In this compelling account of life and death in a Russian province under Nazi occupation, Johannes Due Enstad challenges received wisdom about Russian patriotism during World War II.

With the benefit of hindsight, we know how hopelessly destructive Germany’s war against the Soviet Union was. Yet ordinary Russians witnessing the advancing German forces saw things differently. For many of them, having lived through collectivization and Stalinist terror in the 1930s, the invasion created hopes of a better life without the Bolsheviks. German policies on land and church helped sustain those hopes for parts of the population.

Drawing on Soviet and German archival sources as well as eyewitness accounts, memoirs, and diaries, Enstad demonstrates the impact of Nazi rule on the mostly peasant population of northwest Russia and offers a reconsideration of the relationship between the Soviet regime and its core Russian population at this crucial moment in their history.

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SOVIET RUSSIANS UNDER NAZI OCCUPATION

Fragile Loyalties in World War II

JOHANNES DUE ENSTAD

University of Oslo
For Ingvil
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Note on Translation and Transliteration

All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. For rendering Russian words in the Latin alphabet, I follow the Library of Congress transliteration system, except that diacritical marks, including soft and hard signs, are omitted. I have stored online sources using the web archiving service Perma.cc, and the URLs provided refer to the archived versions.
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Glossary and Abbreviations

AK  Armeekorps (army corps)
AOK  Armeeoberkommando (army high command)
Berück  Befehlshaber des rückwärtigen Heeresgebietes (army group rear area commander)
Dulag  Durchgangslager (transit camp)
EK  Einsatzkommando (Special Force; detachment of the mobile SS and police forces)
EKA  Einwohnerkampfabteilung (Indigenous Fighting Detachment)
EM  Ereignismeldung UdSSR (Event Report by the Chief of the Security Police and the SD)
FK  Feldkommandantur (field command)
GFP  Geheime Feldpolizei (secret field police)
H.Geb.  Heeresgebiet (army group area)
H.Gr.  Heeresgruppe (army group)
Ia  Führungsabteilung (command staff)
Ib  Quartiermeister-Abteilung (quartermaster staff)
Ic  Feindaufklärung und Abwehr (Intelligence and Security)
Iv Wi  Wehrwirtschaftsoffizier (military economic officer)
kolkhoz  kollektivnoe khoziaistvo (collective farm)
kolkhoznik  collective farmer
Korück  Kommandant des rückwärtigen Armegebietes (army rear area commander)
KTB  Kriegstagebuch (war diary)
La  Landwirtschaft (agriculture)
MGB  Ministerstvo gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti (Ministry of State Security)
NKGB  Narodnyi komissariat gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti (People’s Commissariat of State Security)
Glossary and Abbreviations

NKVD Narodnyi komissariat vnutrennikh del (People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs)
obkom oblastnoi komitet (oblast/regional party committee)
oblispolkom oblastnoi ispolnitelnyi komitet (oblast/regional executive committee)
OD Ordnungsdienst (order service)
OK Ortskommandantur (town headquarters)
OKH Oberkommando des Heeres (High Command of the Army)
OKW Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (Supreme Command of the Armed Forces)
O.Qu. Oberquartiermeister (head quartermaster)
OT Organisation Todt
POW prisoner of war
Prop.Abt. Propaganda-Abteilung (propaganda section)
Qu. Quartiermeister (quartermaster)
raikom raionnyi komitet (district party committee)
raispolkom raionnyi ispolnitelnyi komitet (district executive committee)
rückw. rückwärtiges Armegebiet (army rear area)
A.Geb. rückwärtiges Heeregebiet (army group rear area)
H.Geb. SD Sicherheitsdienst (Security Service)
SS Schutzstaffel (Protection Squadron; Hitler’s main police, security, and terror organization and instrument of genocide)
Sich.Div. Sicherungs-Division (Security Division)
starosta village elder
VAA Vertreter des Auswärtigen Amtes (Foreign Office Delegate in the Wehrmacht)
VII Abteilung Kriegsverwaltung (military administration staff)
Wi Wirtschaft (economy)
WiIn Wirtschaftsinspektion (economic inspectorate)
WiKdo/ Wirtschaftskommando (economic command)
Map 1 The Eastern Front, 1941–1942
Introduction

In December 1941, several months into the occupation, peasants in the Opochka district of northwest Russia organized a collection of Christmas gifts for German soldiers. Thousands of felt boots, gloves, and wool socks were delivered in what German officials saw as a display of gratitude for the liberation from Bolshevism.¹ In one pair of socks, a handwritten note was discovered.² It said:

I send the socks as a gift to the invincible German army and I wish for your victory over the Bolsheviks so that they will cease to exist everywhere and forever, and [I wish] for you a swift victory and a healthy return home.

