New York and London bureaus of TASS contributed to something of a pseudo-intelligence network, instructed to provide information on industry, war-production and even the propaganda initiatives of their respective governments hoping to generate popular support for the war effort.<sup>355</sup> The problems the Soviet Union faced in the engendering of uniform public support for its campaign in Finland encouraged Moscow to explore techniques from abroad that might help shape policy at home.

Finally, with the Comintern's decline in prominence there was also an interest in TASS taking on more of a role as the official mouthpiece for the regime. However, the legal and logistical limitations of its offices abroad were not recognised by the

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<sup>352</sup> GARF, f. 4459, op. 11, d. 1212, ll. 240-242 (27 February 1940).

<sup>353</sup> GARF, f. 4459, op. 11, d. 1166, l. 96; d. 1185, l. 33.

<sup>354</sup> GARF, f. 4459, op. 11, d. 1166, ll. 76, 87.

<sup>355</sup> GARF, f. 4459, op. 11, d. 1212, ll. 66-72, 83-84, 90-91, 116-118.

centre when pushing for this additional responsibility. New York's operation as a collector of news for publication in the Soviet Union was legally defined by US law and did not allow them to operate as a distributor of Soviet news independently of the established American news agencies.

As you know, this Bureau is registered with the Department of State – under the law for registration of foreign agencies – as engaged solely in the collection and transmission of news for publication in the Soviet Union...The American press is strongly hostile to the Soviet Union; nevertheless it has much interest in news from and about the Soviet Union. For this reason the agencies include a large amount of Soviet news – mostly from TASS – in their daily reports. This situation can not be improved at present by the direct intervention of this Bureau.<sup>356</sup>

The fact that Khavinson made the request in spite of his knowledge of the bureau's hands being tied reflects the primary concern for the Kremlin in having its voice (and particular presentation of the truth) heard. On 22 February 1940, the Moscow office received a letter from Reuters regarding a message, delivered to its rival, United Press, which quoted the 'Official Soviet Agency' as its source. The message contained a statement from Moscow that 'the most decisive battle of the war was imminent round Viipuri' the result of which was 'Soviet correspondents with the Red Army are predicting success for the Russian troops on or before next Friday.' Reuters expressed concern over why they had not received such a statement, which had appeared in the morning's papers before their offices in London received word. Khavinson dismissed the allegations that this statement was issued by TASS and blamed delays in communication between Moscow and London for any disruption to the service.<sup>357</sup> Whether this was simply a bluff on Khavinson's part is unclear. Nevertheless, it raises issues about the lengths Moscow was willing to go to engineer a positive spin of events in Finland. By this stage in the conflict it was still an

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<sup>356</sup> GARF, f. 4459, op. 11, d. 1212, ll. 48-49.

<sup>357</sup> GARF, f. 4459, op. 11, d. 1185, ll. 7, 15, 18, 19.

imperfect set-up. Nor would the political climate or pressures of war permit the time or resources needed to rectify these problems until after the conclusion of hostilities with Finland.

In the meantime, Moscow could continue to utilise all available channels of communication to get its message across. Andrew Rothstein, the Telegraph Agency's leading representative in London, spent his career operating under the covert surveillance of the British Secret Services.<sup>358</sup> Irrespective of the apparent drop in his direct communication with Khavinson in Moscow, as the war in Finland reached its closing stages, MI5 observed Rothstein making regular visits to the Soviet Embassy throughout the month of March. Spending 'several hours every evening' in the company of Soviet diplomats, he also enjoyed a direct audience with Ivan Maisky 'at least once a week'. As a parallel channel through which the Kremlin could exert its influence, it is again revealing. The same report noted Rothstein's insistence that the Moscow Government was now 'extremely anxious' that 'the trial of Paris Communists should be given as much publicity as possible in the British Press', thus relaying instruction to 'all English Communist journalists who have influence with their papers' to 'feature the trial as much as possible'. Such a strategy is in-line with the practice, explored in our previous chapter, of exploiting any instances of the subjugation of communists abroad, in order to deflect criticism of the Soviet Union's own suppression of opposition.<sup>359</sup> That it offered an alternative news story to its own disastrous record in Finland was no doubt a further motivation for Moscow.

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<sup>358</sup> The files of Andrew Rothstein (held together with those of his father Theodore, who left Britain for Soviet Russia in 1920) offer a unique window on the history and development of the Telegraph Agency within the international communist movement. See NA KV2/1575-1584 (Andrey Fedorovich ROTSHTEYN / Teodor Aronovich ROTSHTEYN, alias Andrew and Theodore ROTHSTEIN).

<sup>359</sup> NA KV2/1581 3.

## The Elephant in the Room

It was not just in correspondence with its agents outside the USSR that the topic of Finland was carefully avoided. The war was by now proving, quite simply, too troublesome to portray in a pro-Soviet light. Whatever brave face was put on over the most recent blow from Geneva should not disguise the fact the war was quickly slipping from the front pages of the central Soviet press. Among the party bureaucracy in the capital, most notably the Department for Propaganda and Agitation, dialogue from the period shows a striking absence of discussion, not to mention even token references to the war.<sup>360</sup> The same is true of the censorship offices of *Glavlit*. Incredibly, it was not until 22 February 1940 when any official limit on the publication of material related to the war was issued to all sections of the media:

Until further notice the placement in print and broadcasting of all kinds of materials - including reprints – related to the fighting units of the Leningrad Military District in their struggle with the White Finns (*po bor'be s belofinnami*) is PROHIBITED.<sup>361</sup>

TASS's dominant role was reiterated by the stipulation that only material issued by their offices and those of the Leningrad Military District were authorised for distribution. Such an order seems like an after thought in the context of the self-censorship that was already beginning to limit the war's presence in the press. It rather reflects the relative weakness of the party machinery to react quickly in this period of intense crisis, resulting in an extended period of time taken to formulate and distribute orders by the centre. When those signals were overly reliant on Stalin's

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<sup>360</sup> RGASPI, f. 17, op. 125, d. 1-8.

<sup>361</sup> GARE, f. 9425, op. 1, d. 16, l. 19.

personal intervention, delays were inevitable. More long-term burdens faced by the bureaucracy further undermined their ability to cope with the demands of the war.

*Glavlit's* concern with the censorship and control of state secrets from the public sphere was a broad remit that in recent years had been dominated by the task of tidying up the mess created by the most recent cycle of repressions. If one views the operation and aftermath of the recent highpoint of Stalinist repressions within this bureaucratic framework, the chronological confines of 1937-38 again seem wholly inadequate for understanding its impact on how the state ran in this period. Given how all-pervasive was the campaign against 'enemies of the people', the clean-up operation required to erase mistakes, names and deeds by those deemed culpable was huge. *Glavlit's* records show an unbroken continuity in the operations of the department through to the end of the decade. This was dominated by a concern with the erasing of all traces of anti-soviet elements and vast swathes of literature and party publications in the process. Major campaigns swept through every museum, gallery and library within the cities of Leningrad and Moscow at the end of 1938 to verify and regulate their collections.<sup>362</sup> Even the arrest of Nikolai Yezhov loses significance among the issuing of formulaic orders, including the request that his name be erased from any cartographic references in June 1939 and from the pages of the *Short Course* the following year.<sup>363</sup> In the context of this ongoing logistical burden, the delayed, often hesitant and contradictory approach to coverage of the Soviet-Finnish war in the public sphere becomes easier to understand.

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<sup>362</sup> GARF, f. 9425, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 29-32.

<sup>363</sup> GARF, f. 9425, op. 1, d. 8, l. 50; d. 16, l. 230.

As a result of this process, a culture of hyper-sensitivity to censorship emerged and was cited by the general staff of the Red Army for their woeful access to basic levels of military expertise, intelligence and educational material during debates in the aftermath of the war. As one anonymous voice attested: ‘Everything is classified’.<sup>364</sup> Monitoring of sensitive works had been extended to the very top levels of the Party, with records of Zhdanov’s own acquisitions in the period preserved among his personal archive, carefully catalogued alongside their classification of secrecy.<sup>365</sup> Stalin’s preoccupation with keeping a tight grip on the direction of the war effort merely exacerbated this problem. Intelligence reports and the vital communication channels through which they travelled were being monopolised by the NKVD and funnelled straight up to Stalin and his inner circle of Molotov and Voroshilov. Given Stalin’s predilection for direct intervention in the press too, the overall impression is of a Party increasingly reluctant to voice its members’ opinions on matters being managed so exclusively by the Kremlin.

At the regional level, the Leningrad leadership was also shouldering a great deal of the burden. Zhdanov’s archive reveals his input in everything from military intelligence – again operating by default through the offices of the NKVD – the military industrial complex, propaganda and agitation (in his collaboration with Kuusinen) and even the appeals of Soviet prisoners of war in the aftermath of hostilities.<sup>366</sup> Such a strong personal presence in the ‘city of Lenin’ was essential. By mid-December Leningrad was showing dangerous signs of popular unrest. The NKVD had been carefully monitoring reports of rising crime levels and the spread of

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<sup>364</sup> Stalin continued to play innocent, remarking: ‘This is the way of the people who do not want our Red Army to know too much. This is probably the reason why everything here is kept secret.’ Chubaryan and Shukman, *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War*, p. 195.

<sup>365</sup> RGASPI, f. 77, op. 4, d. 45, ll. 11-12.

<sup>366</sup> RGASPI, f. 77, op. 3, d. 121, ll. 42-44.

disorder since the beginning of the war. Tougher measures were put in place by the city's authorities with show trials to be staged of those arrested for hooliganism, a curfew for children and additional patrols at railroad stops.<sup>367</sup>

Since Zhdanov continued to make periodic return trips to Moscow, and telephone communication was well established, it is unclear how much individual responsibility he was given. After the war he would be second only to Stalin in receiving praise from the Party, credited with leading the massive effort required from Leningrad.<sup>368</sup> It is telling, however, that in the background, although he was present for the post-conflict meetings orchestrated by the *Vozhd'* – seated alongside Stalin and Molotov whilst the Red Army general staff sought to dissect the lessons of the war – he made just one comment throughout proceedings, contributing nothing to the debate.<sup>369</sup>

While Leningrad concerned itself with maintaining order at the home front, by mid-December a new priority was fast approaching the Soviet media: the upcoming birthday of Comrade Stalin. In acknowledgement of the sheer scale of the press coverage surrounding this date, with page after page dedicated to the great leader and friend of the Soviet people, one's first instinct might be that this campaign was engineered to provide a useful diversion from the events of the war.

In reality, execution of this celebratory campaign required such a lengthy planning process that most of the material predated the outbreak of the conflict. Plans for content to be featured in *Pravda* on the 21 December 1939 were finalised and

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<sup>367</sup> Boterbloem, *Life and Times*, p. 203.

<sup>368</sup> Boterbloem, *Life and Times*, pp. 205-206.

<sup>369</sup> Chubaryan and Shukman, *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War*, p. 156.

forwarded to Zhdanov and Andreev for approval on 27 November.<sup>370</sup> The unfolding press coverage over the course of a week's daily editions, appearing across all major organs of the press, is testament to the magnitude of its subject matter and the lumbering nature of the propaganda machine. Something as trivial as the conflict in Finland was not about to derail the festivities; the regime was unwilling and unable to alter its course, once established. Even orders from *Glavlit* in anticipation of the birthday celebrations had to be issued well in advance:

In view of the execution in December of the sixtieth birthday of Comrade Stalin, publishers and editorial boards of journals and newspapers are preparing to print books, pamphlets, articles, memoirs and other materials, dedicated to this important date.

In order to prevent errors it is required that all commemorative materials, after careful review, are forwarded to the administration for propaganda and agitation of the regional and territorial committees of the Communist Party and Soviet republics, and only upon receipt of their consent will they be authorised for the press.<sup>371</sup>

It can only be assumed that the addition of such an extended vetting process further hampered the bureaucracy during its efforts to respond to the new challenge of managing coverage of the Soviet-Finnish War. The propaganda state was unaccustomed to bad press and ill equipped to deal with it when it was still burdened with the hangover from past repressions and the present headache of Stalin's birthday.

The festivities began in earnest on 20 December 1940, when *Pravda* devoted nearly its entire edition to publishing a 'short' biography of Stalin. The biography was a dense text, unbroken by images, providing the historical preamble for the upcoming fanfare that was due to be unleashed on his official birthday. Although official, in reality he had already reached this landmark anniversary the year before, his actual

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<sup>370</sup> RGASPI, f. 77, op. 3, d. 118, ll. 70-71.

<sup>371</sup> GARE, f. 9425, op. 1, d. 9, l. 157 (20 November 1939).

date of birth occurring on 6 December 1878.<sup>372</sup> While this disparity in dates could hardly have been foreseen as having future significance, the celebrations could not have come at a more inopportune moment for the regime. For nearly a month, Soviet forces had failed to penetrate the main line of Finnish defences on the Karelian Isthmus. Despite an unsuccessful counter-attack by the Finns on the 23 December, just two days later they would secure their first major victory at the battle of Tolvajärvi. The Soviet press opted to focus its attention on the unreserved praise of every facet of Stalin's leadership. Articles assigned to various members of the Central Committee, who had drafted pieces related to Stalin's contribution to their own spheres of influence, appeared in print. Newspapers were awash with the virtues of Stalin as the 'builder of the Red Army', the 'driver of the locomotive of history', the 'Lenin of today' and the 'greatest man of our time'.<sup>373</sup> Current affairs were put on hold as page after page of newsprint was taken up by this build-up of zealous discourse. In its eagerness to surpass the celebration of Stalin's fiftieth birthday, the Party had even pushed to expand *Pravda* for a special twelve-page edition.<sup>374</sup> These preparations were clearly a massive undertaking and dependent upon their initiation before the war with Finland had even begun. Now, with the present state of affairs at the front, space was not about to be wasted on reporting the meagre progress of the Red Army or the defiant resolve of the Finns.

This was not lost on commentators outside the USSR. *Time Magazine's* awarding of Stalin its 'Person of the Year' for 1939 included a review of the week's press attention, where the limited discussion of Finland did not escape notice:

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<sup>372</sup> Service, *Stalin*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>373</sup> *Pravda*, 21 December 1939.

<sup>374</sup> RGASPI, f. 77, op. 3, d. 118, ll. 70-71.

In all this wordage over Comrade Stalin's 60 years of life only six-line communiqués on the progress of the Red Army in Finland were printed in the U.S.S.R. Obviously, the hammer-sickle propaganda machine preferred that Soviet citizens pay as little attention as possible to a scarcely encouraging military campaign.<sup>375</sup>

Though there was clearly indecision over how to approach the issue of the war and avoid tarnishing Stalin's 'big day', Finland would eventually touch on the festivities. On 28 December, Otto Kuusinen made a brief return to the pages of *Pravda* with a note of thanks forwarded from his government to Stalin 'the great friend of the Finnish people'. Originally sent to Zhdanov on 24 December for review following its translation from Finnish, *Pravda* would only find space for the note the following week, tucked away on page three.<sup>376</sup>

If one avoids treating the birthday celebrations as purely a diversionary campaign in the milieu of bad press, its great value was the important reference point it offered the regime for gauging the political and ideological orthodoxy of its people. Soldiers and citizens alike were expected to engage in the process; newspapers were filled with letters and telegrams from the public. Even the articles appearing from the very top echelons of the Party were a public display of their political credentials and formed part of this collective expression of loyalty and thanks to Comrade Stalin.

At the front line, the NKVD paid careful attention to the soldiers' political education. Their schooling in the life and revolutionary career of Stalin was dutifully reported to Zhdanov in the course of the celebrations. This was not a passive process.

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<sup>375</sup> 'TIME Person of the Year, Joseph Stalin, 1939', accessed on 15 April 2011 at <http://www.time.com/time/subscriber/personoftheyear/archive/stories/1939.html>.

<sup>376</sup> RGASPI, f. 77, op. 4, d. 47, ll. 26-31. Again Zhdanov paid careful attention to distinguishing between friend and foe among the Finnish population in his final edit. Adjusting 'Finnish white-bandits' to 'White-Finnish hirelings' (*naymitov*) further alienated the enemy forces from the civilian population that was (apparently) so indebted to Stalin.

As with the images of workers and party meetings in the press, soldiers were engaged with through reading groups and meetings, and were encouraged to write to the newspapers and the Party. Inevitably, there were problems. Distribution of printed material, particularly newspapers, was difficult in the throes of the fighting.<sup>377</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that the command would concern themselves so readily with these tasks, when troops were lacking in other, far more vital equipment and provisions, highlights the weight placed by the regime in the proper schooling of its soldiers. It was considered equal to training in the operation of firearms and the maintenance of discipline among troops, and was later one of the first matters raised at the post-conflict meetings called to discuss the lessons of the war.<sup>378</sup> Stalin remained sympathetic to this need, though by the war's end, he was forced to acknowledge the parallel importance of developing military knowledge amongst the army's cadres of political workers:

For contemporary war we need political workers, staunch politically and well versed in military matters. It is not enough for a political worker to pay lip service to the Party of Lenin and Stalin, never mind all the hallelujahs. This is not enough, today, this is not all we need. He should be politically staunch, politically educated and cultured, he should know military matters. Without that shall never have a good soldier, well-oiled logistics, and well-organised replacements in the army.<sup>379</sup>

The troops, for their part, had other more pressing issues given the woeful conditions at the front and losses they experienced at the hands of the Finnish forces. Among concerns voiced privately to friends and family at home (but intercepted by the NKVD), their letters still show a striking lack of political engagement or adoption of any of the civil war-inspired terminology pushed by the media.<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> RGASPI, f. 77, op. 4, d. 45, ll. 53-55, 60-67.

<sup>378</sup> Chubaryan and Shukman, *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>379</sup> Chubaryan and Shukman, *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War*, p. 217.

<sup>380</sup> *Zimniaia Voina: Issledovaniia, Dokumenti, Kommentarii*, pp. 338-344.

To be fair to the regime, there were attempts to engage with the troops in a less politically-sterile manner towards the end of the conflict. A more populist approach is visible in the serial of cartoons that began to appear in the newspaper *Na Strazhe Rodiny*, which featured the character Vasia Tërkin. His first appearance was on 31 December 1939 and, throughout the rest of the war, his antics were designed to ‘portray the role model of a combat-ready soldier who combined cheerful, quick-witted but unpretentious humour with resourcefulness under fire “without undermining the sacred principles of military discipline”’.<sup>381</sup>

A similar degree of flexibility was not visible in the wider public sphere. After the festivities surrounding Stalin’s birthday had died down and the New Year had been welcomed with an emphatic salutation to all comrades of the Union, press coverage of the war continued to be limited at best. The only real exception was the announcement of a mass of medals and honours that would periodically fill the front pages of newspapers, containing list after list of officers, political workers and soldiers.<sup>382</sup> They offered little indication of the specific acts of heroic endeavour that merited their award. As has already been mentioned, there was a woefully limited amount of day-to-day coverage of front line activity; operational reports often claiming no significant activity had taken place at all. Yet the numerous medal and honour announcements continued unabated.<sup>383</sup> It provided the regime with an opportunity to raise public morale. Fresh-faced recruits were portrayed on the cover of daily editions. A celebration of their heroics hinted at a return to a dominant policy of the 1930s that had been toned down significantly since Stalin’s careful redrafting of the *Short Course*. His insistence then that the time for heroes was at an end clearly

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<sup>381</sup> Van Dyke, *Soviet Invasion of Finland*, p. 121.

<sup>382</sup> *Pravda*, 20, 27 January 1940; 5 February 1940; 22 March 1940.

<sup>383</sup> Van Dyke, *Soviet Invasion of Finland*, p. 120.

came too soon; the need for a positive spin and individual ‘victories’ in the face of general stagnation and defeat eventually over-rode this desire. It was a policy never taken too far, however, as a plan to produce a book chronicling the stories of these individuals was eventually shelved.<sup>384</sup>

Despite this aversion to glorifying individual heroics, Soviet achievements away from the military sphere did provide an opportunity to fill the press with a vivid account of recent activities in the Arctic. The successful return of the icebreakers *Sedov* and *Joseph Stalin* – the former having been stranded since 1938, and forced to establish itself as a scientific polar station – resulted in a hero’s welcome on their arrival home. Their story provided ample opportunity to deflect attention away from the realities of war.<sup>385</sup> An endless stream of party anniversaries, birthdays and public holidays acknowledged in the press also supported this endeavour. Among those commemorated were the anniversary of Lenin’s death and the foundation of the Red Army, the New Year festivities and the birthday of Comrade Molotov. Through these public occasions the press was well served by a constant supply of formulaic material that could fill print-space and draw readers from thoughts of the Finnish front.

TASS had, by now, become the only significant source of news on the war, well before any official guidelines *Glavlit* circulated regarding censorship. Stalin continued to keep a watchful eye over incoming foreign press reports, though instances of his direct intervention in their publication fell. The regime was running out of options until, at last, after nearly two and half months of fighting, it achieved the military breakthrough it was desperate for. It had required a serious shake-up of

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<sup>384</sup> D. Brandenberger, Propaganda State in Crisis: Stalinism in the 1930s, paper presented to the Faculty of History at University of Oxford, 16 February 2011.

