Ryan Bowman

Interpretations of WWII Soviet Propaganda Posters

SES 373

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Sevastopol Factory Worker

“We will take your place!”

It was hard now for Olenka to remember his face, her darling husband Vasily. She remembered clearly the day he had left. She remembered how fresh and strong he had looked in his army uniform, even if his face was now fading from memory. She remembered prying little Ivan off his father’s leg, and making her own face a mask of stoicism to comfort the young boy. She was crying too though, on the inside.

Once he was gone she found herself more and more anxious alone at home. Simple tasks which had before been routine, such as washing the clothes or sweeping the floor, now seemed pointless and painful. All she could think about was Vasily bravely facing the invaders, while she was stuck at home rinsing dishes. And the news from the front was not good, Olenka worried a lot.

As time went on things got harder, food became scarcer as rationing went into effect, they had to drape great black curtains over the window so the bombers couldn’t find them. She was losing her mind suffering alone at home during the days. So she had jumped at the opportunity to work in the factories. She could still remember the poster that was on the wall behind the desk in the hiring office. A strong
woman gazing fiercely towards the front, donned in heavy factory clothes, as the masses of red soldiers marched behind her. Finally Olenka felt she was doing something to help, and the bonus rations for her and her family didn’t hurt either.

The hours were brutally long, mistakes were not tolerated, and the labor was tough. Her soft doughy hands were covered in blisters and cuts, her eyes had dark rings, and her feet complained of the constant standing. But it was better than sitting at home waiting all day. Above her workstation the kind eyes of a Red Army Soldier gazed down at her from a poster, imploring her to work harder, and faster, to aid the victory. It was not Vasily, but as more and more time separated her from him, it became the face she imagined him to have. Looking down at her, counting on her to supply his ammunitions.

“*Industrial worker, send us more shells, and our road to victory will be shorter!*”

As the Germans closed in the pace and intensity only increased. Olenka sent Ivan with her sister and mother to leave the city. They had begged her to come as well but her place was here in the city aiding the fight. She split her time between munitions manufacture and defense construction, barely finding time for sleep. The Fascist air raids were becoming more and more frequent and they spent much of their time hiding in the defensive ditches they were building.

As the air raids intensified much of the factory work was moved underground, into an old champagne factory, to keep it safe from German bombs. The rest of the peninsula had fallen, only Sevastapol still stood defiant. The poster was absent now, in the cramped and dim makeshift factory, but when Olenka closed her eyes she could still picture that pleading face staring down at her and it gave her the strength to keep working. The truth was, even with the bombing and the rationed food. Olenka preferred working with her hands to bustling around the house all day. Her hands were covered in callouses now, badges of pride, and her arms were thick with a new strength. She had been working in the factory longer than many of the other women and they saw her as a leader. She knew that her work had meaning, to help continue the fight and save Mother Russia. And there was something satisfying about collapsing into a bed at night, sore from a long day’s labor, and falling straight to sleep. But it would all soon come to an end.
In the end of June the factory was destroyed, along with many other strategic ammunition dumps and other facilities. The end was at hand. It didn’t seem fair to Olenka that all her hard work had been in vain. But the defenses could hold no longer, and the soldiers were in full retreat. She kept her head low under the Nazi occupation, sweeping floors to make enough to eat. They were rounding up all the city’s Jews, she knew not what for, but the brutality of the SS was apparent enough that she kept her distance. At nights she lay awake, unable to sleep with all her pent up energy. She was used to the long shifts and heavy labor of the factory. She stared at the blank ceiling and imagined Vasily, and the day that Sevastapol would be liberated, but both seemed far off fantasies.

It was two long years under the Nazi boot before Olenka saw those fantasies a reality, or at least one of them. During the liberation she was informed that Vasily had died in combat a year earlier. It made the victory bittersweet. But the reunion with Ivan and the rest of her family softened the blow. They had fled north and east before the occupation and had lived safely under Soviet rule. Her Ivan had grown much in the intervening two years, he was no longer the shy quite toddler but an inquisitive and mischievous 5 year old. Olenka knew that her mother had been spoiling him, she would have to return some discipline to the child. But her true desire was to return to work. It didn’t take long for the factory to reopen, there was still a long road.
to Berlin. And for a time Olenka was content to resume work, it distracted her from the grief at Vasily's death.