Pushkin uezd, Voronets district ... Rakhovo village,

Mikhail Nikiforov

Embedded in a pair of socks sent as a gift to keep a German soldier’s feet warm while fighting Soviet forces at the front, Nikiforov’s message contained real material support. Like many others, he wished to do away with the Bolshevik regime, to make it disappear “everywhere and forever.” Yet the offering also signaled a repudiation of Nazi Germany’s imperial ambitions. Having no desire to see his fatherland controlled by foreign rulers, Nikiforov wished the Germans “a healthy return home” upon accomplishing their mission. The message reflects an anti-Soviet form of Russian patriotism, but also indicates the limits of pro-German loyalty. Mikhail Nikiforov’s letter thus neatly encapsulates the main themes of this book: the fragility of political loyalties, the ambiguities of patriotism, and Soviet Russians’ widespread readiness to invest hope and effort in the German promise of a better life without the Bolsheviks.

Today, with the benefit of hindsight, we know how hopelessly destructive the Nazi project was. Waging a war of annihilation, Hitler intended not only to murder the Jews and other “undesirable elements,” but also to decimate the Slavic population by mass starvation and deportation, keeping the rest as slaves for Germanic settlers. Hitler’s plans for “the East” amounted to the most murderous scheme in world history. Even though they could not be carried out to the extent envisioned by Nazi planners, German policies of annihilation claimed millions of Soviet victims among prisoners of war and civilians in the occupied territories as well as in the besieged city of Leningrad. Soviet Russians witnessing the advancing Germans in summer 1941, however, knew nothing about Nazi plans—many even thought of Germany as a civilized country and Hitler as a strong and capable ruler. For many of them, the future now appeared radically open. War leads to change, big wars to profound changes. What would become of Russia? The Bolshevik revolution was only twenty-four years old, and most people did not share the Marxist–Leninist vision of its historical inevitability. Against this backdrop, my book attempts to add one missing piece to the vast puzzle of how Soviet society lived through the Great Patriotic War by answering the following questions: How did the mostly peasant population of northwest Russia experience the upheaval of war and invasion? How did they deal with the new masters of the land, and how did they relate to the old Soviet masters still present in the shape of partisans and the possibility of Soviet victory? And what can we learn from all of this about the relationship between the Stalinist regime and its core Russian population?

The Soviet victory over Nazi Germany, gained at a harrowing price, contributed decisively to the outcome of World War II and remains one of the defining events of the twentieth century. Caught by surprise when the Germans attacked, the Red Army reeled in retreat during the first weeks and months of the war, leaving the enemy to occupy vast territories inhabited by as many as 80,000,000 Soviet citizens—some 40 percent of the population.3 Given the magnitude of the Soviet occupation experience, one would expect historians of Stalinism to have focused much energy on this period of upheaval. Yet histories of Soviet society in the Stalin era have tended to skip or stop short of the war, treating it almost like a pause between pre- and postwar Stalinism.4 Studies that do focus on

4 See, for instance, Sheila Fitzpatrick, Stalin’s Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Stephen Kotkin, Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Lynne
wartime Stalinist society generally concentrate on the home front and the Red Army. Outside the field of Soviet studies, many historians of the German–Soviet war have studied the occupation, but mostly from a Berlin-centred perspective, using German sources to study German actors. As a result, most of what we know about the occupied Soviet territories concerns the occupiers and their plans, policies, and actions in “the East” rather than the people living there.

As always, there are exceptions: Some historians have explored Soviet citizens’ occupation experience in depth, focusing mostly on Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic countries. To be sure, these borderlands of the Soviet empire remain fascinating sites of historical inquiry and the subject of several important studies. A crucial question remains, however: How did people in the ethnically more homogeneous, presumably more

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sovietized, and predominantly rural Russian territories experience the German occupation?  This is no peripheral question. After all, Russia was the political and demographic core of the Soviet Union, and the state’s wartime appeal to Russian national sentiment is widely regarded as key to the successful Soviet war effort.