<sup>385</sup> See, for example, *Pravda* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 14 January 1939.

the military high-command, placing Semyon Konstantinovich Timoshenko in overall charge of the final offensive on Finnish defences, and by throwing a collective weight of men, machines and firepower that, according to Finnish estimates, ‘gave the Red Army a four-to-one superiority in infantry, a 20- or 30- to one superiority in artillery, and an absolute advantage in tanks and aviation’.<sup>386</sup> The ‘everlasting glory’ anticipated with victory in this campaign was illusionary.<sup>387</sup> The scale of casualties and the protracted nature of fighting that continued until peace was eventually signed a month later meant there could be little salvaged from the war that might present the Red Army in a positive light.

### Conclusion

Without an optimistic spin to offer the reader, TASS had emerged as a viable channel of material to counter the prevalence of bad news from the front. The scouring of foreign newspapers for Soviet-friendly print whilst censoring negative press proved to be an imperfect fix. For TASS, this was a result of limited resources and the breaks in communication Moscow and its offices abroad suffered. It was exacerbated by an inherent weakness in the propaganda state’s position, and its limited available strategies for responding to such rapidly changing events.

Stalin’s personal intervention in everything – from the opening diplomatic talks, to managing the war effort, and the manipulation of foreign news in the pages of *Pravda* – was not an effective strategy for controlling the day-to-day presentation

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<sup>386</sup> Van Dyke, *Soviet Invasion of Finland*, p. 137.

<sup>387</sup> Volkogonov, *Stalin*, p. 365.

of the war to the public. Face-to-face consultation with his subordinates unfortunately limits our insights into the dialogue surrounding this process. It is at least clear that early attempts at fabricating the truth – such as Molotov’s denial of civilian bombing casualties in Helsinki – only bred hesitancy when the facts could not be backed up with evidence and foreign condemnation of the Soviet position remained so widespread. Surprisingly, the regime occasionally felt compelled to air this negative press, perhaps in an attempt to appear objective, but more importantly, as it was acutely aware of the range of opinions within Soviet society – both healthy and unhealthy – concerning Finnish affairs. Thus, it publicly renounced the lies and slander of the foreign press, whilst at the same time engaging in its own freedom with the truth.

Study of this period has also proven invaluable for revealing the prominence of TASS in Soviet affairs. The need for a suitable replacement for the dwindling role of the Comintern suggests a proper history of the Telegraph Agency should be incorporated into our understanding of the Soviet system, both before and after the war. Though this research continues, the value the regime placed on TASS’s collation and strict channelling of information mirrors a recent study of the Stalinist surveillance system. There are clear parallels in how both of these institutions formed part of a *cult of information* for Stalin and his inner circle. They strove to monopolise information, in all forms, from both inside and outside the borders of the Soviet Union. It was driven by ‘an overarching principle that guided the entire system: working toward the *Vozhd*’ (Leader)’, or to borrow Grossman’s conception once more, of acting ‘in the spirit of Stalin’.<sup>388</sup>

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<sup>388</sup> Weiner and Rahi-Tamm, ‘Getting to Know You’, p. 39; Grossman, *Everything Flows*, p. 209.

Khavinson and his staff found themselves rapidly integrated into that system during the war. After the conflict with Finland, three key developments can be traced. Firstly, the expansion of the number and localities of its agents abroad increased exponentially from 1939-40. This included the increase of staff at London and New York alongside newly established correspondents in major capitals around the world. The new intake included the penetration of new and established bureaus with native Soviet operatives, reminiscent of Khavinson's earlier calls for change in 1937.<sup>389</sup> Secondly, the expansion was carefully monitored by the state security services of the NKVD. Its entire *nomenklatura* now operated under the watchful eye of Lavrenty Beria. Careful attention was paid to the sensitive and potentially counter-revolutionary information that passed through its offices, which now included a carefully defined 'secret section'.<sup>390</sup> Finally, in May 1940, the task of reorganising TASS and the channels through which its information network operated was given to one of Stalin's closest associates, Andrei Zhdanov. As Leningrad Party Chief, he had been responsible for mobilising the city's military and industrial capacity for war with Finland. He was well positioned to recognise the value of TASS in the regime's future propaganda efforts. His reforms were geared towards streamlining of the distribution of foreign intelligence via the creation of a new 'Bureau of Internal Information'.<sup>391</sup>

In November 1940, the Head of the Telegraph Agency's Secret Department, Pashenko, forwarded to Zhdanov a copy of instructions (following their approval by the NKVD) outlining the proper handling of the highly sensitive materials gathered by TASS.<sup>392</sup> This document offers conclusive proof that the agency was explicitly tasked

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<sup>389</sup> GARF, f. 4459, op. 38, d. 104, ll. 231-233.

<sup>390</sup> GARF, f. 4459, op. 38, d. 104, ll. 1-5, 235-239.

<sup>391</sup> RGASPI, f. 77, op. 4, d. 13, ll. 84-104.

<sup>392</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4385, ll. 82-83.

with the collection of foreign military and technical information in this period.<sup>393</sup>

Stalin's concern with maintaining a strict monopoly over all such conduits of knowledge suggests the post-war restructuring of the Telegraph Agency was focused on ensuring tight control of that information and its continued exploitation for the benefit of the Party.

Through the widespread surveillance of both Soviet troops and the civilian population, obvious breaks with the official line had been prominent in popular opinion related to Soviet-Finnish affairs.<sup>394</sup> Lessons had to be learned in not only how to wage war but also how to portray it. Khavinson wrote to Durant in New York, seeking to draw ideas from the efforts of foreign powers to manipulate public support for the wider conflict in Europe. There is potential for future research exploring to what extent lessons learned from this conflict were applied in time for Hitler's invasion on 22 June 1941.<sup>395</sup> With the stakes even higher, Khavinson would be once again called upon; this time to ensure the Soviet propaganda machine was armed with ammunition to repel the Fascist advance bearing down on the capital:

19 October 1941. *Khavinson* called from Moscow tonight. Reported on the situation, the order by the State Committee for Defence and so on. Moscow is mobilized for defense.<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>393</sup> It was a task that would catch the attention of MI5. Andrew Rothstein, while dining with an informant for the department, began making suspicious inquiries as to the whereabouts of Bomber Command. In May 1940, he was promptly added to a list of journalists barred from entry to parliament. NA KV2/1581 3.

<sup>394</sup> See, for example, *Zimniaia Voina: Issledovaniia, Dokumenty, Kommentarii*, pp. 207-210; RGASPI, f. 77, op. 4, d. 46, ll. 12-24.

<sup>395</sup> See, for example, A. Y. Livshin and I. B. Orlov, *Sovetskaya Propaganda v Gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny: «Kommunikaciia Ubezhdeniia» i Mobilizacionnye Mehanizmy* (Moscow, 2007).

<sup>396</sup> Banac, *Diary of Georgi Dimitrov*, p. 201.

## Chapter 4

### Life in Leningrad

Freedom of speech must be curtailed when the nation is at war. What use of fighting an enemy without if the enemies within are given a free hand?<sup>397</sup>

*Globe and Mail*, 23 September 1939

The concession to limits on a free press cited above is not taken from a Soviet source, but from Canada's leading daily newspaper at the outbreak of the Second World War. George Kerr offers the quote in the introduction to his assessment of press censorship and politics in French Canada in 1940. It is indicative of a broader consensus among the country's newspapers that censorship was 'accepted as an unpleasant, but unavoidable necessity'.<sup>398</sup> The system of state control that emerged proved ad hoc and poorly defined in practice. It was only the curtailment of civil liberties evidenced in the arrest of Montreal's mayor, Camillien Houde, after his outspoken criticism of the policy of national registration, which forced a clearer definition of the role and responsibilities of the censors. Issues over the control of foreign media – in particular a neutral United States that offered an open point of access for Canadian audiences – were alleviated somewhat by the near-monopoly enjoyed by the Canadian Press wire service over news from abroad. This was still not a system of control that operated anything like the level of the Kremlin's micro-management of press output, but the parallels in attitude and limitations on the ability of the state to guarantee absolute authority over the press in wartime conditions is illuminating for both cases.

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<sup>397</sup> G. Kerr, 'Skirting the Minefield: Press Censorship, Politics and French Canada, 1940', *Canadian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (1982), p. 46.

<sup>398</sup> Kerr, 'Skirting the Minefield', p. 46.

Throughout the Second World War, the British government also strove to influence the popular mood through wartime propaganda. Co-ordinated by the offices of the Ministry of Information, they were, however, realistic when it came to recognising the imperfect ability of official propaganda to exclusively shape public opinion.<sup>399</sup> Voices within the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) also understood that, whilst one could produce and distribute the official line, the actual capacity of the state to force the population to engage and agree with it was limited: ‘The State can require the BBC to broadcast, or abstain from broadcasting, anything it likes. What it cannot do is to require listeners in this country or abroad either to listen to or believe the BBC’.<sup>400</sup>

The relationship between propaganda and popular responses by no means follows a clear trajectory, traceable from official dissemination to active engagement, nor can it be judged by its pervasiveness and a tangible effect on public (or private) discourse alone. Attempts by Khavinson and the Telegraph Agency to illuminate the strategies western powers adopted to raise support for the wider war in Europe indicate the Kremlin also recognised that challenges persisted in getting its message across. The shifting and contradictory nature of the Soviet Union’s official presentation of events in Finland suggests the regime continued to grapple with what exactly that message needed to be. The lessons learned by the Soviet leadership during the Finnish crisis, the adaptations to the official line they made and the institutional adjustments that emerged all had implications beyond the limits of this period. While the defence of Finnish democracy may not have offered a final point of

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<sup>399</sup> P. Bell, ‘Government Strategies on Influencing Public Opinion: Assessment, Censorship, Propaganda’, *Mélanges de l’Ecole française de Rome*, Vol. 108, No. 1 (1996), p. 69.

<sup>400</sup> Cited in Bell, ‘Government Strategies’, p. 69.

rupture in global relations, it was a key flashpoint in what would prove to be years of political strife to come.

For many Soviet citizens, the war in Finland was not experienced through newspaper headlines and government pronouncements alone. The official channels with which we have largely concerned ourselves thus far, tackled the public face of the conflict for audiences (at home and abroad), displaying equal parts truth, fiction and measured self-censorship. The end result was a significant dearth of information about the realities of the fighting that did not escape the notice of contemporaries, both real and imagined:

‘Yes, comrades,’ said Madyarov suddenly, ‘can you imagine what it’s like to have freedom of the press? One quiet morning after the war you open your newspaper, and instead of some exultant editorials, instead of a letter addressed by some workers to the great Stalin, instead of articles about a brigade of steel-workers who have done an extra day’s work in honour of the elections to the Supreme Soviet, instead of stories about workers in the United States who are beginning the New Year in a state of despondency, poverty and growing unemployment, guess what you find...! Information! Can you imagine a newspaper like that? A newspaper that provides information!’<sup>401</sup>

In Grossman’s *Life and Fate*, Madyarov’s passionate critique of the absence of freedom in the press, while set during the violent upheaval of the battle for Stalingrad, offers a pertinent summary of the state of the Soviet media by the end of the 1930s. It is also in the course of this brief moment of ‘seditious talk’ that acknowledgment of certain ‘strengths and weaknesses’ of the Soviet system appears, with allusion to the poor performance of the Red Army against their Finnish neighbours offered as a counter to Sokolov’s insistence on the evident collapse of the bourgeois democracies. The implication is that, even in the context of this acknowledged absence of

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<sup>401</sup> Grossman, *Life and Fate*, p. 260.

‘information’ in the press, the realities of events abroad could still reach civilian circles.<sup>402</sup>

Popular responses to developments in Finland that are preserved in the archives are comparably diverse and by no means consistent with the official portrayal of the war, or in step with the shifting propaganda campaigns pursued by the Kremlin.<sup>403</sup> Similarly, the reasons for this are varied. Those closest to the fighting could, instead, access a variety of reports from the front line, carried by wounded and returning personnel (or even over the airwaves of foreign broadcasts<sup>404</sup>). Rumours and less direct testimony also spread fast, while the arrival of illicit goods and war booty offered tangible evidence of life in the near abroad that often ran contrary to the picture presented by the Soviet media. The regime was acutely aware of these unofficial channels and actively worked to limit the damage they caused.

Of course, there were also those for whom the war simply failed to register as a point of focus in their daily lives. Amongst the recollections of respondents to the Harvard Project, gathered in the decade after the Second World War, this was Moscow’s affair and not one worth concerning themselves with:

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<sup>402</sup> Grossman, *Life and Fate*, pp. 259-260.

<sup>403</sup> This chapter will continue to draw on a variety of Russian and non-Russian sources, with the bulk of my evidence drawn from research completed in St Petersburg at the former-party archive (TsGAIPD SPb). Additional, corroborating sources from Moscow (GARF and RGAPSI), London (National Archives) and the records of the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System (HPSSS) will help develop a more complete picture of life in this period and suggest where evidence from the Leningrad region might offer insights into the wider experiences of Soviet citizens throughout the war.

<sup>404</sup> HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 11, Case 136, p. 65. The respondent claimed that access to foreign broadcasts was possible if done in secret. He reported learning of the occupation of the Baltic countries in 1939 from German radio.

This war did not affect us; this war was a local affair of the Leningrad Military District. Nobody was mobilized in our region, except perhaps some technical personnel.<sup>405</sup>

Their perspective offers an important reminder of the size and diversity of peoples that constituted the Soviet Empire. Whatever unity of voice and purpose the press attempted to portray, it was a poor reflection of the realities of living under Moscow rule, especially when Moscow was so far away:

(And how did the Soviet-Finnish War affect you people in the South?) It was too far away, the general impression was: 'Let them fight.' If the action had been closer to us, perhaps we would have attempted to use it to escape. (Was there any shame felt for the Soviet actions?) How? In what way? This was a Soviet business, not Russian. No one asked us for our opinion in the matter, how could we be expected to feel that it concerned us?<sup>406</sup>

As with these more retrospective descriptions, the numerous and assorted range of 'official' sources, upon which contemporary responses to significant events and state policy are recorded still require careful reading. Often used as a measure of 'public opinion' since their emergence from the archives, these sources offer a valuable, though limited (and sometimes distorted), window into the relationship between state and society, particular to the period and political system in which they were produced.<sup>407</sup>

When dealing with contemporary testimony on the Soviet-Finnish War, it is worth stressing that our goal is not to simply try and measure 'public opinion' in

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<sup>405</sup> HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 37, Case 395/(NY)1706, p. 47. Details offered over the course of the interview indicate the respondent likely came from the North Caucasus.

<sup>406</sup> HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 25, Case 493, p. 85. Later in the interview it is revealed that the respondent also lived in the North Caucasus in the 1930s.

<sup>407</sup> 'Surveillance materials...should serve not only to answer questions posed prior to open archival access and formulated in the context of the Cold War; they also provide an opportunity for reconceptualizing the nature of the regime in general and the meaning of such surveillance materials in particular. Otherwise we will merely be appending new footnotes to old paradigms.' Holquist, 'Information is the *Alpha* and *Omega* of Our Work', p. 416.

direct relation to the conflict. Indeed, it would be an impossible task to gauge the reaction of every contemporary that formed an opinion (or opinions) on this now often overlooked crisis. The challenge of measuring any collective response among Soviet citizens is hard enough, even with their testimony now accessible to a much greater degree than before the opening of the archives.

Instead, this chapter will aim for a broader view of popular experiences of daily life and interaction with the state. Throughout we seek to avoid a dichotomy between ‘opposition’ and ‘support’, or ‘communist’ versus ‘non-believer’. Our goal is to offer a reminder that life in all its colour, variety and absurdity persisted under the Soviet regime, before, during and after the war.<sup>408</sup> More appropriate questions to ask, therefore, are to what extent was that way of life threatened by the Finnish crisis – from the perspective of both the regime and the general public – and what steps were taken by both sides to adjust?

Although in our previous chapter we demonstrated there was a reticence to speak about the war amongst those working more directly under the shadow of the Kremlin, it would be wrong to categorise Soviet society as cowering in fear and involuntarily mute where the subject of Finland was concerned. Any difficulty in finding voices unmediated by official surveillance of the population is mitigated by a focus on such a narrow case study and a crisis that genuinely shook institutions of state out of their typical routine. Leningrad is the centre of our attention, as it was for the Kremlin, in the justification it perpetuated for initiating the conflict and the

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<sup>408</sup> For a useful introduction to developments in the study of popular attitudes to the state and daily life under Stalinism, since the opening of the archives, see J. Hellbeck, ‘Speaking Out: Languages of Affirmation and Dissent in Stalinist Russia’, in A. Kocho-Williams, *The Twentieth Century Russian Reader* (London, 2012), pp. 156-173.

resources it mobilised to fight it. The region represents an atypical case in this regard, though hopefully not in a negation of its ability to provide evidence from which one can draw broader conclusions about Soviet society's response to the war.<sup>409</sup> Even as our view turns from the international to the local, and even the parochial perspectives, the same cannot be said for many contemporaries who maintained a keen sense of the wider domestic and global significance of the Finnish campaign. They remained aware of the potential sources of conflicting news it could elicit, contrary to a strictly (and orthodox) Soviet viewpoint.

### The Official Line

The trajectory of the war, as sketched in previous chapters, and the official responses it elicited, followed much the same pattern in Leningrad and its surrounding areas. Regional newspapers were even more dependent on the output of the Telegraph Agency for their content, alongside the recycling of central party press articles published in preceding editions. This meant that, despite Leningrad's proximity to the border, as diplomatic efforts failed and an increasingly aggressive tone manifested itself in central party press, readers of *Leningradskaya Pravda* were offered only subtle hints of the impending conflict between the two countries.<sup>410</sup> It was in the

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<sup>409</sup> The value of Leningrad as a case study of the experiences of Soviet society in this period echo those outlined by Robert Dale in his treatment of post-war demobilisation of veterans in the region. Incorporating a view of the wider Leningrad oblast offers the perspective of both rural and urban communities, not to mention a major industrial centre second only to Moscow in its political and economic importance. See R. Dale, *Demobilized Veterans in Late Stalinist Leningrad: Soldiers to Civilians* (London, 2015), pp. 17-21.

<sup>410</sup> Of course, we have noted those Leningraders who already sensed a growing threat of conflict with Finland in the weeks preceding the invasion. The anniversary of the October Revolution offered an opportunity for the regime to complete an extensive survey of local attitudes in the region. The possibility of war with Finland was raised as a viable scenario by a number of voices recorded by the NKVD. See Chapter 2: Crisis-management, Censorship, Control, pp. 94-95.

second half of November 1939 that the newspaper made a concerted effort to adjust readers' perceptions of Finland and its people. Following an exposé of an 'anti-Soviet campaign in Finland', appearing in a back-page bulletin on 16 November 1939, a series of carefully co-ordinated TASS reports revealed the 'impoverished position of workers' in the country (18 November) and the 'plight of the families of reservists in Finland' (21 November).<sup>411</sup> This campaign culminated in four separate articles appearing on the eve of the Mainila crisis, all portraying a negative vision of life across the border. Among them, a reference to the 'repression' of the domestic press in Finland may have aimed at explaining away the dearth of corroborating evidence outside Soviet sources.<sup>412</sup>

The need to discredit any positive image of life in Finland and report the poverty among soldiers' families – left wanting while the male breadwinners were stationed on the Soviet border – responded to a more localised problem for the Party in Leningrad. The parallel mobilisation of the region's forces was putting pressure on its own inhabitants. Concerned voices were being raised among soldiers and their wives about the levels of care afforded to their families. Their complaints were directed to the editors of the *Leningradskaya Pravda* who, in turn, passed them to the regional party leadership via well-established channels.<sup>413</sup> These appeals express a palpable sense of increased material hardship, and a general failure to meet the duty of care for military families, explicitly promised by the Party.

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<sup>411</sup> *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 16, 18, 21 November 1939, p. 4.

<sup>412</sup> *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 26 November 1939, p. 4.

<sup>413</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3393, ll. 68-72. For an introduction to the production and conventions surrounding reader correspondence to newspapers in the early Soviet period, see M. Lenoë, 'Letter-writing and the State: Reader Correspondence with Newspapers as a Source for Early Soviet History', *Cahiers du monde russe*, Vol. 40, No. 1-2 (1999), pp. 139-169.

The Soviet government cares about families drafted into the Red Army, and Soviet institutions, faithfully observing the precepts of Comrade Stalin about taking care of people, particularly the children, vie with each other, trying to express their love to the citizens of our socialist motherland.<sup>414</sup>

The shortfall in support offered by the state would, however, remain a contentious issue during and after the fighting though no print space was offered by the editors of the central and regional press to air such popular concerns.<sup>415</sup> It remained a further point of disconnect between the official presentation of the war, which stuck to the press' suggestion of universal support among Soviet citizens, and the harsh reality of the fighting's impact on those close to the front line.