“Come on, lend a hand!”

But things were different now. You could see it in the posters and hear it in the speeches. The strong fierce worker woman was replaced with a petite blonde worker asking for help in carrying her load. The war was ending, the Motherland was winning, and great as that victory was, Olenka could see that her time in the factory was also ending. The men would come home and the women would go back to their homes and their families. Back to scrubbing dishes and sweeping floors. Olenka dreaded it. The factory gave her strength, purpose, leadership. She wasn’t ready to give it up, but she wouldn’t have a choice.
Combat Nurse

“Become a front-line medical nurse, a helper and friend to the soldier!”

Nina had been 17 when the war started. She had been a fool back then, her friend Lyumila had talked her into volunteering. Lyumila was a year older and Nina had always looked up to her. The way her eyes sparkled when she spoke of the glory of defending the Motherland Nina had been entranced. The two of them had walked together to the recruitment office the very next day after the Germans attacked. They were turned away however, war is no place for girls, the hard faced officer had said. But Lyudmila and Nina had not given up so easily. It became a daily routine for them to visit the office every afternoon together. On their walks to the office they conjured tales of their brave exploits: blowing up whole German platoons and sneaking behind enemy lines to slice the throat of Hitler himself. After a few weeks of this the weary officer at the recruitment office finally cracked his tough façade. “If you girls really want to help your comrades you should join the combat nurses.” The two of them were enlisted later that day. Nina remembered fixating on one particular poster as they filled out their paperwork. It showed a fierce nurse charging into battle besides a young soldier, she and Lyudmila had both shared an
excited look as they gazed on it. That was the last Nina saw of Lyudmila, they were sent to different combat nurse units, and Lyudmila would not survive the war, like so many others.

Nina was given a crash course in how to provide first aid for combat wounds: bandage wounds, brace broken bones, inject medicine, but the main purpose of the combat nurses was to take wounded soldiers to safety and better treatment away from the front lines. Their weapons training was even more perfunctory. They were not expected to do any heavy fighting, but war rarely goes according to plan.

Nina saw her first combat in the German push towards Moscow. The defenses were still under construction when the Germans arrived, heralded by great clouds of their planes and the dreadful squeaking of their unstoppable tanks. Nina saw limbs blown from the bodies of men before her eyes. Gone immediately were the romantic tales Lyudmila and she had concocted back in Moscow. She gritted her teeth and went to work, wrapping legs and arms in tourniquets, injecting morphine to dull the pain, and straining to carry such men away from the front. In those first few days she barely rested. Every time she made it back to the front there were more men to carry, more wounds to dress, and more dead. They were retreating so fast that sometimes the front would catch up with her as she took men away from it. Things were dire. It was also in this battle that Nina first fired a rifle. A comrade was stranded away from the cover of the half finished trench the unit was holed up in, hit in his leg and unable to make it to safety. As she had been trained Nina crawled out and kept herself low to the ground, but a German machine gun took notice of her and opened fire. Determined to save the poor soul before her she took up his rifle and fired back. It kicked back into her shoulder as she did, but the recoil was somehow bracing, encouraging her to continue on. She alternated dragging him to safety and firing at the Germans to keep their heads down, and before she knew it, it was over and she was safe in the trench again. It was only the beginning of many such battles.

As time went on Nina became more and more accustomed to the realities of war. Most of it was dreadfully boring, and terrible to endure. Nina had to dry her boots every night as they were soaked through, sleep on beds of branches and leaves, and eat nothing but powdered soup for months at a time. That was when they even had food. There were never enough supplies, working guns, ammunition, winter clothing, food.

It was after one year that Nina received her first wound. She was lucky in this, some men didn’t even last their first week on the front. It was a shrapnel to the knee, painful and debilitating but not
particularly dangerous. She smiled to herself as she was carried off the field. It was nice to be the one carried for once. As soon as she had recovered she was sent straight back to the front, not as a nurse but as a frontoviki, front line soldier. Apparently they were running out of men to send. Nina had her own rifle now, and immediately began putting it to use. After months of crawling under enemy fire with little to defend herself Nina found it easy to advance now that she could fire back. She quickly earned a reputation for her bravery among the other soldiers, eager not to be outdone by a girl they often rallied behind her in combat.