The importance attributed to Russian patriotism in the struggle against Nazi Germany has a long tradition. On May 25, 1945, Stalin proposed a toast to the Russian people, whom he credited with firm wartime loyalty, putting “boundless trust in our government” despite its “mistakes” of 1941–1942 when the Red Army suffered catastrophic losses. The notion that a strong Russian patriotism fueled the Soviet war effort continues to be taken for granted. In Richard Overy’s words, “material explanations of Soviet victory are never quite convincing. It is difficult to write the history of the war without recognizing that some idea of a Russian ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’ mattered . . . to ordinary people.” The Bolshevik policy shift from 1920s internationalism (“the proletariat has no fatherland”) to the official sponsoring of Russian national pride in the 1930s, historians argue, led to a coming together of Soviet and Russian national identity, or the sovietization of Russian nationalism – a development culminating in the wartime crystallization of Russianness as a Soviet patriotic endeavor.

The notion of a strong Russocentric sense of Soviet identity and belonging has shaped our view of Russians’ wartime attitudes and

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behavior. The resulting conventional wisdom may be summed up as follows: While non-Russian peoples in the recently annexed Western borderlands despised Stalin’s regime and frequently greeted German forces as liberators in 1941, the situation was entirely different in the ancient Russian heartlands farther to the east, which had been Soviet for more than two decades. Here, there was “not the slightest hesitation on any part of Soviet society to serve the country.” In most of Russia, another historian claimed, “the majority of the population remained loyal to the Motherland... The Germans found no sympathy in the temporarily occupied districts, apart from that of a few renegades.” In the words of Catherine Merridale, “the Wehrmacht enjoyed support from a portion of the local population, especially as it had yet to reach ancient Russian or even long-held Soviet soil.” Only recently have historians begun to question the image of a steadfast Soviet Russian patriotic loyalty, an image that, I hope to show, fades further in light of evidence from northwest Russia.

This book sets out to challenge the commonly held view that Russians, in contrast to people in the Western borderlands of the USSR, put up widespread patriotic resistance against the German occupiers. Far from remaining loyal to Soviet power, a substantial part of the population in northwest Russia actively supported or passively acquiesced in German rule. While the German occupation brought suffering and death for tens of thousands, including Jews, Roma, disabled people, prisoners of war (POWs), and civilian victims of the brutal antipartisan campaign, many others saw real improvements in their daily life, not least related to the dissolution of the despised collective farms and the German-sponsored revival of the Orthodox Church. To be sure, initial pro-German sentiment subsided over time because of the occupiers’ murderous policies and

colonial condescension, which kindled Russian national sentiment. Nevertheless, until the Germans began to prepare their retreat in late 1943, inhabitants tended to support German power rather than the Soviet government and the partisan movement. They did so because of material interests, political and patriotic passions, and in pursuit of calculated pragmatism – a strategy of heeding the stronger power, shifting one’s loyalties when needed, and working the prevailing system to one’s least disadvantage.

Soviet Russians’ occupation experience sheds new light on the relationship between regime and people in Stalin’s Russia. For decades, this question has loomed large in the historiography of Stalinism, generating debates that have helped define the field. The dominant account of Stalinism studies has it going through three major movements, from totalitarianism via revisionism to postrevisionism. The “totalitarian model” of the 1950s and 1960s became defined as such mainly through later “revisionist” attacks on that first generation of Stalinism scholars. Revisionists, who were mostly social historians, entered the scene in the 1970s and 1980s, charging totalitarians with purveying a narrowly political history driven by rightwing Cold War concerns that produced a top-down view in which a monolithic regime dominated an atomized population. While the polemics against the “totalitarians” often targeted straw men and had as much to do with politics and careerism as they did with scholarship, the revisionists’ actual research greatly advanced our understanding of Stalinism by posing new questions and using new sources. In particular, the early revisionists sought to challenge (what they saw as) the totalitarian view by showing how Stalin relied on not only terror but also bases of social support among upwardly mobile workers, youth, and other beneficiaries. Later scholarship in the revisionist tradition also focused on how stubborn realities on the ground, be it hotbeds of resistance in the villages and factories or chaos in the local administration, often frustrated the regime’s totalitarian ambitions.