Though the regional party leadership were similarly close to developments on the Soviet-Finnish border, they do not appear to have been in a privileged position where the circulation of information was concerned. The local party apparatus were also tracking signals from the centre via TASS in the run up to the invasion. The preservation of newspaper cuttings in the files of the Oblast Committee unfortunately offer little additional context about what they were used for in this particular instance. The declining condition of the Finnish population, reported by the Telegraph Agency in November, was evidently of interest and, thus, highlighted in pencil by the reader.<sup>416</sup> Gathering information from TASS in this way may have been a response to a shortage of more direct instruction. Much like in Moscow, information was

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<sup>414</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3393, l. 72.

<sup>415</sup> For example, letters to *Leningradskaya Pravda* in March and April include a number of appeals for intervention on the behalf of individuals and their families affected by the war. One demobilised soldier, wounded during the fighting, returned to his former place of work to find his position taken and no need of his services. A widow and dependent of a soldier, 'killed during military actions against the White Finns', was left to care for a three year old child and the deaf father of her deceased husband. No response to pleas for support had been forthcoming from the military committee. TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4380, ll. 14, 84.

<sup>416</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3942, ll. 21-25. The clippings were of TASS bulletins taken from *Pravda*, 13-25 November 1939.

circulated amongst a very narrow group of key actors within the region, with the names of Andrei Zhdanov and Alexey Alexandrovich Kuznetsov (second secretary to the Leningrad CPSU city and oblast committees) generally prioritised by the administrative and party organs of local government when directing material to the regional centre at the Smolny Institute.

Besides official communiqués, telegrams and telephone communication, co-ordination between Moscow and Leningrad was also maintained through Zhdanov's regular excursions between the two urban centres. However, with the need for secrecy in the final days before the invasion, it is unlikely that much information was shared beyond the tight confines of Stalin's inner circle. It is not even clear the extent to which Zhdanov was in the loop when the final preparations for war were being discussed in the Kremlin.<sup>417</sup> Whatever he did know was unlikely to be shared amongst the wider Leningrad apparatus. A municipal meeting of key 'propagandists' in the city, scheduled for 22 November 1939, may well have touched upon the topic of Finland. However, Zhdanov was not listed among the attendees and his right hand man in the region, Kuznetsov, led proceedings instead.<sup>418</sup> If it was also Kuznetsov who, out of ignorance, had felt it necessary to preserve the latest cues from TASS on the treatment of the Finnish question, then, apparently, both the regional leadership *and* general public could only rely on their best intuitions regarding the Kremlin's plans for its northern neighbours. Those operating even further down the 'power vertical' could still sense the winds of change and were keen to prove their worth to their superiors. Just two days before the invasion, Makhanov, of the Leningrad city

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<sup>417</sup> Zhdanov is absent from the meeting register of Stalin's Kremlin apartment in the week before the invasion. He only appears again on 27 November 1939, immediately after the shelling of Mainila. Chernobaev, *Na Priyomye u Stalina*, pp. 280-282.

<sup>418</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3931, ll. 41-42.

committee, sought permission from Zhdanov for the broadcast in Finnish of recent statements drawn from the press. Hot on the heels of the invasion, Makhanov again followed with a rousing collection of patriotic songs, once more in Finnish, which were intended to ring out over the airwaves and accompany the victorious march of the Red Army into Helsinki.<sup>419</sup>

Irrespective of any recent shortfalls in more concrete direction, the channel of communication between centre and periphery remained an important one, not only for directing the shape of local media, but also in educating state officials and party members on the language of policy and any shifts in direction it assumed. Much of it was of a fairly mundane and repetitive character. The outlines of monthly press campaigns prescribed by Moscow were generally weighted towards the same reliance on ideological pronouncements and the latest anniversary of one kind or another, which so often dominated the available print-space in the central newspapers.<sup>420</sup> In contrast, evidence of the kind of direction given explicitly about the war and how it should appear in the press is in short supply. When it was requested, the Party was slow to respond and adapted poorly to opportunities afforded by more grass-roots initiatives that emerged within the region. For example, a request for clarification about whether regional newspapers could make use of the abundance of letters received by Red Army soldiers required over two weeks for any official response to be issued. Control over reports of front line activities was given the utmost priority, even at this early stage in the war:

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<sup>419</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3322, ll. 51-83.

<sup>420</sup> For example, the Central Committee sent a list of 'recommended' dates of note intended for inclusion in the December editions of region's newspapers, before the outbreak of war with Finland. TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3942, l. 35.

Letters only of a general character by Red Army troops on active duty may be published in regional newspapers, without descriptions of concrete military episodes.<sup>421</sup>

Again, a heavy reliance on an embedded culture of self-censorship within the media contributed to the progressive limiting of references to the war in the press. By the closing month of the conflict, a selection of surviving summaries from the regional offices of the state censorship apparatus record very little retroactive excision of relevant material from literary productions and the press.<sup>422</sup> Much like the resurgent language of the civil war – prescribed by the centre to portray a divided Finnish society, then instinctive adoption by contemporaries within and without the Party – established practices and a natural aversion to contentious topics undoubtedly helped the media apparatus navigate the controversy of the conflict.<sup>423</sup>

Not that we should entirely discount the potential for more local initiative. By late February 1940, when developments on the Finnish front were increasingly absent from the pages of the central party press, *Leningradskaya Pravda* opted to focus its efforts on mobilising the local population through drives to increase production for the war effort: ‘By the selfless, heroic work of equipping the Red Army with first-class weapons, the workers of Leningrad help smash the White Finns’.<sup>424</sup> After its first appearance on 22 February 1940, this slogan was emblazoned across the front page of the region’s main paper throughout the following weeks. It was a campaign

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<sup>421</sup> On 5 January 1940, the Leningrad Oblast Committee received an initial letter requesting clarification; an official response followed only on 17 January 1940. TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 10, d. 513, ll. 40-41.

<sup>422</sup> Summaries of censorship activity for 15 February 1940 to 15 March 1940 are included in the files of the Oblast Committee. TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4393, ll. 23-25, 29-32.

<sup>423</sup> Even so, the important work of the Leningrad censors during the war was recognised by the Moscow offices of *Glavlit*. After the conclusion of hostilities, a letter praising their efforts – ‘under the leadership of the Party’ – was sent to Zhdanov. It outlined four hundred and two cases where the censors had intervened to ensure military and state secrets were not leaked via the press and radio. GARF, f. 9425, op. 1, d. 18, l. 59.

<sup>424</sup> *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 22 February 1940, p. 1.

that seems to have first taken root amongst the city's numerous factory newspapers, which sought to keep their workforce closely invested in the efforts of the Red Army.<sup>425</sup>

The proclivity among the Party and public to gauge the changing winds of Soviet policy and propaganda via media output from the centre offered an avenue for both groups to influence the official line. We have already demonstrated a fondness among some contemporaries for 'reading between the lines' when bulletins from TASS offered Soviet citizens a window onto the outside world. From letters sent to the editors of *Leningradskaya Pravda*, it is also clear the same examples of political engagement, opportunistic self-aggrandisement or personal appeals that were taking place in the early 1920s and 30s appeared in the course of the war with Finland. Furthermore, the rapid adoption of a distinct vocabulary associated with the ideologically orthodox portrayal of the conflict reiterates how engaged many citizens were and how quickly they could anticipate the new line.

The official script dictated by Moscow continued to dominate public dialogue about the war and in instances of popular interaction with the state apparatus. This new language immediately found its way into the discourse of state officials behind the scenes, with civilian personnel quick to adopt the new terminology. Even the local militia, though faltering to begin with, consciously adopted the designation of 'White-Finns' when referencing the Red Army's latest opponents in reports.<sup>426</sup>

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<sup>425</sup> A. B. Lazarev, 'Sovetsko-finlyandskaya voyna 1939- 1940-kh godov i zavodskiye mnogotirazhnyye gazety Leningrada', in A. V. Gogolevskii, *Obshchestvo I Vlast': Materialy Vserossiiskoi Nauchnoi Konferentsii* (St. Petersburg, 2003), pp. 306-316.

<sup>426</sup> Evidence of this attention to detail is preserved in a handwritten correction made to a typed report summarising police activity on 9-10 December 1939. The incorrect spelling of 'white (*bello*)-Finn',

Likewise, in the opening weeks of the fighting, the editors of *Leningradskaya Pravda* dutifully reported to Zhdanov and Kuznetsov that ‘every day’ they were receiving ‘patriotic letters in connection with military actions against the White-Finnish bandits’.<sup>427</sup>

Speed was of the essence and had been a consistent philosophy of the press throughout the 1930s. ‘*Operativnost*’, the need for newspapers to appear ‘on time and communicate as rapidly as possible to the populace’ was insisted upon by the Central Committee. Its aim, alongside the expansion of newspaper distribution in rural areas, was about ‘making the press a more rapid, effective communicator of central directives and the Party version of the news to the countryside, thus short-circuiting the “radios in skirts,” the village rumour-monger’.<sup>428</sup>

An emphasis on the rapid dissemination of the line was just as visible in the Leningrad region at the end of the decade. From the party speeches circulated over the radio and printed in the press, to the agitators responsible for spreading the word to urban and rural areas, the insistence on quick and effective communication is regularly seen, predating the outbreak of the conflict. An internal Leningrad Obkom report for the Department of Propaganda and Agitation detailed local efforts to ensure proper circulation of a radio speech, delivered by Molotov, on 17 September 1939. The report described how the desire to provide the rural population with adequate access to Molotov’s speech resulted in a ‘special conveying of newspapers in cars to village councils and collective farms’, thus ensuring the workforce would have access

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was felt by the author to warrant amendment before the report could be forward to Zhdanov and Kuznetsov (as was standard procedure). TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3589, ll. 90-91.

<sup>427</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3393, ll. 133-138.

<sup>428</sup> Lenoe, ‘Reader Response’, p. 114.

that same morning.<sup>429</sup> These more proactive efforts provide an important counterpoint to those instances where one sees delays or disruption resulting from the crisis of war.

More generally, many of the formulaic patterns and practices of Soviet media, traced by Lenoe at the end of the 1920s and into the early 1930s, persisted at the end of the interwar period. Indeed, they formed much of the initial response to the fighting that we have illuminated in previous chapters. Collective letters were one such strategy, as journalists toured factories with pre-written resolutions in an effort to gather workers' signatures.<sup>430</sup> In Leningrad, the Party even sought to secure the endorsement of the cultural elite, with Dmitri Shostakovich among the signatures appended to an early show of support for any potential Soviet reaction to Finnish provocations at the end of November: 'Destroy the enemy, if he does not see reason'.<sup>431</sup>

Shostakovich was figure who enjoyed a complicated and often contentious relationship with the ruling regime, his true feelings about the war are better expressed in the silence he maintained after its conclusion, particularly in relation to his composition of a celebratory piece commissioned to accompany the troops' anticipated march on Helsinki. The work, *Seven Arrangements of Finnish Folk Songs (Suite on Finnish Themes)*, would not be performed publicly until 2001, with the composer never laying claim to the work in his own lifetime.<sup>432</sup>

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<sup>429</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 10, d. 447, ll. 83-85.

<sup>430</sup> Lenoe, *Agitation*, p. 69.

<sup>431</sup> *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 28 November 1939, p. 2.

<sup>432</sup> R. Edwards, *White Death: Russia's War on Finland 1939-40* (London, 2006), p. 98.

Amongst the wider workforce of the region, the opening stage of the conflict was an exhausting experience for many. Meetings were gathered ‘quicker than usual’ and held at all hours, in response to the rapid turn-around of events.<sup>433</sup> Updates on the Finnish provocations were blared out ‘late at night over the radio’.<sup>434</sup> We have already seen the burden this placed on those employed within the local press apparatus, tasked with reporting (and perpetuating) the sanctioned view of events.<sup>435</sup> The war produced a period of heightened activity across the Union, affecting young and old, party and non-party members alike:

The meetings would last two or three hours; sometimes they would even interrupt a lecture in order to hold a meeting. At the meetings they would read resolutions, send telegrams to Stalin and do that sort of thing. Especially during the war with Finland we had a great many of these meetings. They lectured to us on how the front was going and agitated us to support the soldiers in Finland.<sup>436</sup>

### On the Home Front

Away from the headlines and carefully co-ordinated press campaign, a rather inauspicious start to the Red Army’s advance on Finland was witnessed before some of its forces had even left the confines of the city. At 17:15, on 2 December 1939, a Soviet tank was sighted manoeuvring through the streets of Leningrad. Suddenly, a young boy stepped into the path of the vehicle, forcing the driver to take evasive manoeuvres, resulting in its collision with a municipal tram.<sup>437</sup> Fortunately, no casualties were reported on this occasion, though it would not be the only instance of

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<sup>433</sup> For the public response to the Mainila shellings, see *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 27 November 1939.

<sup>434</sup> *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 28 November 1939, p. 1.

<sup>435</sup> See Chapter 2: Crisis-management, Censorship, Control, p. 92.

<sup>436</sup> The respondent, a non-party member, was a student in a technical school (pedagogical institute) at the outbreak of the war. HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 1, Case 9, p. 30.

<sup>437</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3589, l. 47.

military vehicles causing havoc on civilian thoroughfares during the war. Both the local party leadership and central command of the Leningrad Military District received numerous complaints from the civilian section of the militia regarding the refusal of Red Army personnel to adhere to the blackout conditions, established in the immediate aftermath of the invasion.<sup>438</sup> There was widespread flouting of the rules regarding vehicle registration, and a cavalier attitude to driving on civilian roads. A lengthy report, forwarded by the Leningrad Oblast's NKVD chief to Kuznetsov after peaceful relations with Finland were restored, outlines the tragic results of this clash between military and civilian life. In the first quarter of 1940, there was a three-fold increase in traffic deaths and injuries, compared to the equivalent period the previous year. What is striking, however, is that the report was preoccupied with the fact that these numbers were still rising through the month of April, as demobilised troops continued to wreak havoc on the city's streets.<sup>439</sup> It was not just the roads that proved a more treacherous prospect for local inhabitants during the war, contemporary militia reports offer numerous examples of military and civilian life clashing with unexpected results during the course of the fighting in Finland.<sup>440</sup>

The war persisted as a backdrop to daily life. For those directly affected by the fighting, whether as a result of the departure of loved ones to front, or food and goods shortages amongst the civilian population, it could elicit a mixture of frustration, loss, anger and political fervour.<sup>441</sup> Though many were quick to discern the proper manner

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<sup>438</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3589, l. 40; d. 4320, ll. 35-38.

<sup>439</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4300, ll. 216-218.

<sup>440</sup> For example, a report was submitted detailing the discovery of weapons, left by an unknown soldier, sometime between 20 and 21 December. The weapons were spotted outside a local cinema, though there was no sight of the owner or explanation of how the weapons got there. TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3589, ll. 134-135.

<sup>441</sup> There is at least one recorded instance of someone refusing to vote in elections to the Supreme Soviet, after their three nephews were wounded while serving with the Red Army. TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3634, l. 111.

in which to speak publicly about the subject, any initial outpourings of patriotic sentiment received by the press did not remain the focus of these letters for long. Many people had more pressing concerns as stores depleted and growing levels of crime emerged.<sup>442</sup> Furthermore, as astute as some people were about the accepted terminology, correspondence of this kind did not provide a suitable forum for raising the more contentious views about the war (or the Red Army's performance within it), which were becoming increasingly widespread as the fighting progressed. The spectre of official censorship was constant and widely acknowledged. Public recognition that letters were often subject to interception by the state security services is evident from the late-imperial period and earliest years of the Soviet republic.<sup>443</sup> It is therefore unlikely that a general sense of popular support for the war, expressed in the opening days of the fighting, reflects the diversity of opinions held privately by the population.<sup>444</sup>

The evidence now available from NKVD and party surveillance also runs counter to any suggestion that the invasion was universally celebrated.<sup>445</sup> There was clearly a broad spectrum of responses. Furthermore, due to the range of official sources reporting to the centre – local militia<sup>446</sup>, the party apparatus<sup>447</sup>, or military

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<sup>442</sup> After the initial outpouring of support for the invasion recorded by the editors of *Leningradskaya Pravda*, the war noticeably dropped in focus from letters sent to the newspaper. Compare, for example, the editors' summaries covering either end of the conflict. TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3393, 4380.

<sup>443</sup> Holquist, 'Information is the *Alpha* and *Omega* of Our Work', p. 430; Velikanova, *Popular Perceptions of Soviet Politics*, p. 74.

<sup>444</sup> Brandenberger's assumption that initial reactions to the war, 'appear to have been generally positive', is reliant on personal correspondence that probably contain a healthy degree of self-censorship. See Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis*, p. 241-242.

<sup>445</sup> See, *Zimniaia Voina: Issledovaniia, Dokumenty, Kommentarii*, pp. 207-210.

<sup>446</sup> The militia recorded a large selection of anti-Soviet comments and rumours related to developments in Finland, western Ukraine and Belorussia, which were circulating between 30 November and 1 December 1939. TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3589, ll. 32-33.

<sup>447</sup> A rapid proliferation of reports by the local party apparatus appeared at the end of November 1939, tracking popular responses to the Moscow's breaking off of diplomatic ties with Helsinki after the shelling of Mainila. Reactions to Molotov's speeches in the run up the invasion, alongside those

channels<sup>448</sup> – as well as less contemporary recollections from the Harvard Project, which often corroborate their assertions, it is safe to assume that they collectively offer a true to life account. The formulaic nature of many of these official sources, as well as their tendency to pander to the particular preoccupations of the ruling regime, has often raised questions as to their validity and value for scholars. However, much like Stalin’s marginalia on the TASS bulletins he received, an additional layer of engagement (and the implicit response from the Party *nomenklatura* it implies) offer further opportunities to draw evidence from these documents about the nature of Soviet surveillance and the ability of external voices to impact policy.

Any engagement was not universal, but often conformed to the rigid power vertical of party control, with the direction of information, in the first instance, to the most senior figures – typically Zhdanov and Kuznetsov – with peripheral characters only receiving copies of important reports and circulars should they fall within the remit of their role. It was generally Zhdanov and Kuznetsov who showed the greatest inclination for engaging with these materials, drawing attention with marks and commentary to the aspects of those documents that caught their eye and might have elicited a more direct response.<sup>449</sup>

Some of this marginalia may well represent the idiosyncrasies of the individual, passing notes of interest (much like Stalin’s sardonic commentary

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responding to military developments after the outbreak of war, suggest the Party saw definite value in collecting this information. TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3633-3634.

<sup>448</sup> Zhdanov, in his capacity as member of Military Soviet of the 7<sup>th</sup> Army, also received updates on the political mood of Red Army forces during the war. See, for example, RGASPI, f. 77, op. 4, d. 45, ll. 49-57; d. 46, ll. 12-24.

<sup>449</sup> For example, a series of duplicate copies of *svodki* sent to Zhdanov, Shtikov, Bumagin and Nikitin by the regional party apparatus were each highlighted by the recipient with a pencil line under their name. Zhdanov can be typically found adorning his copies with further markings, indicating those aspects of the reports that caught his attention in particular. TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3633.

scrawled alongside daily news digests from TASS), or mental markers to be followed up when time allowed. A habit of acknowledging suicides of young men and members of the armed forces is one possible instance of this practice. Though a number of examples can be drawn out from reports at the end of 1939, far more research would be required to determine whether the attention paid to these cases of premature death, offered with only cursory details by the local militia, suggested a wider concern for the Party or a deviation from the norms of Soviet life.<sup>450</sup>

A more significant example to emerge from these sources is the development of an officially sponsored and publicly driven gift-drive for soldiers on active duty at the Finnish front. This campaign became a focal point for the Party at a number of stages in the fighting, coinciding with the traditional holiday season at New Years and the anniversary of the Red Army's formation, celebrated on 23 February 1940. It was the result of both grass roots initiative and active sponsorship by the military and civilian authorities.

The Soviet media's earlier reports of the impoverished condition of Finnish troops and the families they left behind, while potentially deflecting criticism at the poor care afforded to Soviet forces and their families, were quickly undermined once the Red Army learned for themselves the realities of civilian life in Finland:

Once we had taken the first Finnish farmstead, our [men] immediately climbed into attics and cellars to poke around... And there – sour cream, mushrooms and ham, pickles, all sorts... We turn to the political instructor

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<sup>450</sup> In a series of summaries sent to Kuznetsov, the reader notes five separate cases, highlighted in pencil. Other instances of suicide, reported between 15 November and 15 December 1939, appear to have been overlooked if they did not include members of the same demographic. TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3589, ll. 5, 20, 43, 89, 122. For a close study of the Bolshevik regime's attempts to come to terms with suicide in the 1920s, see K. Pinnow, *Lost to the Collective: Suicide and the Promise of Soviet Socialism, 1921-1929* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2010).

and say, 'How is it that you told us that the Finnish peasants are dying of hunger, begging?'<sup>451</sup>

Irrespective of any disenchantment caused on the front line by the official presentation of the war, these men also had families at home who naturally maintained concern for their welfare, whatever their personal feelings about the conflict. This inspired the kind of local efforts acknowledged by a militia report on 3 December 1939. A group of local women, 'on their own initiative', were observed working with several activists to organise a fundraiser to provide gifts for wounded Red Army soldiers. Two hundred roubles were collected and passed to the district authorities for distribution. This rallying of support for the war effort caught the attention of the leadership, the reader of the report dutifully marking the details in red pencil.<sup>452</sup>

It is unclear where the decision came from to expand this small-scale effort into a much broader campaign. However, instructions eventually followed from the LMD to regional representatives of the Party and Komsomol, which proposed that the sending of gifts and letters be more systematically organised via the establishment of dedicated commissions. Specific guidelines were provided about the type of gifts that would be suitable, including food, tobacco, winter accessories and other non-essentials. It was to be a significant undertaking, with one regional commission expected to operate from 10am to 8pm.<sup>453</sup>

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<sup>451</sup> Cited in K. Aleksandrov, 'Antistalinskii Protest v Period Sovietsko-Finlyandskoi Voini 1939-1940', in K. Aleksandrov, *Russkie Soldaty Vermakhta: Gerои ili Predатели* (Moscow, 2005), pp. 10-11.