“Red Cross nurses, don't leave any wounded on the battlefield, nor his weapon.”

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It was in Kursk, about two years in to the war that Nina saw a poster depicting an army nurse. Her reaction was quite different this time. It rankled her to see Soviet women confined to these feminine roles on the posters. Always aiding the brave army men, or crying for their help. She was braver than
most of these men, and she knew others were as well. The women received no credit for the heroic work they did, in the same line of fire as the men.

As the war progressed Nina’s consistent bravery allowed her to climb the ranks to lieutenant. She was somewhat relieved to be a step removed from the front, but when the bullets started flying she itched to run forwards and lead the assault. The men who didn’t know her, from other units or new recruits, would often sneer at her authority, but when the shells were landing around them, and the new recruits were pissing their trousers, and the other officers were frozen in indecision Nina would show them why she had earned her lieutenant’s position. Nina knew full well from her early days as a medic that decisive action was always necessary, and she had no trouble keeping her head under enemy fire.

But when the war was over, just as she had feared, the women received no respect for their sacrifices. They were barred from marching in the victory parade in Moscow. Nina had been furious, but her higher ups told her the war was over, she should return to her life now. The war was won. They didn’t need her anymore, and so they cast her aside.
Partisan in Bryansk

“All debts will be paid off.”

Leo had fought with the Red Army in the Russian Civil War. He thought he was done with war, but war was not done with him. The Germans came back. The Red Army was not ready, and Bryansk fell quickly. Leo had been content to live out his days organizing the local CPSU operations. But in August Stalin called for organized resistance to the Germans in the occupied territories. Leo had already been in contact with his local army pals and party members. They left their farmsteads in the hands of their wives and daughters and disappeared into the surrounding forests. At first they were disorganized and haphazard, taking potshots at German patrols and cutting telephone cables in the night. But soon Moscow sent specialized officers to organize them, train them, and coordinate their efforts.

It was after Moscow sent them specialized radio operators and intelligence operatives they began to be able to act on a larger scale. With information on German troop positions and supplied with legitimate explosives they were able to begin sabotaging the rail lines. Under cover of darkness they would creep from the woods, silently eliminate and opposition and blow tracks, rail cars, or bridges. Leo was one of the better shots so his job was usually to hang back and provide covering fire as his comrades retreated. He was doing what his country and his party needed, but overall Leo was tired. He wasn’t the young fiery revolutionary of 1920.
anymore. The chill of cold nights, hiding out without fire, the ache in his joints from running in the night, the grumble in his bellies those long winters, they all reminded him of how eager he was for this damn war to be over. Still, deep inside him the coals of revolution simmered, egging him on through the pain. If he gave up now then the fight for freedom and equality would have been for nothing.

Their rural and wooded areas held little strategic value to the Germans so Leo and his comrades generally had free reign over the land. It was a tiny pocket of liberty in a sea of German occupation. But the waves often crashed against their shores. German punitive operations were not infrequent. But the partisans knew the land, and they knew their advantage was not in a head on fight. When the Nazis came looking for them the partisans could easily retreat deep into the forests and wait them out. As soon as they were gone Leo and his men would resume their operations.

In January Moscow sent reinforcements in the form of paratroopers with a specific tactical objective. Together with Leo and his comrades they completely destroyed sections of the Smolensk-Vyazama line. So great was their damage that a Panzer division was sent back to drive them away. It was in times like this that Leo knew he was aiding the fight, diverting a whole division of tanks from the front line would surely not go unnoticed by his Red Army comrades.

“The enemy will not dodge the people’s revenge!”