The 1990s witnessed the emergence of “postrevisionism.” Influenced by the cultural turn in the humanities and spurred on by Stephen Kotkin’s major 1995 study Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization, this new cohort of cultural and intellectual historians focused on discourse and ideology. Studying the formation of “Stalinist subjectivity” and the ways in which ordinary people strove to belong to Stalinist society by “working on the self,” postrevisionists emphasized internalization of and identification with the regime’s values.\(^\text{18}\) As Kotkin argued, ordinary people living within “Stalinist civilization” not only sought to fit in by “speaking Bolshevik,” but also experienced Stalinism as “something hopeful” because of its positive ideals and public welfare measures.\(^\text{19}\) Scholars such as Jochen Hellbeck went further, arguing that people living under Stalin were immersed in the all-encompassing ideology and language of the regime and thus “lacked even the most basic precondition for the articulation of dissent: an outside frame of reference against which to evaluate the performance of the Stalinist system.”\(^\text{20}\) In this extreme version, postrevisionism seemed to refashion the social support argument of the early revisionists, albeit indiscriminately, applying it not to particular groups but the general population.

No one can deny the insights provided by scholars such as Kotkin and Hellbeck into the ways in which individuals, pulled into the ideological orbit of the regime or captivated by its visions, promises, and enemy images, helped shape the regime itself through their own thoughts and practices. Yet we should be careful not to identify a social part with the social whole. While Stalin’s regime had its share of true believers and hopeful followers, the dictator also presided over a much larger mass of

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\(^\text{19}\) Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, chapter 5, 358.

\(^\text{20}\) Hellbeck, “Fashioning the Stalinist Soul,” 366.
people for whom the Bolsheviks appeared not as one of “us,” but as an intrusive and violently oppressive “them.” Unlike Hitler’s regime, Stalinism can hardly be called a “consensual dictatorship.” Young urbanites and upwardly mobile workers – those most likely to embrace Stalinist civilization – made up a minority of the population (and even among urban workers, a great deal of dissent occurred), while in the villages the regime patently failed to secure popular legitimacy. Peasants, though relegated to the margins of official Stalinist civilization, were by no means marginal in Soviet society. On the contrary, by 1941 rural inhabitants made up two thirds of the Soviet population. The final third was not entirely urban either: large-scale peasant migration had turned Soviet cities into “peasant metropolises” during the 1930s. By 1940, peasant migrants made up 40–50 percent of urban workers in Soviet cities, where they largely retained their village identities, culture, and practices, quite stubbornly refusing to be transformed into a Communist proletariat. In short, Soviet Russian society on the eve of the German invasion was predominantly peasant.

Northwest Russia, in also being predominantly peasant, reflected Soviet Russian society. The inhabitants of this region, as I hope to show, were perfectly able to think outside the regime’s frame of reference. Alternative frames were readily available, not least through religion and the living memory of other times, places, and political orders. Outward opposition, for obvious reasons, was not a viable option in the 1930s. In dealing with the regime, most people chose to adapt and associate rather than oppose and dissociate. Crucially, however, they did so not because they believed in the Stalinist project or could not escape its language, but simply because of the very violently enforced absence of alternatives. While going about their business, performing their roles and wearing their masks as best they could, some people ended up identifying with the regime and its values. At the same time, and particularly in the villages, many more began developing

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22 Rossman, Worker Resistance.


24 As Fitzpatrick notes with reference to Erving Goffman, there is no clear line between “cynical” and “sincere” performances of social roles – people often become what they act. Sheila Fitzpatrick, Tear Off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 12–13.
and nurturing subversive thoughts, if only vague ones, about a future radical change of the political order. When the German invasion came, it exposed Stalinism’s failure to forge robust bonds of loyalty between the regime and its core Russian population.

Northwest Russia

Situated between the two historic capitals of Moscow and St Petersburg/Leningrad, the lands of the northwest are geographically and historically core Russian territories. The German-occupied area covered parts of what were then the Leningrad and Kalinin regions (oblasts) of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). Encompassing some 81,000 square km (somewhat less than present-day Austria), the territory extended from Sebezh and Velikie Luki in the southwest and southeast to the Gulf of Finland and the suburbs of besieged Leningrad in the north. Lake Peipus (Chudskoe ozero) marked the western border, and in the east, German troops advanced as far as Tikhvin, Demyansk, and Lake Seliger before the front line stabilized roughly along the Volkhov and Lovat rivers following the Soviet winter offensive of 1941–1942 (Soviet forces eliminated the Demyansk salient in February 1943).