<sup>452</sup> The typed report was originally addressed to Kuznetsov. A copy was also forwarded to Shtikov, his name added by hand to the top of the page. It is unclear, therefore, whose copy now resides in the archive. TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3589, ll. 48-49.

<sup>453</sup> Though this particular order was addressed to the party and state apparatus of a single district, documents from after the war attest to the fact this campaign was pursued across the whole oblast (see below, note 462). TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 12, d. 12, l. 15.

The campaign was given good traction in the regional press, with *Leningradskaya Pravda* offering profiles of the military-wives involved in the collection of gifts and other essentials, alongside reports of the enthusiastic response from the local population contributing to the drive.<sup>454</sup> Despite the Party appropriating the initiative to score points, the preservation of letters from a diverse cross-section of the population who contributed reiterates popular investment in the campaign was not purely the result of pressure from above. For all the examples of carefully drafted collective messages from workers in factories, expressing politically sound language and patriotic fervour, the handwritten notes of individuals, young and old, with loved ones fighting at the front, reflect the personal care and genuine concern that was invested in these packages.<sup>455</sup>

To take one example: a note adorned with a small sketch of a Red Army soldier and a Soviet plane flying overhead was received by the LMD. The author, a young boy named Nikolai (presently studying in the fourth class), was eager to elicit a response from any soldier that might read his appeal. He innocently stressed that he was never the recipient of poor marks (only good or excellent grades) and hoped any reply would provide both a name and age of his new found comrade. Adopting the official designation of the enemy – the White Finns – his letter offers an insight into how this language penetrated his speech when he describes reading about the progress

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<sup>454</sup> *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 18 December 1939, p. 2. Further updates would appear later that month, after the excitement surrounding Stalin's sixtieth birthday had died down. See, for example, *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 26-31 December 1939.

<sup>455</sup> For a large collection of these letters, which include those sent from outside the limits of the Leningrad region, see TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 12, d. 48-50.

of military actions in the newspapers.<sup>456</sup> It is, above all, the product of a complex mixture of external and internal motives.<sup>457</sup>

The soldiers who received these gifts and notes from the civilian population were grateful of this outpouring of human kindness.<sup>458</sup> Even those receiving notes from strangers took time to pen their thanks, either directly, or with the hope of expressing their gratitude more publicly in the pages of *Leningradskaya Pravda*.<sup>459</sup> They responded enthusiastically to eager school children and their idealisation of front line troops, and dutifully acknowledged the contribution to the war effort made by workers.<sup>460</sup> Numerous examples survive of the collective letters that were drafted by units under the watchful eyes and guiding hand of political workers at the front, but these should not negate the important levels of human interaction on display.<sup>461</sup> The war belies an easy categorisation as either one that was universally popular or unanimously condemned.

Beyond a simple gauge of public opinion, the sponsorship and direction of this campaign, after the initial snowballing of local efforts, reiterates the scope for ground level initiatives that were not reliant on the Party's intervention alone.<sup>462</sup> In fact, the

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<sup>456</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 12, d. 12, ll. 11-12.

<sup>457</sup> In another example, a small collective note written by a group of young pioneers included a personal amendment by one of the children. Irrespective of any guiding hand of teachers or party affiliates in the production of this letter, the author simply wished to acknowledge that their father was also a soldier, living in Leningrad. TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 12, d. 48, l. 85.

<sup>458</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 12, d. 47.

<sup>459</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 12, d. 47, l. 18. For a summery acknowledging letters sent by Red Army troops to the editors of *Leningradskaya Pravda*, see TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3393, ll. 210-212. In December, the newspaper provided an official treatment of this correspondence between military and civilian personal. See *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 17 December 1939, p. 1.

<sup>460</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 12, d. 47, l. 16.

<sup>461</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 12, d. 47, ll. 5-6, 8.

<sup>462</sup> A report reviewing the work of the commission responsible for the gift campaign was sent to Zhdanov and other representatives of the Oblast Committee on 23 March 1940. Credit is once again given to the initiative of urban and rural workers, intelligentsia and students. The report also

centre often proved an impediment to the effective exploitation of this expression of popular engagement. Not only have we seen how the editors of regional newspapers were unsure of the limits within which they were operating when publicising soldiers' letters from the front – many, as we have noted, preoccupied with expressing thanks for the moral and material support they received – but the regime arguably missed a further opportunity in its failure to make more of this outpouring of goodwill following the restoration of peace.<sup>463</sup> A letter, drafted in March 1940 by the Deputy Head of the Military Department of the Leningrad Obkom (and Deputy Chairman of the Commission for Gifts) Alekseev, suggested something be done with the large surplus of donations collected during the war. The intention was for articles and brochures to be produced, drawing on the valuable experience of the commission.<sup>464</sup> There is no evidence that these recommendations were acted upon. Further attempts by LenTASS to put together exhibitions after the war to educate the population about the expansion of Soviet influence in Finland and the Baltic states also failed to gather momentum.<sup>465</sup> None of these proposed projects were in line with the regime's more pressing desire to draw attention away from the disastrous performance of its forces.

Though the spectre of official censorship was a hindrance to troops and civilians communicating the negative aspects of life at the front line, Leningraders were unlikely to have been ignorant of the harsh realities of conditions on the Karelian Isthmus. Whilst official reports of the fighting were sparse and carefully censored, with press photos of troops limited to smiling faces of eager young recruits,

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acknowledges that the campaign was afforded widespread coverage in newspapers and radio. TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4071, ll. 45-50.

<sup>463</sup> By mid-February, even the editors of *Leningradskaya Pravda* began to complain to Zhdanov about the limits placed on them by the censors in comparison to the central party newspapers in Moscow. TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4379, l. 129.

<sup>464</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 12, d. 52, ll. 1-3.

<sup>465</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4385, ll. 54, 61-62.

temperatures that winter were bitterly cold and shortages of essential goods impacted civilian life in equal measure.<sup>466</sup> As one of the protagonists of Grossman's *Life and Fate* would recall, 'it wasn't Finland, but the Finnish winter' that was responsible for disastrous results of the war.<sup>467</sup> Indeed, in a rather shocking revelation of the ill prepared state of the Red Army for these winter conditions, the post-conflict meetings in Moscow between Stalin and his general staff later acknowledged that standard practice for recruits before the war was to entirely avoid training in temperatures below minus fifteen degrees centigrade.<sup>468</sup>

More troubling still for the regime, as the fighting progressed, was the steady flow of casualties returning from combat. Davies has acknowledged how quickly reports could spread from the medical ward to civilian circles.<sup>469</sup> By mid-December, word of Red Army losses were already being picked up by the militia, via rumours circulated in hospital.<sup>470</sup> The problem was exacerbated by the need to recruit volunteers from the Party and Komsomol to meet the growing demand for medical personnel:

During the first Soviet Finnish War, all members of Komsomol, we were mobilized for hospital work, because weren't enough nurses and medical personnel. Dat how I met people who were wounded and all dose people, they were telling us dat it was all false, dat Finland didn't begun war against Soviet Union, dat it was Stalin who give orders to Red Army to enter Finland (*sic.*).<sup>471</sup>

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<sup>466</sup> Numerous letters of complaint received by the editors of *Leningradskaya Pravda* in January 1940 highlight the poor winter preparations made for housing in the region and attest to the impact of the cold on the region's inhabitants. TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4379, ll. 103-105.

<sup>467</sup> Grossman, *Life and Fate*, p. 261.

<sup>468</sup> Chubaryan and Shukman, *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War*, p. 20.

<sup>469</sup> Davies, *Popular Opinion*, p. 100.

<sup>470</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3589, l. 122.

<sup>471</sup> HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 15, Case 301, p. 51.

Even civilians not in direct contact with the wounded were eager to seek out news. They were responding, to some extent, to the complete failure on the part of the regime to offer any kind of transparency about the human cost of war while the fighting raged on. Contemporaries recognised the speed with which rumours travelled in this period and how strongly they contradicted the official presentation of events, preoccupied as it was with stories of valour and victory.<sup>472</sup>

The regime took steps to limit this channel of unofficial information. Reports from foreign observers in Moscow and Leningrad reveal that the removal of wounded from these major urban centres was a standard policy.<sup>473</sup> This strategy may have limited some access to the stories shared by returning soldiers from the front line, but as already noted, the task of stocking medical facilities with personnel and essential equipment drew manpower and materials from across the region, perpetuating contact between military and civilian personnel.

Soldiers removed from active duty and no longer under direct care would also carry reports home about the realities of the fighting and the material condition of their Finnish foes. This provided more tangible evidence of the disparity between official reports of Finnish experiences of hardship and exploitation, versus the experiences of Soviet troops across the border:

After outbreak of Soviet-Finnish war spoke widely about this since two of her fellow villagers wounded and sent home from front: 'At home they told their mothers what they saw in Finland. They said that in Finland everybody had a watch on his hand, a nice suit and plenty of food - exactly as it was in Russia during Tsar Nicholas.'<sup>474</sup>

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<sup>472</sup> HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 4, Case 30, p. 28.

<sup>473</sup> NA FO371/24850 162; FO371/24856 34.

<sup>474</sup> HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 34, Case 109/(NY)1462, p. 25.

For the residents of Leningrad, more concrete evidence of the home comforts and material wealth of the Finnish people arrived with the accumulation of war booty that started to appear in the city. The militia began to make note of more extreme cases, including a healthy supply of Finnish built bicycles discovered just a week after the invasion, stored in the apartments of the father and neighbour of one enterprising Red Army officer.<sup>475</sup> The huge numbers of appropriated goods recorded by the Leningrad Military District after the war evidence the potential scope of the problem facing the regime. On 4 July 1940, Zhdanov was sent a report from the trophy commission responsible for cataloguing the diverse range of items gathered by Soviet forces. Among its pages were listed thousands of items of clothing, furniture, electrical goods and household wares.<sup>476</sup> If only a fraction of their number was crossing the border during the war, it must have offered Leningraders another startling contrast to the Party's routine reports of poverty and hardship experienced by the Finns.

The state, for its part, was also not averse to exploiting the war for its own material benefit. One of the few territorial gains made during the fighting offered a welcome coup for the Soviet cultural set. Ilya Repin, a renowned painter in pre-revolutionary Russia and celebrated precursor of the Party's own prescription for 'socialist realism', had spent much of his later life in Kuokkala, living on the grounds of his Penates estate. When Helsinki declared its independence from the former Russian Empire after the October Revolution, Kuokkala was incorporated into the new Finnish republic, though Repin continued to live and work on the estate until his

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<sup>475</sup> The guilty party was one Lieutenant Yevmenov, who had reportedly crossed the Finnish border with six bikes in early December 1939. A further report submitted later that month revealed the discovery of clothes and household goods among the possessions of two military wives whose husbands were on active duty on the Finnish front. TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3589, ll. 63, 115.

<sup>476</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4328, ll. 135-153.

death in 1930.<sup>477</sup> The military occupation of Kuokkala during the Finnish campaign returned control of the estate to Moscow. The Soviets discovered numerous works by the artist, together with his personal correspondence, which included letters to notable figures, among them the Party's very own Kliment Voroshilov. Two representatives from the Academy of Arts were assigned to secure control of this important archive, transferring its holdings to Leningrad.<sup>478</sup> The more systematic appropriation of Finnish goods and industrial capacity by the USSR would begin in earnest after the signing of peace in March 1940.<sup>479</sup>

This influx of illicit goods from Finland was not enough to overcome the general shortages and widespread hardship many credited the war with causing. Foreign observers noted the problem and tracked Soviet efforts in the local and regional press to explain away the 'temporary' shortfall in bread and fuel.<sup>480</sup> The local apparatus evidently began to grow concerned. When reporting on the parallel shortage of personnel caused by the recruitment of civilian members of the security apparatus for military service, Chief of the Militia, Colonel Grushko, feared the consequences of being left shorthanded: 'This situation poses a threat to security in the oblast's districts of a revolutionary order (*revolyutsionnogo poryadka*), especially in wartime'.<sup>481</sup>

This spurred on police and state security services to closely track the availability of goods in stores and to ramp-up surveillance of the popular mood.

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<sup>477</sup> For a short biography of Repin's life and major works, see G. Sternin and J. Kirillina, *Ilya Repin* (New York, N.Y., 2011), pp. 181-191.

<sup>478</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4377, ll. 13-17.

<sup>479</sup> See Chapter 5: Silencing the Past, pp. 210-211.

<sup>480</sup> NA FO371/24850 136-146.

<sup>481</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4320, l. 31 (24 January 1940).

Proactive, rather than simply a retrospective assessment of developments, this was the regime seeking to respond to the rapid escalation of a problem beyond its immediate ability to resolve. While instances of speculation were clamped down upon with vigour, and attempts were made to redirect goods in the region, there is little evidence to suggest the regional apparatus made any kind of headway before the end of the war.<sup>482</sup>

The local militia were already overstretched by more pressing security concerns brought on by the fighting in Finland. Fears of an aerial bombardment of Leningrad's industrial capacity led to the enforcement of a blackout in urban centres. This exacerbated concerns among the local and state security services of growing instances of 'hooliganism'.<sup>483</sup> This was a topic upon which the Party evidently felt it was on a surer footing, and some attempts to engage with the problem were given limited publicity during the war.<sup>484</sup> The state opted to tread carefully. Any proactive steps to deal with select instances of anti-social behaviour were given limited print space in the local press, but nowhere was a direct line drawn connecting these concerns with the results of war with Finland. An example was made, however, to

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<sup>482</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4300.

<sup>483</sup> Reports received by the British Embassy in Moscow indicate precautionary measures were also taken in the Soviet capital, with the dimming of lights and use of blue lamps inside buildings. This was presented by the Soviet press as an economic move, though, according to the Embassy's sources, there may have also been some truth to this explanation. NA FO371/24850 81-88. On 16 December 1939, a report was sent to Kuznetsov, outlining the impact of the blackout on Kronstadt and attempts to respond to rising levels of hooliganism in the city. TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3589, l. 127.

<sup>484</sup> Evidence of public concern over the levels of 'hooliganism' in the region is not limited to the months of fighting in Finland. For example, complaints forwarded to *Leningradskaya Pravda* about the actions of a group disrupting cinemagoers in mid-November were published in the 'Letters to the Editor' section later that month. An additional follow-up report detailing the response of the militia in this instance was published in December. See *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 24 Nov. 1939, p. 3; 14 December 1939, p. 3. A more general effort to deflect public concerns over the issue was published under the title 'For a perfect order' on 9 December 1939. It included an interview with the city public prosecutor and elicited further responses from the public, addressed to the newspaper's editors. See *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 9 December 1939, p. 4; TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3393, ll. 142-144.

dissuade any that might hope to take advantage of the difficult night time conditions on the home front.<sup>485</sup>

Behind the scenes, the task of enforcing the precautionary measures taken in wartime fell on the state militia, who, in turn, sought to draft-in support from the Party and Komsomol for the task of patrolling the streets of Leningrad at night. Regular police summaries testify to the growing numbers this required as the war progressed, though it apparently fell short of the hastily drawn up targets made by the Party's city committee.<sup>486</sup> Orders issued on the 30 December 1939 earmarked a further thousand Party and Komsomol members to assist the militia. Nevertheless, a report sent to Kuznetsov by the regional apparatus of the NKVD, more than a month after the war's conclusion, complained bitterly of the failure to properly co-ordinate these efforts between state and party apparatus, highlighting instances where its members explicitly refused to fulfil this role.<sup>487</sup> The regime was being made to look increasingly vulnerable; the war stretched its resources and drastically undermined public morale. Its workforce continued to circulate 'anti-soviet provocationary rumours' about the progress of the Red Army in Finland, apparently undeterred by the threat of reprisals.<sup>488</sup>

None of the negative ways in which the Finnish crisis directly affected civilian life in the region was given coverage in the press. The Party Department for Propaganda and Agitation, with whom much of the responsibility rested for

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<sup>485</sup> On 20 December 1939, William Seeds, the British Ambassador to the Soviet Union, acknowledged at least two recent cases of 'hooliganism' in Leningrad that had elicited the death sentence. NA FO371/24850 82.

<sup>486</sup> Under the heading, 'Measures to protect social order', routine summaries regularly included figures for representatives from the militia, Party and Komsomol, participating in nightly patrols. See, for example, TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3589, ll. 115-116.

<sup>487</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4300, ll. 294-295.

<sup>488</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4300, ll. 165-166.

orientating people to the proper line, seemed as equally ill equipped as their counterparts in the militia to respond to the challenges the war posed them. The same has already been acknowledged of the propaganda department's efforts in Moscow. Narrowing our attention to Leningrad allows a more focused study of this issue. One can illuminate basic institutional (and ideological) failings and the general limitations of the party faithful to reconcile their position with a naturally inquisitive (and often sceptical) public.

### The International Situation

At the end of 1938 the regime was in a celebratory mood. With publication of the *Short Course*, the history and ideology of the Party was at last canonised for domestic and international audiences alike.<sup>489</sup> The new Soviet bible was a text deemed to hold the key to a fresh campaign of enlightenment for the Party rank-and-file and broader sections of society.<sup>490</sup> And yet, by the end of the following year, the Department of Propaganda and Agitation in Leningrad, whose network of agents were akin to a secular priesthood tasked with spreading the gospel of Bolshevism, were already concerned with the problems they faced in getting people to properly engage with the book. Compounded by the persistence of problems with basic literacy in the region, in many districts candidate members of the Party struggled to penetrate the dense text beyond its opening few chapters.<sup>491</sup> In spite of the evident desire to prioritise responding to this shortfall, events on the international stage were about to

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<sup>489</sup> R. Service, *Comrades: Communism: A World History* (London, 2007), p. 180.

<sup>490</sup> For a detailed study of the introduction, dissemination and reception of the *Short Course* in the Soviet Union, see Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis*, pp. 216-228.

<sup>491</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 10, d. 447, ll. 86-90; d. 473, ll. 68-71.

seriously undermine any such efforts.<sup>492</sup>

As a collective failure to counter Hitler's expansionist aims pushed the rest of Europe closer and closer to war, the Soviet Union suddenly opted to engage with its political and ideological rival. After years of vitriolic opposition, both sides sought to reconcile their differences over freshly inked treaties on trade and geo-political relations. With developments in the east also witnessing Japan's encroachment on Soviet interests in Asia, enemies still abounded for the regime, irrespective of the essential breathing room afforded by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

The 'international situation' – as the central and regional apparatus of the Department for Propaganda and Agitation officially alluded to events abroad<sup>493</sup> – began to change too rapidly to allow those responsible to elaborate a clear general line. The shift to an 'anti-imperialist' war required the same adjustment in policy and discourse already seen imperfectly implemented amongst the Comintern and with more immediacy by the central party press. The inconsistent adaptation seen across the international communist movement was equally evident in the regional case of Leningrad. For example, the 'need to know' basis of Kremlin rule meant plans for the coming Autumn's lecture cycles in the region still allowed for discussion of the 'aggression of Fascist governments' and an assessment of the 'united front' among communist parties abroad as late as 19 August 1939.<sup>494</sup> The difficulty in implementing the new line is implied in the castigation the department received the

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<sup>492</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 10, d. 473.

<sup>493</sup> Not only was this term used exhaustively throughout internal documents and communication within the department, but it was also adopted in its members' day-to-day expression of public deeds and 'private' reflections. On 8 February 1940, extracts from the diary of a district party propagandist were published alongside a profile of a day in the life of a local '*partkabinet*' (party study). Nowhere was explicit reference made to events in Finland, though the 'international situation' remained acceptable shorthand throughout. *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 8 February 1940, p. 2. See, also, below, note 496.

<sup>494</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3376, ll. 70-73.

following month, for its failure to maintain close control over lectures and discussions on the ‘international situation’. The new situation demanded party members within the department to alone co-ordinate lectures and talks, with better preparation of materials expected by their superiors.<sup>495</sup>

For their part, the department’s personnel preferred to bury themselves in the official past, whilst the civilian population, in contrast, showed a clear desire to keep up with current events abroad.<sup>496</sup> In the face of prevailing unofficial channels of information, the Party did not (and could not) simply repress all news of international developments, despite its best efforts to limit their impact. It sought instead to inform and enlighten its people via press, radio, lectures, film and the daily grind of meetings, group discussions and collective resolutions that appear to have taken up an inordinate amount of the workforce’s time in this unsettled period.