But there were also times with the Partisans that Leo was not proud of. In the winter of 42-43, when food had become scarce and the men were beginning to lose strength they ventured from the forest to gather supplies from the locals. In general they knew which farmers were true comrades and would spare them food, but this time they needed more than what could be freely offered. It was a tough winter for the peasants as well, and the Germans were also taking their cut of the agriculture. Leo had to clench his jaw to hold himself back as they terrorized a farmer into giving up his hidden grain stash by threatening his daughter. That farmer wouldn’t make it through the winter. Leo’s commander told them they were aiding the greater good; that sacrifices must be made for Mother Russia, but Leo’s heart wasn’t in that. Still, it was even greater reason not to give up, he mustn’t let their sacrifices be for nothing.
Leo’s proudest moment came late in the spring of 1943. They had received news that a German general would be passing through on to the front. Though they had little time to prepare they knew this was a great opportunity. Under the cover of darkness charges were rigged on the road he was expected to take and partisans took up positions in the surrounding tree lines. Leo spent his time cleaning his weapon, making sure his position was well concealed, and sleeping as they waited for sunrise. Leo had gotten very good at sleeping at a moment’s notice in any position between his two wars, though it strained his back more now than it used to. As the sun began to peek over the trees and onto the road his ears picked up the faint hum of a truck engine. He brought his rifle up and pointed it onto the road, bracing it carefully upon the dirt and against his shoulder. It was several more minutes before the convoy arrived, but waiting was another thing that Leo had gotten good at. As the dark trucks finally came into view Leo strained to make his aging eyes sight up on his target. But in the middle of the convoy, he could make out a shining officers cap on the passenger of the car. There! And then the charges went off. The lead truck was destroyed, blocking the convoy, and for a long moment Leo’s vision of the road was obscured by smoke and dust. But as it was clearing he saw the general duck behind the rear of his vehicle. Just the edge of his shoulder protruded out. Leo took a breath in, held it, and made the shot. He was rewarded as the figure fell out into the road clutching his arm. Leo calmly worked another bullet into the rifle and breathed in the enemy will not dodge the people’s revenge!
again. This time the figure lay still after he shot. A slow grin worked its way onto Leo’s face: this would hurt the enemy for sure!

By the fall of that year the Red Army arrived to liberate the Bryansk. The partisans were offered a place among the Red Army rifle regiments, but Leo was done. Instead he found his way home, to his wife and daughters. He had given all that he could for the Motherland, he was ready to rest now.
Soviet Ace Alexander Pokryshkin

“Glory to the heroes of the Patriotic War! Glory to Stalin’s falcons!”

The majesty and the power, of the great machines flying over his head, had entranced Alexander. All he could think about was how amazing it would be to fly like that. Though he was only twelve, he had vowed that he would someday fly in planes such as these. His wish had come true, through furious diligence and an ingenious mind he had earned his way into the ranks of the VVS, the Soviet Airforce. But it was not the dream he had imagined, the Germans had them outmatched in training, tactics, organization, and technology. The standard Soviet tactics were horribly outdated, and had almost gotten him killed on his first few missions. Luckily he trusted his instincts over his training and was quickly learning new, better techniques for outsmarting his foes. He talked with the other men of the unit, swapping stories and tactics: carefully plotting out old dogfights in his journal. His new learning kept him and his comrades alive in a time when the rest of the air force was being mercilessly destroyed.

Glory to the heroes of the Patriotic War! Glory to Stalin's falcons!

As the war progressed Alexander began to think he had a guardian angel. In July a flak explosion caught his engine and he crash landed behind enemy lines, spending half a week avoiding enemy troops and sneaking back to his unit.
In October an enemy machine gun round ricocheted around his cockpit, severing his shoulder straps and grazing his jaw. And in November Alexander had woken to the sounds of yet another air raid. Tired of watching aircraft be destroyed sitting on the runway he had rushed out and fired back from the tail gun of one of the bombers. The strafing bomber came directly towards him, bombs exploding beneath it. One landed just in front of him, but was released too low and didn’t detonate. Each time it was like he had stolen from death himself, and Alexander was determined to use his stolen life to save his comrades from the idiocy of official Soviet aerial tactics. That first year was the hardest, but they all soon learned the tricks necessary to survive.