The number of people inhabiting the soon-to-be-occupied districts on June 22, 1941 was about 1.9 million, the majority of whom lived in the countryside. Up to 95 percent of them were Russians by nationality, most of them Orthodox by faith. Various Finnish-speaking groups, Estonians, Jews, and a small number of ethnic Germans also peopled the towns and villages of northwest Russia. Following the invasion, the population dropped by hundreds of thousands due to evacuation, flight, and mobilization into the Red Army. Of those remaining on occupied territory, a minority of about 7 percent inhabited the towns, while the rest were spread out over 11,900 villages in about 250,600 peasant households. A large number of men had been evacuated or mobilized, leaving a

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25 In 1944, parts of the Leningrad and Kalinin regions were transferred to the newly established Novgorod and Pskov regions.
Map 2  Occupied northwest Russia
male-to-female ratio of about 1:2. Even though some historians have portrayed the population remaining on occupied territory as consisting of children, women, and old men, there was no such demographic collapse in northwest Russia, where the combined share of children and people above sixty years of age was not much higher than in the Soviet Union as a whole before the war.

Northwest Russia was an agriculturally poor region, largely covered by forests and marshland, with relatively infertile soils. With the exception of a large textile factory in Narva and flax mills in Pskov, industry was poorly developed. Consequently, the region was of little economic significance. That fact had a paradoxical outcome. On the one hand, Nazi planners saw the northwest as part of the Soviet Union’s “forest zones,” grain-deficit regions whose inhabitants would “become superfluous” and would have to die in their tens of millions or flee to Siberia when the Germans took away the country’s food surplus. This line of thinking had real consequences, most notably famine in parts of the occupied territories, as well as the genocidal siege of Leningrad. On the other hand, the poor agricultural yields also motivated the German decision to allow decollectivization in this region (unlike in the case of the black earth of Ukraine, not much could be extracted here anyway), a move most peasants welcomed and from which many benefited.

The occupied territories came under the jurisdiction of the Wehrmacht’s Army Group North (Heeresgruppe Nord). Unlike the Baltic countries and parts of Ukraine and Belarus, which came under civilian Nazi rule in the so-called Reichskommissariaten, northwest Russia remained under military administration until the end. A network of commandant’s offices (Ortskommandanturen and Feldkommandanturen), each staffed by a few dozen German personnel as well as a similar number of Russian employees, ran the day-to-day administrative affairs. Lacking the manpower and local knowledge to govern the occupied territories on their own, the Germans also set up a local self-government apparatus largely modeled on the prewar Soviet administration whereby the village elder (starosta)
replaced the kolkhoz chairman, the volost elder the rural soviet chairman, and so on. Alongside three Wehrmacht Security Divisions (the 207th, the 281st, and the 285th) operating in northwest Russia, the Germans also deployed SS and police forces to enforce the new order. Moreover, the Germans recruited thousands of local volunteers and prisoners of war to serve in auxiliary police units and antipartisan detachments.

What about the representativeness of northwest Russia? In being predominantly rural, the region was typically Soviet. Yet it was certainly untypical of the German-occupied territories farther south and west, where the ethnic mix was greater and Jews lived in much greater numbers. This book does not purport to tell the whole story about the Soviet occupation experience, but aims to increase and deepen our knowledge of that story by shedding light on one particular region – a Russian one as opposed to a Ukrainian, Belarusian, or Baltic one – that has so far largely remained in the dark.

A Note on Sources

A mountain will appear differently depending on your standpoint, and the only way to get a sense of what it “really” looks like is to see it from many different angles. The same applies to the subject of this book, and indeed to most historical subjects. I have therefore relied on a variety of source types offering different perspectives, including official Soviet and German records, published and unpublished interviews, memoirs, and diaries.

The Russian-language sources fall into four main types: Official records (reports, summaries, and correspondence, mostly by partisan units operating in the occupied territory and regional party organs); oral testimonies (recorded in post-Soviet years); postwar and post-Soviet memoirs; and contemporary diaries. Oral testimonies come from four main sources. First, I draw on a collection of several dozen interviews with wartime inhabitants of the Luga district that have been carried out, taped, transcribed, and (partly) published by historian Aleksei Vinogradov of St Petersburg State University. Second, the Russian writer Izolda Ivanova has published, on the basis of interviews with people from several districts of northwest Russia, a compilation of more than 100 accounts of the