The Party undoubtedly painted a particular view of the world for its people, one that sought, in many ways, to make the lands outside the borders, laws and liberties of the Soviet Union a dangerous, violent and oppressive place.<sup>497</sup> The regular deployment of the terminology of terror against rival powers abroad was one

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<sup>495</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3376, ll. 149-150.

<sup>496</sup> On 17 February 1940, a report on the work of district *partkabinets* was forwarded to the Leningrad ObKom. Despite the ardent desire to focus efforts on providing guidance in the study of the *Short Course* and assist in the direction mass-political agitation in the countryside, party activists could not escape popular preoccupation with the ‘international situation’ and, in particular, Finland. TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 10, d. 473, ll. 37-47.

<sup>497</sup> Jeffrey Brooks has traced the growing prominence of ‘official xenophobia’ in the Soviet press through the 1920s. This demonising of rival foreign powers was intended to counter the prevailing ‘cosmopolitanism’ in Russia evident from the late-imperial period and into the early years of the Bolshevik regime. During the war scare of 1927, it was also deployed as a strategy for undermining the position of the opposition by Stalin and his allies, and was subsequently retained as a dominant trope of the press during the first Five Year Plan and drive for collectivisation. See J. Brooks, ‘Official Xenophobia and Popular Cosmopolitanism in Early Soviet Russia’, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 97, No. 5 (December 1992), pp. 1431-1448.

important strategy for achieving this.<sup>498</sup> As we have seen with the Finnish example, there still remained an abundance of legitimate targets for the Party to rail against, even if the readjustment of Nazi-Soviet relations removed Germany from the firing line.

The persistence of this language and other strategies seen in the regional press coverage of the conflict in the region align with Lenoe's assertion that Soviet journalism in the era of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and early 1930s did not witness dramatic changes in approach.<sup>499</sup> What does need to be adjusted, however, is the preoccupation with newspapers' growing specialisation as a mouthpiece for the party faithful alone. The sense that wider engagement with the lay population was of lesser importance might have reflected an official attitude, though it does not echo the outlook of every non-Party voice:

I read [newspapers] for two reasons. First to be informed on political events, secondly, to know how to react externally to events with other people. I think that many Soviet citizens do the same thing.<sup>500</sup>

Even the layout of newspapers prescribed by the Party did not, necessarily, reflect the manner they were read, or the relative weight given to their content. In acknowledging the persistent attention this thesis has paid to the back-page bulletins of TASS, it is rewarding to discover at least one respondent of the Harvard Project who shared much the same focus on international affairs:

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<sup>498</sup> Although Brooks points to stories of repressions abroad as a common tactic of the Soviet press when it sought to paint a picture of 'the nastiness of life under capitalism', he neglects to attach any significance to the language of 'terror' and 'terrorism' being used in the press' delivery of these reports to its own citizens (even when citing Stalin's own commentary on the persistent threat of 'terrorists and arsonists' operating against the Soviet Union). Brooks, 'Official Xenophobia', pp. 1442-1442, 1445.

<sup>499</sup> Lenoe, *Agitation*, pp. 76-79.

<sup>500</sup> HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 11, Case 136, p. 68.

Everybody starts reading the paper from the back page. But it varies. I personally understood the meaning of [international news], but some people, the young ones, those who have never been abroad, or the Party people, they look differently at things.<sup>501</sup>

Beyond the printed word, the publication of the *Short Course* also brought with it a fresh impetus for spreading the Party's message through oral channels. Although the *Short Course* was originally intended for independent study, the press and party apparatus were soon inundated with requests for assistance with the text. The result was the organisation of consultations and lectures to support private attempts by the rank-and-file to 'master Bolshevism'.<sup>502</sup> By the outbreak of war with Finland, a whole cycle of public lectures operated on a routine basis in Leningrad, organised by the Department for Propaganda and Agitation under the watchful eye of the regional authorities.<sup>503</sup> Attendance of lectures dedicated to the 'international situation' dwarfed that of any other category of public talk on offer. The history of the Party, classical Marxism-Leninism, theoretical questions and even those of a more 'popular' nature simply couldn't boast anything like the numbers clamouring for news of the world around them. Oblast figures covering the whole of 1939 echo a similar picture seen at the district level for specific months of the war. For example, of the comparable 311 lectures on the Eighteenth Party Congress, the 310 on the individual works of Lenin and Stalin, and 371 related to the 'international situation', attendance is recorded of 33,866, 26,082 and 62,219 persons respectively. Although lectures on

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<sup>501</sup> My thanks must go to Jon Waterlow for highlighting this illuminating case. HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 10, Case 133, p. 49.

<sup>502</sup> Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis*, pp. 217-219.

<sup>503</sup> For examples of the kinds of lectures this incorporated, see TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, o. 2v, d. 3931, ll. 58-60. Similar guidelines were distributed to coincide with Stalin's sixtieth birthday. TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, o. 2v, d. 3931, l. 61.

the outside world constituted fewer than twenty percent of the total for that year, their audience accounted for more than a quarter of all attendees to these official forums.<sup>504</sup>

Regardless of Stalin's direct intervention, or the official pronouncements of Molotov (the public voice of the Party's international orientation since May 1939), the speed with which the external environment saw drastic change, both east and west of the Soviet borders, was beyond the Party's abilities to react to the new international situation. In contrast, the party faithful in the Department for Propaganda and Agitation busied themselves with the sacraments of Marxism-Leninism while poring over the *Short Course*. They preferred to isolate themselves from a world of sin and ever shifting political (and ideological) orthodoxies that risked severing them from their anointed roles of guiding the cadres to the promise of eternal salvation in the paradise of communism.<sup>505</sup>

Amongst their private and public discourse, in references to the real world, the term 'international situation' operated as safe shorthand for events not yet written into the official history of the Party. Even internal party communication between Moscow and Leningrad necessitated this oblique language. Inter-department reports within the oblast were scarce in detail and tended to avoid direct reference to Finland.<sup>506</sup> Behind this institutional obfuscation, we can still catch a glimpse of the situation on the

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<sup>504</sup> For the 1939 oblast figures for attendance at lectures divided by category, see TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 10, d. 473, l. 15. For a selection of tables providing figures at the district level for February – April 1940, see TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 10, d. 491, ll. 1-3.

<sup>505</sup> Jan Plamper provides a useful discussion of the category of sacral versus ideological texts (or canons). He points out that in the context of the violent and traumatic upheaval of the Stalinist era, its ideological canons required constant reinforcement and articulation of their significance 'to embed them in collective memory'. When the official narrative was being repeatedly rewritten, as in the case of the Finnish War, its canonisation was, ostensibly, a task beyond these bastions of Bolshevik ideology. J. Plamper, 'Abolishing Ambiguity: Soviet Censorship Practices in the 1930s', *Russian Review*, Vol. 60, No. 4. (October 2001), pp. 526-544.

<sup>506</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 10, d. 473.

ground. Handwritten lecture reports, funnelled to the regional centre, were generally limited in detail when offered up to the first layer of the party hierarchy. They continued to reinforce the dominant theme of the ‘international situation and external [foreign] policy of the USSR’ (to use its full title), in addition to reporting attendance details of the public meetings dedicated to this topic. Nevertheless, preserved in their roughly scribbled notes is evidence of the difficult questions these gatherings provoked for the lecturers. Attendees were not afraid to draw attention to flaws in official policy or gaps in the narrative: ‘Why is the military activity in Finland dragging on?’; ‘Whether it is possible to consider or examine the situation in Finland, in connection with the help of England and Mannerheim’s bands, as intervention against the USSR?’; ‘Why, if we have a population of 180 million, can’t we cope with Finland, where the population is 3.5 million people?’; ‘[What is] the fate of the People’s Government of Finland?’.<sup>507</sup> This level of detail was obscured in the process of collating, summarising and sending these reports through the power vertical, and, thus, was clearly considered to be an inconvenient truth better ignored by the more zealous members of the party apparatus.<sup>508</sup>

Although the social background of lecture attendees is unclear from the raw data available, these gatherings were not directed at party members alone. Listings for public lectures (alongside those of the theatre and cinema) were published regularly on the back page of *Leningradskaya Pravda*. Here, the provision of historically

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<sup>507</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 10, d. 490, ll. 17-18, 64-65.

<sup>508</sup> The failure to report these more benign expressions of popular confusion and scepticism about the war may have meant the leadership in Moscow and Leningrad was generally limited to instances of anti-Soviet commentary recorded by both the party apparatus and punitive organs of state. One wonders if this merely reinforced the siege mentality of Stalin and his inner circle, associating heretical thoughts with primarily the criminal elements of society and the more extreme expressions of anti-state ideas. Any need to reconcile themselves to more mundane instances of popular dissatisfaction within the Party's version of events may not have been deemed a priority, especially when their subordinates, at every level of the power vertical, were unwilling to report the truth to those above them.

grounded talks responding to the interest in international events, together with regular round-ups of recent developments on the world stage, indicates the Party's concern with meeting an evident demand. Much as in the rest of the media, there were limits on the regime's ability (or desire) to maintain the flow of information about Finnish events. A sharp fall-off of related lectures is seen in the middle of January, with only sporadic talks specifically discussing Finland (whether from a historical or contemporary perspective) persisting through the remainder of the war.<sup>509</sup>

There was also need to adapt to the shifting presentation of the war. Early signs of a new narrative centred on the 'Mannerheim Line' are visible by February 1940, with topically themed lectures on the history and development of modern fortifications scheduled.<sup>510</sup> The Party remained on its strongest footing when revisiting its sacrosanct past. The spectre of foreign intervention during the Russian civil war was a regularly recurring theme. Current targets of the Soviet rancour were highlighted through instances of their past animosity to socialism, with particular vitriol reserved for England through successive lectures on 26 and 27 February 1940.<sup>511</sup> Speakers used the lectern as a platform to draw the same parallels pursued by the Soviet press, between current events and the condemnation of the imperialist aims of England and France in Finland.

The success or failure of this co-ordinated campaign is harder to gauge. By the summer of 1940, after the war's conclusion and a degree of normality returned to the region, assessments of the state of party-political work in the LMD reveal that the

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<sup>509</sup> For an example of these listings, including reference to both talks on 'international events' and a historical treatment of Finland's relationship to 'imperial intervention during the civil war in the USSR', see *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 4 January 1940.

<sup>510</sup> *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 6 February 1940. See Chapter 5: Silencing the Past, pp. 210-234.

<sup>511</sup> *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 26-27 February 1940.

serious shortfalls in the ideological work of the civilian sector mirrored those in the military.<sup>512</sup> We have already seen how, for Stalin, there was a clear and present need to resolve these failings.<sup>513</sup>

Conversely, active engagement by the population with these official attempts at presenting an ideologically orthodox and politically sound view of global events need not be viewed exclusively as an endorsement of the party line or an indication that it resonated with every audience. As with people's perceived ability to 'read between the lines' of the day's news, a more selective reception of the oral dissemination of the Party's message could still offer different information for both the party faithful and curious outside observer (two categories that are by no means mutually exclusive).

Thus, the figures for attendance at lectures dedicated to the 'international situation' are still not representative of a regional population that numbered in the millions. Neither these statistics nor the numerous examples of state surveillance and surveys of popular opinion have preserved the voices of the politically disengaged and passively disinterested. Again, it would be futile to attempt a sweeping survey of the region's inhabitants that somehow captures every facet of popular opinion. Rather, what we have tried to show with this chapter is that any attempts to divide Soviet society between these extremes of opposition and support, of believer and non-believer, is an impediment to recognising the great diversity of life and experiences that persisted under the Soviet system. Selective engagement with that system, the information it offered (and withheld) about the wider world, and the resources it

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<sup>512</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4328, ll. 43-54.

<sup>513</sup> Chubaryan and Shukman, *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War*, p. 271.

provided, was navigated by groups and individuals often making the best of what life threw at them.

Emerging from the archives, the sense of disorder and chaos that grew out of the crisis is often palpable, as are moments of farce and extreme tragedy inherent in life. Popular attitudes include both a passive disregard of the war or an enthusiastic embrace of the patriotic feeling the state was keen to project in support of the conflict. Some were opportunistic, others objected vocally to the burden it placed on their lives and those of their families. Throughout, one should regard neither the state, nor the society it claimed to represent to be acting entirely independently of one other; each was forced to react to changing circumstances and demonstrated a mutual willingness to adapt to the crisis.

It would also be wrong to present the region's inhabitants as a passive, non-critical audience. They deserve, instead, to be seen as actors in their own right. Many showed a capacity to engage with the official script and unfolding narrative while simultaneously reacting to external cues and ad-libbing as appropriate. This, in turn, forced a more collaborative response from the state at a local level than has been traditionally acknowledged. While the centre undoubtedly resisted this initiative from below, there were clear limits on its ability to do so.

## Chapter 5

### Silencing the Past

The past, he reflected, had not merely been altered, it had been actually destroyed. For how could you establish even the most obvious fact when there existed no record outside your own memory?<sup>514</sup>

George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

How could the people in power give free rein to somebody who knows the truth, even if it concerns the remotest stars? Do you imagine the Pope will hear the truth when you tell him he's wrong, and not merely just hear that he's wrong?<sup>515</sup>

Bertolt Brecht, *Life of Galileo*

In this final chapter, our focus broadens once more to incorporate the Kremlin's response to the closing stages of the conflict, considering how the regime sought to shape the public presentation of events for domestic and international audiences in both the press and film media (the latter incorporating a hastily prepared documentary film on the Soviet-Finnish War released shortly after hostilities were at an end). Although evidence of any discussion surrounding this process within the propaganda machinery is limited, the new narrative that would come to dominate the official presentation of a 'victory' for the Red Army can be traced directly from Stalin's preoccupation with the defeat of Finland's 'European teachers'. His view of the war is preserved in the post-conflict meetings held with his general staff to dissect the shortcomings of the campaign. The relatively candid assessments of the conflict these meetings provided were not publicly aired and are not essential to our narrative.

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<sup>514</sup> P. Davison (ed.), *The Complete Works of George Orwell, Vol. 9: Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London, 1987), p. 38.

<sup>515</sup> B. Brecht (trans: John Willet), *Life of Galileo* (London, 2014), p. 33.

In contrast, the regime's public welcoming of peace went hand-in-hand with only a piecemeal (and inconsistent) recognition of the costs of the fighting, something which did not escape the notice of contemporaries. Furthermore, given the evidence we have already produced of Moscow's failure to curtail conflicting perspectives on the war from proliferating both at home and abroad, we will reflect on the willingness of the Kremlin to silence voices that had the potential to undermine the official narrative in the months after the fighting. In doing so, we will consider the uneasiness with which Russia continues to treat these victims of the punitive organs of the Soviet state (and the war more generally) today.

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The media silence ordered by Moscow on 17 February 1940 was a prerequisite for rewriting the narrative of war. This formed a strategy of damage limitation where public perceptions of the fighting were concerned, having already left numerous unanswered questions since the outbreak of hostilities. The regime would eventually have to account for the huge number of casualties incurred during the fighting, if not the wider expenditure of resources required to secure the relatively meagre territorial rewards. Earlier attempts to portray the war as a conflict driven by the imperial aspirations of the west had not been realised through any meaningful action on the part of foreign powers. The League of Nations' decision to expel the USSR from its membership was an ineffectual diplomatic manoeuvre, free of any significant punitive action. Although the Finns did benefit from a limited number of volunteer forces sent from abroad, this was a token effort, often begrudgingly supported by their

governments at home and by no means decisive for the war effort.<sup>516</sup> Nevertheless, whatever their public posturing, behind closed doors the Soviet Union did not welcome the intervention of Britain and France, and diplomatic channels with the Finns were tentatively restored at the end of January.<sup>517</sup> There remained, however, many weeks of protracted struggle at the negotiation table (and on the front line) before any end to the fighting would finally emerge.

In the interim, with little indication that audiences were being swayed by the public presentation of the conflict thus far, the Soviet media adapted the narrative once more, seeking the perpetuation of yet another myth. It was one that further moved the focus away from the limited manpower at the Finns' disposal. Instead, an image was developed of an impenetrable line of defences that, paradoxically, were designed with the same aggressive philosophy that had triggered war in the first place. This was the 'Mannerheim Line', named after the same former Tsarist general, Baron Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim, who had been openly vilified in the Soviet press for his purported campaign of terror against the innocent Finnish people. His moniker would now stand as a bastion of Finnish defensive efforts. There would be no reflection of this inherent contradiction in the Soviet media's about-turn.

Within the official version of events, this myth would eventually become a principal focus of the war effort; almost an enemy in its own right – a dormant monster that had posed as much a threat to Leningrad as the men that manned its defensive line. Mannerheim, having been persuaded out of retirement by the Helsinki

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<sup>516</sup> See, for example, 'French Aid to Finland: Daladier's Statement, Paris, March 12, 1940', accessed on 18 April 2011 at <http://www.histdoc.net/history/BRFO1940-03-12.html>; Comprehensive figures for foreign troops involved in the fighting, gathered by Finnish sources, are cited in Aleksandrov, 'Antistalinskii Protest', pp. 17-18.

<sup>517</sup> Van Dyke, *Soviet Invasion of Finland*, pp. 135-136.

government to lead the war effort at the ripe age of seventy-two, would freely admit the ludicrous nature of this self-delusion:

The impression made by the poor performance of the Russian armed forces was calculated to undermine the authority of the Soviet regime and had therefore to be counteracted by means of propaganda, for which reason the Russians at the time of war of position launched the myth of the 'Mannerheim Line'. Our defence of the Karelian Isthmus was to rest upon an exceptionally strong defensive barrier, built up, according to the latest technique, of reinforced concrete, which could be compared with the Maginot and Siegfried Lines, and the like of which no army had ever forced. Accordingly, the Russian break-through was, to quote an official Russian utterance, 'a deed without parallel in the history of war'. This was complete nonsense. The facts were quite different. As has already been mentioned, the defence line consisted of a small number of permanent machine-gun nests connected by means of trenches – field fortification completely lacking in any depth. This line had been christened the 'Mannerheim Line' by the people. That it was held was entirely due to the tenacity and courage of our soldiers, and not to the strength of the position. As to Russian defeats on the Eastern front, it was evident that Russian propaganda was unable to find any plausible explanation for them.<sup>518</sup>

The Finns played up to this idea of an 'exceptionally strong defensive barrier' during the course of the ensuing peace negotiations. Pandering to Soviet egos, they stressed the fact that the Red Army's 'martial prestige' had been recovered with the breakthrough of the Mannerheim Line, a feat unsurpassed by the armies of France and Germany fighting in Western Europe.<sup>519</sup> The reality was probably somewhere in-between these two extremes; the failure to effectively co-ordinate and disseminate Soviet intelligence among the general staff was a far more significant factor in the disastrous military performance of the Red Army.<sup>520</sup> For this, the guilt must be placed squarely on the shoulders of Stalin and the system of rule he fostered. He resolutely refused to acknowledge the breakdown in communications that were facilitated by his

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<sup>518</sup> C. Mannerheim (trans: E. Lewenhaupt), *The Memoirs of Marshal Mannerheim* (London, 1953), p. 371.

<sup>519</sup> Van Dyke, *Soviet Invasion of Finland*, p. 175.

<sup>520</sup> W. Trotter, *The Winter War: The Russo-Finnish War of 1939-40* (London, 2002), pp. 62-66.

insistence on holding a monopoly over all key information channels to the centre (or indeed, that he even held such a monopoly):

*Oborin* (Brigade Commander, Chief of Artillery of the 19th Corps): ...As for the intelligence service, I am somewhat dissatisfied. It's a fact that we had no secret intelligence service.

*Stalin*: We didn't, isn't there one? Does it exist? Should it exist?

*Oborin*: I think it should. What did we have? Finland was within easy reach, but we didn't know what it was doing. And I'm sure money was allocated for this purpose. Right?

*Stalin*: Send three or four tourists there and they will do the job.

*Oborin*: Even though I'm no good at spying, if I'd been sent there, I'd have pried into every corner [laughter]. We shed much blood unjustly because we did not have intelligence information.<sup>521</sup>

The weight of western involvement was not abandoned by the press altogether. Shortly after the ban on press coverage of the front, the pages of *Komsomolskaya Pravda* would conveniently provide its younger readership with a concise review of the official line regarding the 'international character of the Finnish events'.<sup>522</sup> Indeed, the regime was finally beginning to coordinate its efforts to portray these 'events', as the sheer weight of its forces finally broke through the defences of the Karelian Isthmus and forced the Finns to sue for peace.<sup>523</sup> Though this change in fortunes was achieved as early as February, the media kept the Soviet public in the dark a further month before reporting on Helsinki's attempts to reach agreement with Moscow. The Kremlin were not about to repeat the same mistakes that were created by the fiasco surrounding the outbreak of hostilities.

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<sup>521</sup> Chubaryan and Shukman, *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War*, p. 28.

<sup>522</sup> *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 24 Feb. 1940, pp. 3-4. The same review was recycled two days later in Leningrad's regional Komsomol organ, *Smena*. See *Smena*, 26 February 1940, pp. 2-3.