By 1942 it was Alexander who had gained the upper hand, utilizing his meticulously researched tactics to surprise German pilots. In July of that year he lured his enemies into overshooting him with two well-timed barrel rolls successfully shooting down the German Aces Hans Dammers and Kurt Keiser. Around this time his regiment was recalled from the front lines to train on the new P-39. On this trip Alexander remembered passing through a railway station and seeing a poster depicting the brave ‘Stalin’s Falcons.’ A little boy was passing and paused to marvel at the fierce visage in the poster. Alexander remembered smiling to himself and remembering his own marvel at the planes above him so many years ago. He would give this boy, and many others, something to be proud of.

That was, if commander Isayev would stop breathing down his neck. Isayev had always been disapproving of Alexander’s new ideas. Isayev was the kind of blind patriot who would follow Stalin off a cliff, and now that he was regimental commander he expected the rest of the men to fall off the cliff with him. Angry and jealous of Alexander, Isayev spread rumors of his cowardice and insubordination, court marshalling Alexander and grounding him indefinitely. It was only through the support of his comrades in the regiment that the truth of Alexander’s successful innovations came out. Once again he dodged the bullet and the charges were dropped. It was a deep breath for Alexander to see the higher ups could appreciate what he was doing and the need for change.

In the following year, 1943, Alexander saw some of the most intense fighting yet, in the skies over Crimea. But they were armed with new planes, and were implementing some of Alexander’s newest tactics, and bit by bit the Luftwaffe were repelled and defeated. By alternating dive directions they could confuse and decimate enemy bomber formations. By implementing his ‘pendulum’ flight pattern they could optimize their different aircraft’s abilities. For the first time it felt like they were doing more than just surviving. They were winning. As the weeks went by, Alexander’s kill count
continued to stack up, his growing experience combined with the new plane were making him unstoppable.

Alexander turned his new skills to specialized task, hunting German flight leaders. By cutting the head off of the snake he could send the rest of the Germans into a state of panic and cause them to retreat. As the year progressed he began racking up German aces under his kill count, and saving his comrades for numerous casualties by demoralizing whole groups of the enemy at a time. By May he was awarded as a Hero of the Soviet Union, and by the next month he was a Major and the squadron’s commanding officer.

By the end of the summer Alexander had shot down so many aces that he was now using his call sign “Sotka” (one hundred) over the open airwaves to protect bombers. The enemy feared him so much that they ordered their planes grounded whenever he was in the air. By 1944 Alexander had become so famous that the Soviets often ordered him to stay on the ground rather than risk losing their propaganda golden boy. As much as Alexander understood the importance of maintaining moral, he felt he was needed more urgently in the air, and so did his best to circumvent these restrictions and join his comrades in the air. Though Alexander’s fame and his achievements served the Soviet propaganda machine his rebellious attitude and ideas did not. These day, with the war winding down, he was confined to coordinating his squad from below. And he figured things would continue this way once they had achieved victory. Alexander would never compromise on his honestly, and the higher ups were loathe to admit they were ever wrong. But Alexander didn’t fight for glory or recognition, he fought for his comrades, for his country, and for little boys who looked up at the sky and dreamed of one day mastering it.
“In the sky, on the ground and in the sea.”

“Bullets are expensive Georgys!” His father bellowed, “you must make every one count.” The rabbit had gotten away. “You are too tense.” His father continued the lecture, and Georgys listened as he stared at the snow beneath his feet. “Relax, gently guide the rifle, feel it, aim, fire.” It was one of many such lectures. Ivan, Georgys’ father was big on tough love, but it was a tough world this far north in the Urals. Georgys had thought it could be no tougher than the sparse harvest and frigid winters of his home. He had been wrong. Even out here, in the farthest reaches of the Union, they find you. It was late in 1941 when Georgys was conscripted. He was immediately shipped to the front line, cannon fodder for ‘the Motherland.’ But Georgys was determined to show these strutting urban fools what real Russians were made of. The hypocrisy of the system was somehow lost on many of the other bright eyed recruits. They believed the gleaming posters with the brave soldiers, countless tanks, and triumphant airplanes. Georgys soon learned that the soldiers were cowardly and inept, the tanks were weak and hopelessly doomed compared to the German Panzers, and the air force? Georgys didn’t even see a Soviet plane for the first few months.
The only thing that Georgys hated more than the arrogant, hypocrite, communists who had dragged him into this war were the pompous, ruthless Germans who had started it. It didn’t take long for them to take away many of his new friends, infantry didn’t last long in the Red Army. But Georgys was determined to be the exception. He quickly earned a reputation among his unit for being a crack-shot. He just parroted his father: “Bullets are expensive, I make every one count.” Eventually his talents caught the right eye and he was transferred out of the standard infantry and into a sniper unit. He had thought getting himself off of the front line would be good, but this was just in time to be transferred to Stalingrad, which was very bad. You heard tell that fresh soldiers were lucky to last more than a day in the city. Georgys was given very little in the form of formal training, instead it was the other snipers, the ones who lasted more than a day, who taught Georgys the art of survival in the hellish city.