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A Note on Sources

Third, I have made use of a dozen videotaped testimonies by Holocaust survivors and witnesses (collected under the auspices of the Shoah Foundation Institute). The fourth source is a number of interview transcripts published on the Russian website iremember.ru. As for memoirs and memoirlike texts, the most important ones are by Dmitrii Karov (Dmitrii Petrovich Kandaurov, a Russian émigré who served as an intelligence officer in the Wehrmacht during the war), Oleg Anisimov (the wartime head of a Riga-based welfare committee concerned with Soviet refugees), and Vera Pirozhkova (a wartime inhabitant of Pskov and a journalist in the occupation newspaper Za rodninu). Occupation diaries are rare. In particular, few peasants kept them. I have made use of two rural diaries, both written by village teachers, as well as a handful of others written by urban inhabitants.

On the German side, the most important type of source consists of official records produced by the military administration apparatus, including Wehrmacht and SS/police agencies as well as Foreign Ministry

I. A. Ivanova, Za blokadnym koltsom: sbornik vospominanii zhitelei Leningradskoi oblasti vremen germanskoi okkupatsii 1941–1944 gg. (St Petersburg: Vesti, 2010).

See sf.usc.edu/full-length-testimonies.


Anisimov, The German Occupation.

V. A. Pirozhkova, Poteriannoe pokolenie: vospominaniiia o detstve i iunosti (St Petersburg: Zhurnal Neva, 1998); V. A. Pirozhkova, Moi tri zhizni. Avtobioigrafitcheskie ocherki (St Petersburg: Izdatelstvo "Zhurnal 'Neva'", 2002).

representatives attached to the staffs of the 16th and 18th armies operating in the Army Group North area. Most of them are reports written by officers responsible for rear-area surveillance, administration, policing, and security. All of these sources have their peculiar limitations, which I have discussed at length elsewhere. Here I will only mention one salient issue related to my extensive use of official Soviet and German reporting on “popular mood” to illuminate popular attitudes and behavior.

Pripiski (“write-ins”), the overreporting or inventing of achievements, was common if not ubiquitous in Soviet economic life. The state set production targets, and by overfulfilling the norm a factory director or collective farm chairman could hope to gain access to resources, reap personal rewards, and improve his or her reputation. During the war, Soviet authorities also prescribed targets for the partisan movement, announcing specific numbers of rails to be destroyed and so on. The practice of pripiski made its way into Soviet partisan warfare as well, leading to wildly exaggerated figures for acts of sabotage and Germans killed in battles with partisans. Given this tendency to invent successes, a healthy dose of skepticism is in order when reading the partisan reports’ highly optimistic portrayal of the local population’s attitudes and behavior – inhabitants are mostly described as unflinchingly loyal to the Soviet regime, even supporting the collective farm system.

German observers, of course, were no less mired in their cultural, political, and ideological surroundings. In particular, the Nazis’ image of “the Russian” emphasized a lack of initiative and independence. According to this vision, it would not only be legitimate for Germans to rule over Russians, but also the Russians would be content to have a new master to rule over them. As one military administration official put it during a talk given in Pskov in September 1942:

The Russian has not changed for centuries. What was true during the time of Peter the Great is true today as well, one encounters everywhere the same

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repression and the same poverty, the same indifference, idleness, and the same inclination towards mysticism... He needs someone to rule over him, if he is not to sink into lethargy.\textsuperscript{42}  

The idea of an idle Russian people waiting to be ruled by a “strict but fair” master, combined with a consistent anti-Bolshevism, shines through in much German reporting on popular mood. We may assume that confirmation bias stemming from these convictions inclined many German observers to emphasize anti-Soviet attitudes among the population. Such an emphasis, of course, would also serve to legitimize the overall German mission of colonizing “the East.” However, German anti-Bolshevism and the condescending view of “the Russian” clearly did not influence German reporting in the same way that \textit{pripiski} demonstrably and significantly skewed Soviet partisan reporting. Despite the thrust of ideology and racist–colonialist imagination and ambition, German observers remained quite sensitive to nuances and changes on the ground. Even though the Germans tended to view inhabitants as predominantly anti-Bolshevik, when they believed that people in a given locality were losing faith in the Wehrmacht and German power they did not hesitate to say so. When “popular mood” declined, military intelligence officials generally made note of it and, in the spirit of Prussian \textit{Redlichkeit}, tried to explain why. Many reports would even point to German policies as the culprit.  