<sup>523</sup> The Kremlin remained ever reluctant to grant the conflict the status of a full-blown war given an official declaration had never been signed.

At the introduction of the Mannerheim Line as the latest attempt by Moscow to present the conflict to the Soviet readership, TASS was again important in distributing the key terminology and official narrative. By virtue of the blanket censorship ordered by *Glavlit*, Soviet newspapers found their hands tied where details of front line activity were concerned. The prominence of the Finnish defensive works and their eventual breaching by Red Army forces was instead introduced through the daily digests of foreign newspapers provided by the Telegraph Agency.<sup>524</sup> Although these second-hand accounts might have been concurrent with efforts to maintain a degree of objectivity in the presentation of events, one can imagine it might have appeared rather strange to the Soviet readership that reports of major breakthroughs and military successes on the Karelian Isthmus were not being reported first-hand by Soviet correspondents.

A change in mood also conveniently coincided with the twenty-second anniversary of the Red Army's formation, celebrated on 23 February 1940.<sup>525</sup> This appeared to re-ignite popular expressions of support for those fighting on the front line, as shown by the further flurry of letters and gifts gathered by the Leningrad Military District explicitly acknowledging the collective pride felt across the Union.<sup>526</sup> Irrespective of any sponsorship of these efforts by the party apparatus, in contrast to earlier stages of the war, they were afforded little print-space in the central

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<sup>524</sup> For an example of these early references to the Mannerheim Line, see *Pravda*, 1 March 1940, p. 5. 'Foreign Press About the Successes of the Red Army on the Karelian Isthmus'. Once again, these TASS bulletins were often published concurrently between the central and regional press. See, also, *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 1 March 1940, p. 4.

<sup>525</sup> Mekhlis' desperate hopes of bringing the war to a conclusion by Stalin's sixtieth birthday had, of course, not been realised. See Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin*, p. 292.

<sup>526</sup> See, for example, TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 12, d. 49, ll. 13, 34, 40. In one instance, the desire to join in these celebrations with appropriate displays of political fervour apparently overtook the logistical impediments facing the authors. The letter was seemingly typed without a working 'm' key, though repeated references to '\_annerhei\_'s bands' (*sic.*) were felt a necessary marker of the authors' correct understanding of the official presentations of the war.

or regional press. Instead, the potential for an end to hostilities was finally alluded to in a striking visual statement on the back page of the anniversary edition of *Leningradskaya Pravda*. The mood of the macabre scene was barely lifted by the black humour of its pun on White Finland: ‘*belo-final*’ (see Fig. 6).<sup>527</sup>



Fig. 6.

Still somewhat premature, it would be another two weeks before peace was officially announced on 13 March 1940. Only at this point did the sudden news of the end of the fighting appear blazoned across the front page of *Pravda*.<sup>528</sup> The absence of corresponding editions of *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Izvestiia* the same day reiterates the Party’s concern with carefully managing dissemination of the news through the regime’s primary organ, before further distribution could be coordinated across the media as whole. Away from the capital, readers of *Leningradskaya Pravda*

<sup>527</sup> (Fig. 6.) *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 23 February 1940, p. 4.

<sup>528</sup> *Pravda*, 13 March 1940, p. 1.

also found no edition that day. The full text of the announcement and corresponding treaty was, however, distributed through the Telegraph Agency, providing regional party leaders in Leningrad (and their counterparts throughout the USSR) with the means to swiftly adjust to the sudden reconciliation between Moscow and Helsinki.<sup>529</sup> More explicit direction from the centre about how to handle the immediate coverage of the new, peaceful relations appears to have been in short supply. When the news was printed in *Leningradskaya Pravda* the following day, their editors now openly acknowledged peace talks had taken place from 7-12 March 1940, though there had been no prior warning in the press before the official announcement in *Pravda*.<sup>530</sup>

To combat these disparities, the Soviet media avoided anything original with its presentation of events. A full-page spread of the treaty was offered to the readers of *Pravda*, dated 12 March 1940, with supporting commentary lauding the promise of security its ratification would guarantee for Leningrad and the USSR. An opportunity to review the diplomatic and military efforts of the last three months coincided with a blasting of Anglo-French efforts to incite the war, and the ‘questionable antics’ of the League of Nations during the course of the fighting.<sup>531</sup> Communists abroad dutifully picked up this line in their own presentation of peace; news of the treaty delivered in London’s *Daily Worker* on 14 March was offered as a blow to British and French plans to ‘extend the area of bloodshed’. The newspaper quoted heavily from their Moscow counterparts. Front-page commentary from a defiant Willie Gallacher was also on point, insisting this ‘bloodshed’ might have been avoided in November, had it not been for the influence of ‘outside pressure’.<sup>532</sup>

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<sup>529</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4385, ll. 23-32.

<sup>530</sup> *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 14 March 1940, p. 1.

<sup>531</sup> *Pravda*, 13 March 1940.

<sup>532</sup> *Daily Worker* (London), 14 March 1940, p. 1.

Gone for the moment was the revolutionary rhetoric of the civil war. With normal diplomatic relations restored, any polemics against Mannerheim and the Finnish government in Helsinki served little purpose and were dropped from this relatively measured response to the end of fighting. Crucially, the day's summary of front line activity from the Leningrad Military District took care to ignore the massive bombardment the Finnish forces had been subjected to in the run up to the agreed ceasefire at noon that day. Orders to troops stationed on the north-western front had been issued as soon as peace was signed on the evening of 12 March 1940, explicit in their instruction to keep fighting until the cease-fire hour.<sup>533</sup>

In spite of the Red Army's insistence on maintaining pressure on Finnish defence efforts till the final hour, over the page from *Pravda's* celebration of peace, the meagre gains of the war were clear for all to see.<sup>534</sup> The redrawing of the Soviet-Finnish border did not result in massive territorial acquisitions. Leningrad's relative position to the border was improved but little had been achieved beyond the aims of the pre-war diplomatic negotiations. That did not stop the regime putting on a brave face. Two days later, *Pravda* was ready to conclude that the 'Soviet people on the whole approve the peaceful policy of their government'. Led by an article describing the voices of support from the newly acquired city of Vyborg, popular responses from across the Union were again offered in unison.<sup>535</sup>

Compared to the speed and scale with which the Party had collated widespread ground-level support at the beginning of the fighting, the regime struggled to obtain

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<sup>533</sup> Van Dyke, *Soviet Invasion of Finland*, p. 178.

<sup>534</sup> *Pravda*, 13 March 1940, p. 2. The map was also swiftly distributed among international audiences, appearing on the front page of London's *Daily Worker* on 14 March 1940.

<sup>535</sup> *Pravda*, 15 February 1940.

an equally ebullient response to the abrupt announcement of peace.<sup>536</sup> It could, however, continue to rely on a degree of flexibility with the truth. The view from Vyborg offered by the Leningrad Military Department gave the impression of a city conquered in the crucible of war.<sup>537</sup> In reality, Red Army troops had only managed to hold the city under siege in the final stages of the fighting and never reached beyond its suburbs.<sup>538</sup> In the final version of the story, this poetic licence would soon become a full-blown fabrication, reordering the events reported within the hastily prepared documentary *Mannerheim Line (Liniia Mannergeima)*, released at the end of April 1940.<sup>539</sup>

Vyborg's official incorporation into the territory of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was secured under the provisions of the Moscow Peace Treaty. The city became a further centrepiece of post-war publicity, its pre-existing infrastructure rapidly assimilated by its new masters, both publicly and under the auspices of the NKVD's covert control.<sup>540</sup> As Finland's second largest urban centre, it was admittedly still a significant prize for the Soviets, though its Finnish population was hastily evacuated, according to the terms of the recently inked treaty. The Soviet press made much of how quickly transport and communication links were established with their new acquisition, and many forward thinking citizens were swift to offer

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<sup>536</sup> *Leningradskaya Pravda* did endeavour to portray a more substantial and enthusiastic response from local inhabitants. Meetings held at night to circulate the news; mention of thousands of congratulatory telegrams sent to soldiers by their families; radio announcements and telephone calls; all these channels testified to the speed that information travelled through the region. Amazingly, in all the excitement, an immediate adjustment to the language of peaceful diplomacy had taken place and any references to 'White Guards' and 'Mannerheim's Gangs' were entirely absent from the newspaper's coverage. See *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 14-15 March, 1940.

<sup>537</sup> See successive LMD summary reports for the closing days of the fighting published in *Pravda*.

<sup>538</sup> Van Dyke, *Soviet Invasion of Finland*, pp. 176-178.

<sup>539</sup> *Pravda*, 23 April 1940.

<sup>540</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4605, ll. 1-21.

their services to the regime in the hope of a chance to live and work in the newly occupied territories.<sup>541</sup>

Concurrent with the press' attempts to publicly perpetuate this celebratory mood, in the days immediately following the announcement of peace, many Leningraders were clearly puzzled by the absence of Kuusinen and his 'People's Government' from discussion of diplomatic affairs with Finland. This sentiment was not only picked up by the Party through covert surveillance but also expressed in letters sent to the editors of *Leningradskaya Pravda*.<sup>542</sup> Notwithstanding Moscow's refusal to recognise the legitimacy of the Helsinki administration at the start of the war, as it openly embraced the formation of an independent 'People's Government', all this had apparently been forgotten in an effort to bring hostilities to a close. Some explanation was needed. None was forthcoming.

### The Lessons of War

At the same time as the Kremlin attempted to come to terms with the results of the war on the public stage, the foreign expertise and equipment provided to Finland were to remain paramount in the leadership's own private preoccupations. Stalin was particularly fixated with portraying the breakthrough of Finnish defences to his own general staff as a victory over the Finns' 'European teachers'. This was carefully censored from the public, however, in view of the fact that his analysis explicitly credited Germany with providing the expertise required for 'half of the fortified line

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<sup>541</sup> The editors of *Leningradskaya Pravda* noted in their summary that many of these appeals stressed the shortage of suitable living space in Leningrad. TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4380, ll. 46-49.

<sup>542</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4380, ll. 22-24.

in Finland'. As his closing remarks on the matter, they nevertheless permeated through the Party and the Red Army leadership, being seen to offer suitable justification for the losses incurred:

We have defeated not only the Finns: that is not a great deal. The main thing in our victory is that we have destroyed the equipment, tactics and strategy of the advanced states of Europe, who were the Finns' teachers. This is the main thing about our victory.<sup>543</sup>

These same sentiments were echoed at a meeting of local civil and military functionaries in Leningrad on 4 April 1940.<sup>544</sup> Ostensibly called to review the performance of volunteer ski-troops mobilised for the Finnish front, the gathering also provided a perfect platform for ebullient Party praise:

The war with the White Finns was not only a war with Finland, but it was a war against the united forces of capitalism... The war with the White Finns showed the greatness of the Soviet Union [and] the patriotism of its people.<sup>545</sup>

Stalin's tacit acknowledgement of Germany's role in the Finnish defensive works was again absent. Participants instead recognised that the official conception of an ongoing struggle with the capitalist world remained paramount to the Soviet version of events, incorporating into this interpretation the media's new preoccupation with Finnish physical defensive works.<sup>546</sup> The destruction of these defensive works 'in a short period of time', was a testament to the strength and power of the Red Army's forces and the evident "strength" (*sic.*) of the capitalist world.<sup>547</sup>

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<sup>543</sup> Chubaryan and Shukman, *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War*, p. 274.

<sup>544</sup> For the full transcript of the meeting, see TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 12, d. 30.

<sup>545</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 12, d. 30, ll. 59-61.

<sup>546</sup> Molotov's recent speech to the Supreme Soviet was explicitly acknowledged during the closing remarks of Leningrad Obkom Secretary Bumagin.

<sup>547</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 12, d. 30, l. 60.

In contrast to Stalin's explicit desire to hear shortcomings of the Soviet war effort in Moscow, the Leningrad meeting would not provide a significant forum for open discussion and critical debate. Attendees preferred to turn the event into a stage show driven by inflated patriotic pomp and ceremony. As with the reticence shown amongst local representatives of the Department of Propaganda and Agitation for reporting the realities of popular contestation of the official narrative in the region, Stalin's position at the epicentre of information gathering and control undermined the free flow of open and critical dialogue about such a contentious issue (except where he could personally set the agenda).

What both the core elements of the official narrative shared was their inability to deal with the human aspect of the story. The artificial distinction between 'White-guard', '*belo-bandit*' forces and the people of Finland bore little resemblance to the reality of collective resistance the country had displayed in the face of the Soviet advance. Not a single Finnish citizen had been arrested for anti-state activity during the course of the conflict.<sup>548</sup> Worse still, Stalin was acutely aware, via his sources in the NKVD, of his own troops' willingness to desert and leave behind the promised future paradise of the Soviet Union.<sup>549</sup> An evident point of concern, Stalin was quick to raise the question of Russian-speaking troops fighting on the side of the Finns during the post-conflict meetings with his general staff.<sup>550</sup>

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<sup>548</sup> Rentola, 'The Finnish Communists', p. 602.

<sup>549</sup> *Zimniaia Voina: Issledovaniia, Dokumenti, Kommentarii*, p. 537.

<sup>550</sup> Chubaryan and Shukman, *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War*, p. 85.

## The Narrative Re-written

The enemy then, as it stood, could not be presented to the Soviet people. Not in its human form, as the faces of Finnish soldiers, which were much like those of the husbands, fathers, sons and brothers who had fought in Red Army uniform. The solution was to turn the enemy into the brick, mortar and barbed wire of the Finnish defences. Its ruptured concrete bunkers, reportedly built to rival those of the Maginot Line in France, marked a victory for Soviet ingenuity in the face of capitalist collaboration. The war was now portrayed as the defeat of the Mannerheim Line, to which newspaper images and the propaganda of the documentary film that shares its name attested. Having been constructed with aggressive, not defensive intentions, in order to provide a bridgehead for assault, its fortified works demanded the ingenuity and courage of Red Army troops to overcome them. When the Soviet media was finally able to exploit photographic images from the front line, the Red Army victors were now shown proudly standing atop these shattered beasts.<sup>551</sup>

By the time film footage chronicling the exploits of these Red Army dragon-slayers appeared, released to Soviet audiences as *Liniia Mannergeima* in April 1940, the overall narrative of the war had been stripped down to its basic elements. Gone were the diplomatic efforts that preceded the hostilities. Absent, too, was any reference to the strike on Red Army troops in Mainila. In the film's opening shots of Leningrad, its emphasis remained on the vulnerability of this revolutionary centre as the city's people went about their daily business, unaware of the shadow cast over them by the Finnish guns just thirty-two kilometres away. Helpful animations went on

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<sup>551</sup> *Pravda*, 30 April 1940, p. 3.

to reveal the extent of the ‘defences’ – something of a misnomer given the particularly aggressive intentions the film projects – with lines of earthworks, tank traps and barbed wire illustrating the challenges that faced the Red Army forces before the central character of the Mannerheim Line was introduced to the audience.<sup>552</sup>

According to the Soviet regime’s re-imagined version of events, the advance of its forces had been an unmitigated success. Those defeats, which Mannerheim’s memoirs flagged as posing such a challenge for the propagandists to explain, are erased altogether from the film’s account of the war. Now the focus of the narrative was on the destruction of roads, rail and telecommunication lines skilfully repaired by Red Army engineers, with armoured units crossing ice and snow as the Soviet guns pounded the Finnish lines. The faces of the enemy are never seen in combat. One token scene offered a glimpse of prisoners of war, sharing stories and cigarettes with their captors. In contrast, on the battlefield, in the captured towns and villages and within the ruptured defence works along the Karelian Isthmus, native faces were conspicuous in their absence – a faceless enemy, invisible in combat. The reality of those ‘White-Finnish bandits’ was never revealed to the audience, beyond the few blackened and snow-covered corpses that periodically interrupted the footage of troops and tanks pressing forward with the advance.

That advance was now reduced to two key stages, presented in the documentary as the breakthrough of the Mannerheim Line and the capture of the city

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<sup>552</sup> *Mannerheim Line (Liniia Mannergeima)* 1940, Documentary Film, Leningrad Studio Newsreel. From information sent to Khavinson by a representative of the Telegraph Agency in German occupied Belgium, it appears the documentary was intended for both domestic and international audiences. On 18 September 1940, Yefimov wrote to the Khavison, attaching a report that indicated the film was to be shown as part of a screening held in Brussels of three Soviet productions: ‘At present, the Soviet trade mission is seeking permission from the German High Command to screen these films.’ GARF, f. 4459, op. 11, l. 1214, ll. 73-74.

of Vyborg. No stagnation of Soviet forces or counter-attacks by Finnish troops interrupted the progress of the Red Army. As one sceptical viewer recalled after watching the film: 'I wasn't there. But one person of our village was there. And he told how the Finns beat the Russians. But in the film, all victories'.<sup>553</sup>

Untarnished by military setbacks, the film could now proudly paraphrase Stalin with the immortal line: 'There are no fortresses that Bolsheviks cannot storm.' This slogan of Soviet industry is borne out by the footage of captured defence works, revealing their inner workings and stressing the scope of the challenge that, ultimately, proved no match for the tenacity and courage of the Red Army. More creative commentary was still required with some of the footage. As the film depicted troops beginning the march on Vyborg, the filmmakers' cameras could not help exposing the ruined city before them. Its blackened and broken buildings were carefully explained away as the result of Finland's own forces having set the city ablaze. In line with Stalin's own predilection for the exploits of Soviet aviators, the air force enjoyed a high profile in the film.<sup>554</sup> Yet any incidents of civilian bombardment were also carefully purged from the records: 'In early March parts of the Red Army finished completely surrounding Vyborg. The enemy sets fire to the city'.

Soon the red banner was seen flying over the rooftops, while beneath lines of troops and armour paraded through an apparently deserted city. Though the commentary failed to acknowledge as much, there were no crowds of Finns welcoming their 'liberation' by the Red Army, the local population long since evacuated. In contrast, a warmer welcome was guaranteed in the streets of Leningrad,

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<sup>553</sup> HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 8, Case 103, p. 44.

<sup>554</sup> On aviator's 'special attraction for Stalin', see Service, *Stalin*, pp. 358-359.

the victorious troops portrayed receiving a final hero's welcome along the banks of the Neva.

Behind the carefully edited footage of military pageantry and prestige, these festive closing scenes of popular support need not be dismissed as solely the result of the Party's manipulation. Surviving commentary from eye-witnesses often speaks of the human cost of war and offers a reminder of the family ties that were just as important to these crowds, now seeing loved ones return from the front. These were the same loved ones whose wartime correspondence with their civilian counterparts is preserved in the archives. Notes expressing pride, affection and concern for their safety accompanied their earlier receipt of gifts and packages. These men were now welcomed home with open arms:

I have three sons who fought on the Finnish front, and now thanks to the wise policy of our government they return home. We have achieved this; Leningrad is now safe, the lives of our husbands and sons are saved.<sup>555</sup>

The politically orthodox language and jovial praise of the Party may have been for the benefit of official ears, but relief that one's husband and sons were not among the lost or wounded must have elicited great relief for those left at home during the fighting. According to NKVD figures, almost one and a half million Leningraders lined the streets to greet parades led by local forces, during the annual May Day celebrations that same year. The local security services reported no issues. A collective sense of relief that the fighting was over offered some reason to be cheerful, especially after the hardship and shortages suffered by the region's inhabitants in recent months.<sup>556</sup>

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<sup>555</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4020, ll. 156-159.

<sup>556</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4404, l. 17.

Notwithstanding this sense of relief, the regime could not afford to ignore the vast numbers who didn't return home.<sup>557</sup> Such was the human cost of those few months of war that a public acknowledgement of the casualties suffered was eventually made by the Party. At the end of March 1940, within Molotov's speech to the Supreme Soviet, the figures were cautiously manipulated to appear a fraction of the Finnish losses:

The war in Finland has exacted heavy sacrifices both from us and from the Finns. According to the estimates of our General Staff, on our side the number killed and those who died of wounds was 48,745, or somewhat less than 49,000 men, and the number wounded 158,863. Attempts are being made on the part of the Finns to minimise their losses, but their casualties were considerably bigger than ours. Our General Staff places the number of Finnish killed at not less than 60,000, without counting those who died of wounds, and the number of wounded at not less than 250,000. Thus, considering that the strength of the Finnish Army was not less than 600,000 men, one must admit that the Finnish Army lost in killed and wounded over one-half of its total strength. Such are the facts.<sup>558</sup>

Davies has described this as amounting to political *glasnost* on the part of the Party.<sup>559</sup>

This is giving more credit to Molotov than is due. Those Leningraders who bore witness to these 'facts' were not blind to the realities of war:

The victims of our Red Army are not 48,000 but about one million. Did as many return from the front as went? And the soldiers themselves say that

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<sup>557</sup> According to figures gathered by Grigori Krivosheev in the early 1990s, the number of dead and missing for the Soviet Union can be estimated at 126,875, with total casualties at 391,783. The Finnish sources he cites give totals of 48,243 Finns killed and 43,000 wounded, though these appear to be inflated in comparison to data gathered by Pekka Kurenmaa and Riitta Lentilä in 2005. Their research, by comparison, gives a total of 25,904 dead or missing among the Finnish forces. See G. Krivosheev (ed.), *Soviet Casualties and Combat Losses in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1997); P. Kurenmaa and R. Lentilä, 'Sodan tappiot', in J. Leskinen and A. Juutilainen (eds.), *Jatkosodan pikkujättiläinen* (Helsinki, 2005). These respective totals for Soviet and Finnish losses during the Soviet-Finnish War are taken as the best available estimates by Pasi Tuunainen in a recent collation of Finnish military casualties incurred between 1939-45. See P. Tuunainen, 'The Finnish Army at War: Operations and Soldiers, 1939-45', in T. Kinnunen and V. Kivimäki (eds.), *Finland in World War II: History, Memory, Interpretations* (Leiden, 2012), p. 172.