“A sniper shoots from afar, but always hits his target!”

A sniper shoots from afar, but always hits his target!

Concealment is key, make sure the enemy doesn’t see you until he’s dead. Fire a few times, then move on, stationary snipers are dead snipers. Always be on the lookout for counter snipers, the Germans hate
snipers and will work hard to eliminate them. That sounded nice to Georgys, anything the Germans hated was fine by him. And so, paired with a scout he quickly got to work thinning out the German 6th army.

The city truly was chaos, possession of territory changed block by block, house by house, room by room. The Soviets were forcing the Germans to fight for every last inch. The peeling faded posters on the disheveled walls would have you think that this courageous self-sacrifice was all patriotic heroism, but Georgys thought it probably had more to do with Stalin’s order 227. It was less than a week before Georgys’ scout was killed in an artillery blast. He had to make do without one for a time, which was fine by him, he’d never had any help whilst hunting. Georgys also did away with the scope on his Mosin-Nogut, he’d never used that for hunting either. And he found it to be bulky and to give away his position. It didn’t take long for him to start pioneering some survival tricks of his own. He started rigging buildings with old helmets and rifles to confuse enemies, and piling snow in front of his rifle to conceal the muzzle flash. But these things would only get one so far in Stalingrad.

“Fight to the Death!”

Twice Georgys was certain he would die. There were many times when death could have found him, in a stray shrapnel, a counter sniper’s bullet, the collapse of an unstable building, but only twice where it seemed certain. The first time he became surrounded by an unexpected German advance, cut off from support and with the enemy on all sides he was in deep trouble. Not because they would shoot him, as long as he was careful they’d never find him, but because they hadn’t much food to begin with, and now he was completely cut off. It was too risky to light a fire so Georgys had resorted to eating rats that he could catch raw. Hunger make a man pretty desperate. But even that had been very little to sustain him, and if it hadn’t been for a timely Soviet counteroffensive he would have surely died or been captured. He wasn’t sure which was worse, the Germans were not kind to their prisoners. The second time he had been holed up in a house, picking off enemies across a square when a creak on the floorboards behind him caused him to turn. There was a German soldier, malnourished and half-dead from the conditions but very much alive enough to point his rifle at Georgys. Click. The thing had jammed. Georgys had rushed the man, and the two wrestled on the floor of the house for a minute or two. The other man’s weakened condition had allowed Georgys the upper hand and he had crushed his head with a table leg. It was the only time he killed a man face to face, and it was very different than
shooting him from several hundred meters away. The soldier’s gaunt lifeless face, and that anti-climactic click, would haunt Georgys for the rest of his days.

Finally after what seemed an eternity of nights with an empty stomach and numb toes the Soviets pushed forwards and broke the siege. And Georgys’ luck only improved from there, a stray German bomb caught him in the right shoulder, earning him a quick trip away from the front. It was the perfect injury, the kind that took a long time to heal from but ultimately would leave him undamaged. Plus he met his future wife Olga working as a nurse at the aid station. She applauded his bravery and service and Georgys was struck by her cheery attitude despite her work. He still hated the communists for dragging him into a fight that wasn’t his, and for making him live through the hell that was Stalingrad, but at least they had given him a wife. Everything happens for a reason Georgys, his father had used to say.

Fight to the Death!
Bibliography