<sup>558</sup> 'Soviet Peace Policy – Speech Delivered on 29 March 1940', accessed on 26 April 2011 at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/molotov/1940/peace.htm>. See, also, Balashov, *Prinimai Nas*, pp. 281-286.

<sup>559</sup> Davies, *Popular Opinion*, p. 101.

the Finns mowed them down like a scythe. No one tells the truth about these losses, they will long be kept secret.<sup>560</sup>

So committed to the lie was the Party that when Finland attempted to offer more reserved numbers of its own casualties, *Izvestiia* quickly published a rebuttal to this attempt to manufacture 'laughable lies'. The regime either had a very short memory, or was struggling to keep track of the liberties it took with the truth. In responding to official Finnish figures of 19,576 men, the newspaper now inflated their own estimates to 70,000, higher even than Molotov's earlier claims.<sup>561</sup>

Besides this rare concession to the human cost of war, there were no other great revelations to be found in the words of Stalin's foreign minister. The focus of his diatribe was reserved for those foreign powers that interfered in relations between Finland and the USSR:

It may safely be said that had Finland not been subjected to foreign influences, had Finland been less incited by certain third states to adopt a hostile policy towards the USSR, the Soviet Union and Finland would have arrived at a peaceful understanding last autumn, and matters would have been settled without war.<sup>562</sup>

The material contribution made by these powers was expounded in some detail. Italy's contribution was included alongside those of the Allied powers, while Germany's was carefully avoided (Ribbentrop's earlier displeasure over the insinuations made by TASS about German supply of arms to Finland still fresh in the Kremlin's mind). A somewhat surprising result of Italy's eager desire to exploit the war for financial gain was its status as the one of the two largest providers of supplies

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<sup>560</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4020, ll. 196-198.

<sup>561</sup> Thompson, 'Nationalist Propaganda', p. 397.

<sup>562</sup> 'Soviet Peace Policy – Speech Delivered on 29 March 1940'.

to Finland, second only to the material support offered by Sweden.<sup>563</sup> One should keep in mind that the broader shape of the European theatre of war was yet to emerge in these messy months of shifting loyalties and strategic priorities. Italy would only officially join the war on the side of Germany in June 1940.<sup>564</sup>

The myth of the Mannerheim Line remained equally prominent in Molotov's assessment of the campaign, closely following the script endorsed by Stalin behind closed doors:

These fortifications, especially the ferro-concrete structures, attaining a high degree of military strength, connected by underground thoroughfares, surrounded by anti-tank trenches and granite anti-tank obstacles and supported by countless minefields, together constituted what was known as the 'Mannerheim Line' which was built under the supervision of foreign experts on the model of the 'Maginot Line' and the 'Siegfried Line'. It should be mentioned that until recently these fortifications were considered impregnable, that is, such as no army had ever broken through before. It should also be mentioned that the Finnish military authorities had endeavoured beforehand to convert every little village in this area into a fortified position supplied with arms, radio antenna and fuel stations, etc. In many parts of the south and east of Finland, strategic railways and highways of no economic importance whatever had been built leading right up to our frontier. In short, hostilities in Finland have shown that already by 1939 Finland, and especially the Karelian Isthmus, had been converted into a place d'armes ready for an attack by third powers on the Soviet Union, for an attack on Leningrad.<sup>565</sup>

In the face of damning criticism from the foreign press – again, criticism the regime felt pressed to respond to publicly – the best strategy the Kremlin could formulate was the perpetuation of much the same rhetoric witnessed during the war. The acknowledgement of Soviet casualties was one minor concession to the losses of the war, though there was little room for widespread transparency in the aftermath of such a disastrous campaign. Privately, the local party leadership in Leningrad did at least

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<sup>563</sup> Vehviläinen, *Finland in the Second World War*, p. 71.

<sup>564</sup> Pons, *Stalin and the Inevitable War*, p. 200.

<sup>565</sup> 'Soviet Peace Policy – Speech Delivered on 29 March 1940'

recognise the invaluable contribution made by countless medical personnel that responded to the crisis with compassion and kindness. Amongst civilian recipients of awards and honours drawn up after the conclusion of hostilities were a significant number of doctors, nurses and hospital administrators, who were commended for the levels of care they offered and the resources they were able to mobilise. Credit was also given to the men and women involved in the organisation of the gift gathering for front line troops.<sup>566</sup>

The presence of both party members and the non-affiliated amongst the recipients of these awards suggests participation in the war effort went beyond mere politics or a sense of military duty. For some, especially those serving in non-combatant roles, it represented a more basic expression of human kindness and due diligence in their work. Mikhail Polyakov, a hospital cook stationed across the border in Finland, received recognition for his provision of good quality nourishment for the troops.<sup>567</sup> A senior nurse, Elizaveta Makarova, was praised as the ‘best of the best’ among the nursing staff of hospital No. 1868, for her professionalism and the affectionate way with which she related to wounded soldiers.<sup>568</sup>

These efforts were not afforded the same kind of public acclaim that the armed forces received in the press. Here, the need for precise control over the distribution of awards by the centre was expressed in the itemised instructions sent by Mikhail Kalinin to Zhdanov at the end of January 1940.<sup>569</sup> Close attention was paid to the positive publicity the granting of military honours afforded the Party. The supervisory

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<sup>566</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 12, d. 43a, 44.

<sup>567</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 12, d. 43a, l. 7.

<sup>568</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 12, d. 43a, l. 1.

<sup>569</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4227, ll. 2-3.

role played by TASS in the regional press resulted in its chastising of the editors of *Leningradskaya Pravda* and their ‘wrong attitude’ towards the prompt publication of the materials it circulated. A stern reprimand pointed to the editors’ failure to find print-space for a report detailing second secretary, Alexey Kuznetsov’s attendance at an award ceremony, held in Peterhof, on 22 February 1940. *Leningradskaya Pravda* was evidently neglecting to follow the example set by *Smena* and the central party press.<sup>570</sup> A consistent and timely adherence to the official line was of paramount importance to the regime.

Speed and uniformity in the delivery of the official line could be better expected now that the crisis in Finland was at an end. That Molotov’s public commentary echoes, so closely, the interpretation of the war expressed by Stalin in the presence of his general staff, reiterates the importance those signals from the *Vozhd’* were to the public line taken by the Party and its propaganda machine.<sup>571</sup> Carefully calculated, the regime finally offered a relatively coherent and collective response to a dearth of information that had been the most consistent element of the war’s treatment. This earlier failing on the part of the press was even quietly acknowledged by the Party, though dressed, as ever, in a positive light. Coinciding with its announcement of the public release of the *Mannerheim Line* documentary, *Pravda* included a short profile of the film. It ended with the profoundly ironic line, credited to the Soviet people: ‘Yes, now we understand that this is how it was!’<sup>572</sup>

It is still questionable how successful the Party was in shaping public perceptions of the war overall. The pace with which the political and military arena

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<sup>570</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4385, l. 17.

<sup>571</sup> Chubaryan and Shukman, *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War*, pp. 263-274.

<sup>572</sup> *Pravda*, 23 April 1940, p. 4.

had begun to change by the end of the 1930s had caught out the Kremlin. With Stalin's sporadic intervention, the ability of the press to respond effectively to these shifts had decreased. His presence merely amplified the risk of misinterpreting the official line, causing indecision when input was not immediately forthcoming. When no alternative to past precedent was available, the result was sterile, repetitive commentary that was perpetuated by the political centre and slavishly imitated by domestic and foreign communists alike. The reliance on continuity over any concerted effort to change the strategies of the propaganda machinery was tangible in this period. It would be worth exploring whether any significant reappraisal took place before the summer of 1941. This thesis has already provided one instance where the visual imagery of broken treaties and clawing hands was recycled in the portrayal of the expansionist aims of first Mannerheim and then Hitler.<sup>573</sup> Our acknowledgment of Yakov Khavison's involvement in the Kremlin's propaganda efforts during the war on the eastern front in 1941 also suggests elements of continuity in the personnel involved.<sup>574</sup>

In the interim between the Soviet invasion of Finland and the German invasion of the USSR, both of which should be considered from the perspective of the Red Army's participation in the broader Second World War, the situation was not going to get any easier for the Soviet media. Following the failure of the Finnish campaign, a shake-up was required. As a result, throughout 1940, articles concerned with how to manage the press appeared virtually every month within the Central Committee's official organ, *Partiinoe stroitel'stvo*. This new direction 'reflected the party leaders' seriousness about the issue of press interpretations of the rapidly changing political

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<sup>573</sup> See Chapter 2: Crisis-management, Censorship, Control, pp. 96-97.

<sup>574</sup> See Chapter 3: Signals from Stalin, p. 160.

and military scene'.<sup>575</sup> Furthermore, in an effort to counter the apparent ambiguity over the leadership of the Party's primary press organ, Petr Nikolaevich Pospelov was promoted to editor-in-chief of *Pravda*.<sup>576</sup>

Some, if not all, of these changes might have still taken place had the Soviet Union not gone to war with 'little Finland'. Hitler's expansionist aims had already triggered war in Europe; the pressure was on the regime to effectively manage popular opinion in the context of Moscow's sudden shift in orientation towards conciliation with Nazi Germany. The subsequent division of Eastern Europe through a combination of veiled diplomacy and Red Army bayonet undermined its self-professed role of peacekeeper and forced the press to produce commentary that set a template, which was later replicated for the Finnish War.

Nevertheless, the woeful performance of Soviet forces in Finland – in contrast to the relative ease with which the Red Army had crossed half of Poland – meant that, for the first time since the end of the Russian civil war, the Kremlin had to deal with the prospect of defeat by a foreign power and the overt rejection of a communist hegemony by its proletarian community. That the Soviet regime opted largely for a policy of media blackout at the highpoint of the fighting indicates the limits of the propaganda machine during crisis, combined with a lack of confidence over its ability to curb negative popular opinion at home and abroad.<sup>577</sup> Even Finnish communists began to question where their loyalties should lie. Following Arvo Tuominen's refusal

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<sup>575</sup> Thompson, 'Nationalist Propaganda', p. 388.

<sup>576</sup> See biographical note, RGASPI, f. 629, op. 1.

<sup>577</sup> For evidence of how that same hesitancy amongst Soviet film-makers resulted in the shelving of a number of scripts based on the war, see B. Raiklin, 'Soviet Cinema in the Wake of the Terror: The Artistic Council at Mosfilm, 1939-41', *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (2009), p. 283.

to take part in the government of the Finnish Democratic Republic, he eventually severed his links with the Comintern entirely. Writing to Dimitrov in June 1940, Tuominen condemned the Soviet government's failure to 'ask the people of Finland...whether they wanted such a "People's Government" and the Red Army for their liberation'. He now implored the Communist International and its members 'to declare that Moscow peace is not peace, but rather the typical diktat of an imperialist aggressor whose hands have stripped the people of Finland of more than 10% of their lands and national property.'<sup>578</sup>

Even the tried and tested terminology of terror had failed to undermine public perceptions of Helsinki during the war. It was unable to stand up to scrutiny when contemporary cases of Finnish atrocities were fabricated alongside the excesses of the civil war period. Neither party newspapers at home, nor their counterparts abroad perpetuated the idea for long that Helsinki was violently repressing its own people in the face of the Soviet advance. In the end, if the Kremlin had not faced the challenge of portraying such a contentious conflict, it may well have proved even less prepared for the onslaught of Hitler's 'blitzkrieg' in both a military capacity and the mobilisation of public support essential to the Soviet Union's survival.

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<sup>578</sup> Cited in Firsov, Klehr and Haynes, *Secret Cables of the Comintern*, p. 177.

## Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire<sup>579</sup>

Contrary to *Pravda's* expression of relief from the civilian population, who were now reportedly able, at last, to understand 'how it was' that the Soviet Union became embroiled in war with Finland, the reality of the conflict remained a long way away from the newspaper's official presentation of the 'facts'. Taking into account the censorship of front line activity demanded by *Glavlit* in the closing stages of the conflict, shortly followed by the rewriting of the narrative that formed the centre of the public presentation of events, there is still one aspect of the regime's efforts to control perceptions of the war that helps explain why sensitivity to this war continues to exist in Russia even today.

The evidence available concerning the fate of Soviet prisoners of war returned from Finnish captivity is fragmentary at best. While the contribution my own doctoral research can offer is limited, acknowledgement of these men and their story is intended to provide a further challenge to the continued reliance on a dominant framework of 'Great Terror' and 'Great Patriotic War' when studying the Soviet past. As I argued in my introduction, this rigid periodisation has allowed elements of continuity in the repressive apparatus of state (beyond the years 1937-38), propaganda machinery, and military dynamics of the interwar period to be long overlooked by the scholars of Stalin's Soviet Union.

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<sup>579</sup> This subheading shares the title of Alexander Churakov's more detailed treatment of the fate of Soviet prisoners of war, tracing their return from Finnish captivity. As Churakov acknowledges, this subject 'remained closed for a long time in [Russia's] national historiography and jurisprudence.' The evidence that has emerged from my own research is intended to compliment the still incomplete story of the shared experiences of these men. See A. V. Churakov, 'Iz ognya da v polymya...', *Voyenno-istoricheskiy arkhiv*, Vol. 43, No. 7 (2003), pp. 60-99, accessed on 14 April 2015 at <http://www.proza.ru/2010/06/23/586>.

Among the collected documents drawn from the archives of the former NKVD in Moscow, a final report relates to the fate of those Red Army troops captured by Finnish forces during the course of the war. Though never acknowledged publicly in the Soviet media, the return of one hundred and eight prisoners of war was co-ordinated through the offices of the security apparatus in April 1940.<sup>580</sup> This was just a fraction of over five thousand officially listed within Finnish and Soviet sources and whose release was agreed within the Moscow peace treaty.<sup>581</sup> According to a report by British intelligence forces, who conducted intensive interrogations of some two thousand prisoners while still in Finnish captivity, ‘with only a few exceptions, all ranks refuse to return to the Soviet as exchanged Prisoners of War. They are confident of being instantly shot.’<sup>582</sup> This pessimism was well placed. Their collective return undoubtedly posed a serious problem for the Soviet regime in light of their experiences of the fighting – contrary to the official presentation of events – and exposure to Finnish society and standards of living. Their very existence ‘refuted the propaganda myth of the invincibility of the Red Army’.<sup>583</sup>

Details of the fate of those previously mentioned one hundred and eight prisoners are limited to a list of their names, divided among three wagonloads of troops transported across the border to the USSR. The lists are provided without any

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<sup>580</sup> *Zimniaia Voina: Issledovaniia, Dokumenti, Kommentarii*, pp. 613-615.

<sup>581</sup> A recent collaborative project between Russian, Finnish, German and Norwegian scholars, which provides figures for POWs held by Finland for the entire Second World War, puts the total number of Red Army captives for the Soviet-Finnish War at 5700. Among those held for the duration of the conflict, a death rate of 2.4% reduced the total population by one hundred and thirty-five by the close of the fighting. See L. Westerlund, ‘Prisoners of War in Finland in WW II: An Introduction’, in L. Westerlund (ed.), *Sotavangit ja Internoidut: Kansallisarkiston Artikkelikirja [Prisoners of War and Internees: A Book of Articles by the National Archives]* (Helsinki, 2008), p. 8.

<sup>582</sup> Tolstoy, *Stalin’s Secret War*, pp. 150-154.

<sup>583</sup> Churakov, ‘Iz ognia da v polymya’.

additional commentary as to the men's treatment once they returned to Soviet soil.<sup>584</sup> NKVD reports sent from the Finnish side of the repatriate process indicate the persistent sense of suspicion to which these men were subjected. Widely questioned, with their personal effects searched, evidence of 'counter-revolutionary white-guard literature' and other contraband was duly reported to Moscow.<sup>585</sup> Unfortunately, no documents are preserved in the collection that indicate what the future held for those returning soldiers that were compromised by items found on their person, or the unsatisfactory responses to interrogation they offered. Rather, the next destination for any who were deemed suspect is illuminated by a document preserved in the personal fond of Andrei Zhdanov.

On 2 November 1940, Zhdanov received a letter from the NKVD containing details of a prisoner of war, Ivan Andreevich Gromov, held since his return to the Soviet Union at the end of the fighting. Attached was an appeal thrown from the window of his cell in the hope of it reaching Zhdanov in his Leningrad offices. That handwritten appeal was recovered and a typed copy provided alongside the original. The contents indicate the fate awaiting a number of these Soviet POWs, though it is unclear why the NKVD took the trouble to forward this particular appeal or whether any action was taken by Zhdanov as a result.

Wounded and frostbitten, Gromov's capture occurred after his unit failed to break through a Finnish encirclement in mid-February. According to the NKVD's interpretation of these events, no resistance was offered to the 'White-Finns' – despite reference to his incapacitation – and he was thus deemed to have breached his military

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<sup>584</sup> Whether the editors of this book were privy to any further classified sources, omitted from the published collection of documents, is unclear.

<sup>585</sup> *Zimniaia Voina: Issledovaniia, Dokumenti, Kommentarii*, Document 231, pp. 608-610.

oath on his return to Soviet soil. Subject to interrogation, before his case was reviewed by a special conference of the NKVD in September 1940, he was eventually condemned to five years in the Pechlag labour camp. Writing to Zhdanov, Gromov's petition was on behalf of, not only himself, but also those members of his squad assigned to the same fate. It is still unclear exactly how many of the thousands that returned from Finnish captivity followed the same route as these men. Gromov is certainly not listed among the names given in the published source above.<sup>586</sup>

Nor does Fyodor Vasilevich Mochulsky offer any personal details of the prisoners he encountered in his time as an NKVD-GULAG worker in the Pechorlag forced labour camp, described in his posthumously published memoir.<sup>587</sup>

Mochulsky's testimony does, however, corroborate the account given by Gromov:

As a witness of this reality, I cannot defend my beliefs or provide any good explanations about what went on. I have to ask the following questions. *Question:* Why were honest Soviet patriots who volunteered on the Finnish front in the ski battalions for 'the campaign at the rear of the enemy' accused in the name of the motherland of being political criminals and given long prison sentences? This was after the Finns (who were superior fighters in many ways) had routed them, encircled them, and taken them prisoner (many of them injured). The reality is that these Soviet soldiers had been volunteers and they had battled desperately, as long as they could.<sup>588</sup>

Mochulsky's reflective questioning comes from his memoir's closing pages, an attempt to reconcile his experiences of the harsh realities of the Soviet system with his own beliefs and convictions. After a long and successful career, this remained one of

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<sup>586</sup> RGASPI, f. 77, op. 3, d. 121, ll. 42-44.

<sup>587</sup> Correspondence with Deborah Kaple confirmed that this designation was one of a number of variations by which the camp went by, including the abbreviated 'Pechlag' used in relation to Ivan Gromov's case.

<sup>588</sup> F. V. Mochulsky and D. Kaple, *Gulag Boss: A Soviet Memoir* (Oxford, 2012), p. 169. Note that in the original hardcover edition this passage was mistranslated.

many questions he found impossible to answer.<sup>589</sup> The fate of these young men appeared to resonate in particular with Mochulsky. He recounts their arrival at the Gulag, which occurred early in his career as a camp attendant:

In November 1940, these men still did not know their ultimate fates, since they had not been officially sentenced. In the meantime, they were being kept as convicts, and treated as such. Several of these former soldiers were students, many of them my age. There are no words that could convey their suffering. When any of these unfortunate young people complained about their fate, I looked at them and could not find any way to comfort them.<sup>590</sup>

Surviving letters to the Leningrad Military District testify to the youth and enthusiasm of some of these fledgling fighters. An expressed wish to defend one's homeland 'to the last drop of blood' was a very real prospect in the killing fields of the Karelian Isthmus. The desire 'to protect the freedom of the Finnish people from the White-Finnish yolk' was a more naïve endeavour altogether.<sup>591</sup>

The creation of these units was a hastily drawn up response to a complete absence of qualified ski-troops, desperately needed to fight on the Karelian Isthmus. Assessment of their formation and performance during the war offers no indication the general staff paid much heed to the question of their disproportional combat losses or the fate of any men unfortunate enough to find themselves in Finnish captivity.<sup>592</sup> With the sudden cessation of hostilities, they became just another facet of official propaganda efforts to draw some dregs of success from the war.<sup>593</sup>

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<sup>589</sup> Mochulsky and Kaple, *Gulag Boss*, p. 172.

<sup>590</sup> Mochulsky and Kaple, *Gulag Boss*, p. 36.

<sup>591</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 12, d. 50, ll. 1, 10.

<sup>592</sup> TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 12, d. 32.

<sup>593</sup> The return to Leningrad of those 'heroic-skiers' fortunate enough to survive the war was given a front-page treatment in *Leningradskaya Pravda*. See *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 21 March 1940, p. 1. One of the unexpected consequences resulting from their experiences in Finland (aside from the need to make these mobile ski battalions a permanent fixture of the Red Army) was a drive to improve sport and physical culture in the region. There are a number of documents that testify to attempts by the

## Lost in the Archives

The treatment of returning POWs is not the only instance where an apparent sensitivity to the realities of the Soviet-Finnish War is still detectable in relation to archival evidence today. The published transcript of the post-conflict meeting between Stalin and his generals offers a fairly candid view of the lessons the leadership were able to draw from the disastrous performance of its troops. Yet Stalin's closing remarks, included in the published editions, have seemingly been expunged once more from the accessible records held in RGASPI.<sup>594</sup> Likewise, within the same *opis* that contains many examples of Stalin's utilisation of TASS bulletins in this period, other documents that are helpfully grouped according to country have, nevertheless, remained classified where sources explicitly related to Finland are concerned.<sup>595</sup>

Regional archives in Leningrad also fall short of offering a complete window on events during the war. Important channels of communication with Moscow remain classified; later files now open to researchers testifying to the potential significance of these closed documents.<sup>596</sup> Nor are the city's archives alone in displaying something of an ongoing aversion to the realities of the conflict. A visit to modern day St.

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authorities to draw impetus from the lessons of the Finnish War and encourage a development of athletic pursuits in the Leningrad Oblast. See TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 4404.

<sup>594</sup> RGASPI, f. 17, op. 165, d. 77-78.

<sup>595</sup> RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 389-395. The *opis* includes a table of contents, which lists page references for each *dela*, grouped by country. Included are those related to Finland, which unfortunately sit somewhere among a series of blanked out entries at the corresponding pages of the *opis*. Unsurprisingly, attempts to request these files met without success.

<sup>596</sup> For example, files related to correspondence with the Central Committee in Moscow remain inaccessible for the key period of the war. See TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3988. Frustratingly, declassified documents from the months immediately following the culmination of hostilities merely confirm their potential value for illuminating the directions on the war offered by the Kremlin. See, for example, a telegram from Stalin to Zhdanov, Bumagin and Nikitin indicating his displeasure at the publication of an article in *Izvestiia*. TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 3989. l. 60.

Petersburg offers little evidence of its central place in the war. The only surviving, permanent exhibit in the Military-Historical Museum of Artillery, Engineering and Communications Forces remains couched in the same Soviet rhetoric that emerged to praise the efforts of its engineers and their successful conquest of the Mannerheim Line defences. Scale models of the concrete fortifications appear alongside black and white photos showing the aftermath of the breakthrough (See Fig. 7).<sup>597</sup> Even more conspicuous are the exhibition halls of the State Museum of Russian Political History, which do not contain a single reference to the war within its chronological coverage of the entire sweep of Soviet history, from Lenin to Gorbachev.



Fig. 7.

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<sup>597</sup> (Fig. 7) Author's own photo.

Is this then, perhaps, a reflection of the success with which the Party proved able to re-write the history of its war with Finland? Does a shared sense of amnesia amongst the official presentation and preservation of its past reveal the strength of the Soviet propaganda machine or more current political priorities?<sup>598</sup> Does a popular disengagement with the events of 1939-40 indicate the past was not merely forgotten, but actively ‘destroyed’ by the Party? These are questions that are probably impossible to answer conclusively, given the rupture and upheaval that was to follow the outbreak of the ‘Great Patriotic War’ in June 1941.

The evidence of proactive efforts by the Party to control the spread of information about events in Finland through official and unofficial channels, including Stalin’s personal intervention in this process, does indicate the priority the regime placed on managing the impact of the crisis for domestic and international audiences. The subsequent rewriting of the recent past after the end of the fighting further conjures up an *Orwellian* vision of totalitarian control, with the co-ordinated efforts of the propaganda machinery bent on establishing a new version of history, while the coercive arms of the state sought to silence any conflicting voices that could contradict it.

In reality, things are not so bleak. As recently as 2010, Russian audiences were given the opportunity to revisit the history of the Soviet-Finnish War as part of a live televised debate.<sup>599</sup> Some seventy years later, a desire to critically assess Russia’s past

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<sup>598</sup> ‘Russian History Receives a Makeover That Starts With Ivan the Terrible’, accessed on 12 April 2015 at [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/31/world/europe/russian-museum-seeks-a-warmer-adjective-for-ivan-the-terrible.html?emc=edit\\_th\\_20150331&nl=todaysheadlines&nid=67449098&r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/31/world/europe/russian-museum-seeks-a-warmer-adjective-for-ivan-the-terrible.html?emc=edit_th_20150331&nl=todaysheadlines&nid=67449098&r=1).

<sup>599</sup> ‘Stenogrammy “Suda Vremeni”. 26. Sovetsko-finskaya voyna’, accessed on 12 April 2015 at <http://www.kurginyan.ru/publ.shtml?cmd=add&cat=3&id=136>. The episode was broadcast as part of a series of historical programmes first shown between June and December 2010.

remained, as did a select few of those voices that bore witness to the realities of war.<sup>600</sup> This, necessarily, puts paid to a more extreme assessment of the Party's success in monopolising popular memory of the conflict.

Understanding the strategies adopted by Moscow and the pervasive power of the state-sponsored media to present a Kremlin-friendly version of events elicit certain parallels between current expressions of Russian power in the near abroad and those explored during the Soviet period in this thesis. Following the Soviet Union's dissolution, the Telegraph Agency was re-named ITAR-TASS, though it continued to function as the central government news agency in Russia. Most recently, in September 2014, its former title was restored, lauded as a 'bid to preserve and develop its best traditions'.<sup>601</sup> As the Kremlin continues to exert its influence both within and outside its borders, TASS persists as an institution closely aligned to the political priorities of Russia and its ruling regime.<sup>602</sup> In 1939, empty posturing and diplomatic efforts, enacted by the League of Nations and other developed nations, played into the hands of a regime whose self-image was dependent on a position of polar opposition to the western world. Moscow strove to convince its people that permanent and invasive internal and external threats existed. Current governments would do well to remember little has changed in the way modern Russia defines, for its own people, its relations with Europe and the west, and also the means at its disposal for projecting that image at home and abroad.

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<sup>600</sup> Reference to contemporary documents and speeches takes place throughout the show's proceedings, including the published transcript of Stalin's closing commentary at the post-war meetings held in April.

<sup>601</sup> TASS Russian News Agency, 'TASS History', accessed on 25 October 2014 at <http://en.itar-tass.com/history>.

<sup>602</sup> 'Russia's Foreign Ministry: Threats of US Secretary of State against Russia unacceptable', accessed on 24 March 2014 at <http://en.itar-tass.com/russia/721831>. The same spectre of foreign intervention, seen so consistently in interwar Soviet propaganda, still has a role to play in the Russian media today.

## Conclusion

How can the theatre be entertaining and at the same time instructive? How can it be taken out of the traffic in intellectual drugs and transformed from a place of illusion to a place of insight?<sup>603</sup>

Bertolt Brecht, *On Experimental Theatre*

On 17 April 1940, the Marxist playwright, poet and theatre director Bertolt Brecht set sail for Finland. Brecht and his family had fled their native Germany on the ascendancy of the National Socialists in 1933. Settling in Denmark the following year, the immanency of war in the spring of 1939 motivated a further move to Sweden. Then, in early 1940, coinciding with Hitler's invasion of Denmark and Norway, the family made yet another hasty exit, leaving books and other worldly goods behind as they crossed the Baltic Sea.<sup>604</sup> Landing in Helsinki, Brecht avoided overt criticism of the Soviet Union's recent treatment of its northern neighbour, but noted in his journal the 'difficult situation' still facing the country after the conclusion of hostilities, and the apparent 'dismay in Scandinavia' over England's 'failure to act'.<sup>605</sup>

Brecht, though a Marxist, was not slavish in his adherence to the vision of socialism projected by the Kremlin. Critical of those for whom 'socialism is whatever

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<sup>603</sup> Quoted in *Life of Galileo*, p. xxxv. The full quote appears in translation: 'How can the theatre be both entertaining and instructive at the same time? How can it be drawn away from this intellectual narcotics traffic and be changed from a place of illusion to a place of practical experience? How can the shackled, ignorant, freedom and knowledge seeking human being of our century, the tormented and heroic, abused and ingenious, the changeable and the world-changing human being of this frightful and important century achieve his own theatre which will help him to master not only himself but also the world?' B. Brecht (trans: C. Mueller), 'On the Experimental Theatre', *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (September 1961), pp. 16-17.

<sup>604</sup> B. Brecht, J. Willett (ed.) (trans: H. Rorrison), *Bertolt Brecht: Journals* (London, 1993), p. 53 (hereafter 'Brecht, *Journals*').

<sup>605</sup> Brecht, *Journals*, p. 55.

the USSR does', his earlier recognition of Moscow's motivations for the attack on Finland was coupled with commentary containing a healthy degree of scepticism over the Kremlin's championing of liberty for the Finnish proletariat: 'The treaty with the Russian-installed Finnish people's regime runs counter to the notion that the Finnish workers and peasants are having to exchange their national freedom for their social freedom, it serves as a pretext and as such it is weak.'<sup>606</sup> Although Brecht did not express outright condemnation of the conflict in his private observations, a certain difficulty in reconciling the actions of the Soviet state with his sympathetically coloured world-view and staunch anti-fascism is apparent. Indeed, the editors of his journal note the strange absence of any observations regarding the end of hostilities and signing of peace in March 1940.<sup>607</sup>

Throughout these many months of personal and political turmoil, Brecht's creative output continued unabated, eliciting some of his most celebrated works in this period. Influenced by his vision of theatre as a revolutionary medium capable of inspiring audiences to act and engage with the world around them, his ideas also found form and expression in a lecture delivered to a Stockholm audience in May 1939.<sup>608</sup> Here, he spoke of experimental theatre's potential to 'alienate' an event or character from the viewer, to shake them out of a sense of empathy with the actors on stage and the events to which they bore witness.<sup>609</sup> Brecht's 'epic theatre' was a

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<sup>606</sup> Brecht, *Journals*, 10 December 1940, p. 41. For his critical assessment of the state of socialism in the USSR, see the entry on 26 January 1940, p. 45.

<sup>607</sup> Brecht, *Journals*, p. 470 (Editorial Notes). There is also no evidence of more public engagement with the topic of the Soviet-Finland War in his surviving letters from the period. See B. Brecht, J. Willett (ed.) (trans: R. Mannheim), *Bertolt Brecht Letters, 1913-1956* (London, 1990).

<sup>608</sup> Brecht, *Journals*, p. 29.

<sup>609</sup> Brecht, 'Experimental Theatre', p. 14. More recent translations of the original German term *Verfremdungseffekt* have often opted for 'estrangement' to better capture the close connection the term shares with the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky's notion of 'making strange' (*priyom otstraneniya*). For a summary of this debate and the associated problems of translation, see D.

reaction against the dramatic tradition, exposing the mechanics and make-up of the stage, interjecting actors dialogue with external commentary, and forcing the audience to respond critically to the episodes played out before them. The aim was to correct a growing sense of social impotence in the modern world, one he may well have shared in the context of the rapidly unfolding crisis of the Soviet-Finnish War:

Man today, living in a rapidly changing world and himself rapidly changing, lacks an image of the world which agrees with him and on the basis of which he can act with a view to success. His conceptions of the social life of human beings are false, inaccurate, and contradictory, his image is what one might call impracticable, that is, with his image of the world, the world of human beings, he cannot control the world.<sup>610</sup>

### Stalinism and the Soviet-Finnish War

From our reflections on Stalin's own attempts to control the world around him, it is clear that the *Vozhd'* was dependent on far more than direct stage management and the cues he offered his closest political allies. Stalin's mastery of the political stage went beyond a tightly controlled and well-rehearsed script, which drew on long established and sparingly adapted tropes. Indeed, notwithstanding their shared Marxist ideology, Stalin was the antithesis of Brecht's directorial practice. He strove, above all, for the concealment of all the makings of the play, of the mechanics of the stage and any construction of official policy and party line. His intent stood in direct opposition to 'epic theatre', seeking not to inspire change and the awakening of human agency, but to perpetuate a fixed and authoritarian system of rule, where the machinery operating behind the scenes was masked from audiences and actors alike.

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Robinson, *Estrangement and the Somatics of Literature: Tolstoy, Shklovsky, Brecht* (Baltimore, Maryland, 2008), pp. 173-175.

<sup>610</sup> Brecht, 'Experimental Theatre', p. 10.

By focusing attention on an under exploited period of Soviet history, incorporating a case study relating to an episode of intense domestic and international crisis for the regime, I have managed to illuminate some of that machinery concealed from contemporaries. This thesis has considered both the *form* and *function* of the Stalinist system and its attempts to manipulate public opinion at home and abroad. My intention has been to challenge popular perceptions of the Soviet Union as maintaining an all-pervasive propaganda machinery; one that was able to effectively manage public understanding of the world within and without its own borders, and in accordance with the official narrative dictated up by Stalin and his inner circle.

Not only has my research revealed the limits of the propaganda machinery's capacity to respond effectively to the rapidly changing political and military events of the period (incorporating the official organs of the international and domestic press, censorship bodies and central and regional party apparatus), but that the responsibility for this lies, to a large extent, with Stalin, who strove to maintain a personal monopoly over both the decision making process *and* the flow of information into the public sphere. My findings support Davies' earlier conclusion that 'the Stalinist propaganda machine failed to extinguish an autonomous current of popular opinion', whilst offering insights into the upper echelons of the leadership and their responses to potential breakdowns of the party line that were absent from her study.<sup>611</sup>

Beyond Stalin, other key actors were involved in this unfolding drama. Zhdanov and Kuusinen are among the most prominent, for their role in developing and perpetuating a particular language and terminology that was applied to the war. It

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<sup>611</sup> Davies, *Public Opinion*, p. 183.

was a strategy that still relied heavily on the recycling of old rhetoric. In the absence of an alternative conception of Finnish society that might help justify the conflict, this was to prove an outdated and wholly inaccurate portrayal. Nevertheless, it provided an important marker for the regime in its monitoring of public and private discourse, especially where any ambiguity surrounding the progress of events on the front line necessitated more concrete ways of expressing one's views in an ideologically sound and politically 'healthy' manner. Clearly, adoption was neither uniform nor widespread across all sections of society. Many preferred to avoid discussion altogether as the struggle with the White Finns became the elephant in the room. This was particularly true for those working within the party and state apparatus.

Other factors, both long and short term, played a role in undermining the Party's ability to portray the war in a coherent manner or even navigate the shifting events at the front with a degree of immediacy. This period must, above all, be placed in the context of the culture of hyper-sensitivity to censorship that emerged over the course of the 1930s. Of note, too, is how the burden of any bureaucratic clean-up that supported the repressions of 1937-38 inevitably stretched beyond these traditional chronological confines. Added to this were the particularly time consuming preparations required for Stalin's birthday, demanding meticulous vetting of the vast range of material that was to emerge during the celebrations. It was not that the Party specifically utilised these celebrations – and others like it – as a pretext for misdirecting attention away from the war. It is more a reflection of how ill-equipped the press and propaganda machinery was to display initiative or move outside the well-established norms within which it functioned on a more routine basis.

Stalin's personal intervention in everything from the opening diplomatic talks, to managing the war effort and channelling foreign reports on the fighting into the pages of *Pravda* was not an effective strategy for controlling the day-to-day presentation of the war to the public. Face-to-face consultation with his subordinates unfortunately limits our insights into the dialogue surrounding this process. It is clear, at least, that those earlier attempts at fabricating the truth only bred hesitancy when the facts could not be backed up with evidence and foreign condemnation of the Soviet position was so widespread. Surprisingly, the regime felt compelled to air this negative press, out of a wish to appear somewhat objective, perhaps, but more importantly, as it was acutely aware of the range of opinions within Soviet society – both healthy and unhealthy - concerning its affairs in Finland. Accordingly, the Soviet media publicly renounced the lies and slander of the foreign press, while at the same time playing fast and loose with the truth. Eventually, by the war's conclusion, the regime preferred a strategy of no news, to bad, or manufactured material. This was to allow the propaganda machinery ample time to rally itself and develop a more coherent narrative to challenge the notions of the conflict as a defeat for the Red Army.

In view of these shortcomings, proper consideration of the solutions available to the regime has also brought TASS into the spotlight, as its newfound significance placed Khavinson and his growing network of agents under the direct gaze of Stalin. In light of the decline of the Comintern and corresponding rise of the Telegraph Agency as both an informal intelligence network and official mouth-piece for the regime, the latter's diverse range of responsibilities needs to be better incorporated into our understanding of the Soviet system both sides of the Finnish crisis.

Above all, a return of the Soviet-Finnish War into a more coherent narrative of the Stalinist system, through the 1930s and into the next decade, allows an appreciation of both aspects of continuity and change witnessed in this period. Although more work needs to be done, this thesis has offered glimpses of the all-pervasive nature of the NKVD and – irrespective of any winding-down of repressions that took place in 1938 – has asserted the need to consider the ongoing impact of its coercive apparatus, on both victims and popular perceptions of the regime, particularly in light of the Soviet media’s exploitation of a carefully managed terminology of terror. As our understanding of the Stalinist system increases, thanks to improved access to its archives and more time to explore them, the neat compartmentalisation of key episodes in its history become less and less suited to current research. I strongly believe that while the ‘Great Terror’ and ‘Great Patriotic War’ continue to fascinate students and specialists of the field, attention needs to be given to those ‘gaps’ that have developed where formerly evidence was scarce and our understanding underdeveloped by comparison. A proper appreciation of the social dimensions of our period reminds us that those who lived through these ‘epochs’ of history did not always share an equally compartmentalised awareness of their impact, or the chronological limits by which they are defined by scholars.

As one of the more prominent and contested theoretical frameworks that have emerged over the years, the evidence presented here also offers a check on certain assumptions about the nature of the ‘totalitarian’ state. It is a conception that I believe still holds some value based on the range, if not perhaps the effectiveness, of Stalin’s reach highlighted by this study.<sup>612</sup> It has also shown what lay beyond the Kremlin’s

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<sup>612</sup> In this manner, I share the view of Robert Service that the term ‘suitably redesigned as involving insubordination and chaos as well as harshly imposed hierarchy is the most suitable concept to

control and uncovered instances of hesitancy and caution, concealed behind the public bravado of the regime.

Old theories die hard; the cultural associations invoked by notions of totalitarianism maintain a significant hold on popular understandings of the period and the actors involved. It is the job of case studies to test the limits of these generalisations, whilst also providing evidence to support the assumptions made. Where evidence is lacking, where we simply don't have the pieces to complete the picture, these concepts can help us continue the narrative thread in a plausible direction. What they should not do, however, is influence one's interpretation of the evidence and force that narrative thread along a particular path, via the perils of selection bias, or the reading of events with the benefit of hindsight in an over deterministic manner.

Naturally, all this is achieved from a privileged position. We have produced a relatively static view of an ever-changing world. Our ability to track continuity and contradictions is on the understanding that few contemporaries would have been able (or perhaps willing) to comprehend much beyond a fairly narrow view. Although the party line might not have been consistent, it didn't necessarily need to be. This was not a one-act play, with a limited cast. It was a sprawling series of conflicting storylines and sub-plots, covering huge swathes of territory and temporal space. One

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characterize the USSR'. The emphasis must remain on the *aspiration* for total control demonstrated by Stalin and the regime, rather than their actual achievements, which naturally fell short of a perfect monopoly over the thoughts and actions of Soviet citizens. Stalin's willingness to micro-manage the minutiae of TASS bulletins appearing in *Pravda* has offered fresh evidence of the lengths he was willing to go to achieve absolute authority. There may still be many more such instances to emerge from the archives. See Service, *History Of Modern Russia*, pp. xxix.

can present a sense of beginning, middle and end; what is harder, is understanding how events played out with an ever-present sense of the unknown.

The actors that have appeared, both centre stage and in the wings, at various points in our production, have shown the complexity of outlook, ideology and engagement with the events in Finland that belie any one-dimensional characterisation. How long these events stayed pertinent to them is impossible to generalise but, given the turbulent years ahead, one must acknowledge that their overshadowing need not be credited alone to the machinations of the Kremlin. Instead, the words of Brecht, writing in exile in Helsinki in the shadow of the crisis, evoke the fate of this war for many, if not least, the author himself:

This is the year which people will talk about.  
This is the year which people will be silent about.<sup>613</sup>

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<sup>613</sup> B. Brecht, J. Willett, R. Manheim and E. Fried (eds.), *Bertolt Brecht Poems, 1913-1956* (London, 1976), pp. 349-350.

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