While in the German view there was never an illusion that the vast majority of the local population was pro-German by default, the opposite seems often to have been the case on the Soviet side. This does not entail that German reports on popular mood can always be taken at face value while Soviet accounts should always be dismissed as unreliable. It does, however, suggest that the latter’s blind angles were generally wider.

\textbf{Structure of the Book}

\textbf{Chapter 1} sets the stage by exploring the impact of prewar Stalinism in northwest Russia. Here I argue that the Bolshevik regime failed to produce robust bonds of loyalty that would firmly pull Soviet Russians into the orbit of the Stalinist political order. In \textbf{Chapter 2}, I account for how people experienced and responded to the German invasion in the first days, weeks, and months of the war. Hopes and fears surfaced as the institutions of Soviet power crumbled before the advancing German forces. Patriotic

sentiment was widespread but ambiguous: Some volunteered for military service and declared their loyalty to the Soviet motherland, while others hoped the Germans would defeat the Bolsheviks, dismantle the collective farms, and pave the way for the establishment of a new and better political order in Russia.

Chapter 3 tells a story of death and survival among the groups of people singled out for destruction by the Nazis: Jews, Roma, disabled people, and prisoners of war. Chapter 4 then turns to the food situation and shows how German economic policy and wartime upheaval combined to cause extreme poverty, hunger, and ultimately thousands of deaths by starvation in certain parts of northwest Russia. To fend off the ghost of hunger, people found work with the German army or fled to more well-off districts. Hunger and deprivation apparently did not lead to a major change in popular political attitudes. Mass starvation was localized, and most people saw it as a result of war, not German policies.

While Chapters 3 and 4 deal with people facing mass murder and starvation, Chapters 5 and 6 show how large parts of the population simultaneously experienced a change for the better in their everyday lives. Chapter 5 accounts for the dissolution of the collective farms in occupied northwest Russia, arguing that the move reinforced support for the Germans among the peasantry, who benefited materially from the new agrarian order. Chapter 6 discusses the German-sponsored revival of the Russian Orthodox Church. The priests working for the Pskov Orthodox Mission, a wartime institution established to provide religious and relief services for the local population, saw themselves as Russian patriots: They labored in the interest of the Russian nation, but in opposition to the Bolshevik regime and the partisan fighters working to reestablish it. While the clergy’s appeals to the faithful helped shore up support for the occupation regime, their patriotic message also kindled a popular sense of Russian national identity which could easily fuel anti-German attitudes in the minds of the growing number of people who were coming to see Nazi Germany as the greater evil.

Chapter 7 takes on the complex question of how people related to the new configuration of political power in northwest Russia. Here I explore the ways in which ordinary people supported, harnessed, subverted, and evaded German as well as Soviet claims to power in the occupied territories, finding that the substantial degree of popular support for the German regime was rooted in material needs as well as an anti-Soviet form of Russian patriotism. The Soviet partisan insurgency, on the other hand, was hardly a popular movement before late 1943, when the German army
began to retreat and thousands flocked to the partisans in a massive rejection of German authority. Yet most people were not die-hard supporters of either power. They sought to evade rather than engage with power. When passive neutrality became impossible due to violence and threats from both sides, people turned to a tactic of calculated pragmatism, hoping to survive by keeping a foot in both camps.

As Chapter 8 shows, the 1943 shift of popular allegiance was eased by a growing realization that Hitler was no better than Stalin. Even though accumulated grievances resulting from German atrocities and oppressive behavior mattered, power realism was the decisive mover. The imminent retreat of German forces was what sparked a movement of popular resistance. With the Germans being chased out of the country, popular attitudes to the reestablishment of Soviet power were mixed. People were relieved to see the war end and happy to reunite with their loved ones, but many also feared the wrath of the Soviet state and resented being forced back onto the collective farms.
“Up till the present time, two worlds are still living with us. Which world will win we cannot know, but the one that wins is the one we will live with.” These words were uttered in November 1940 by Alfeyev, the headmaster of a middle school in the Utorgosh district, while speaking to a group of prospective conscripts on the subject of world revolution. The local NKVD reported Alfeyev’s statement as “unhealthy,” but his musings tell us something more: They reveal a profound sense of socio-political undecidedness. By expressing the notion that Soviet existence was being contested by two different “worlds,” along with a pragmatic determination to live with whatever the prevailing order might turn out to be, the headmaster demonstrated openness to radical political change and immunity to the Stalinist message.

Alfeyev was one of about 1.9 million people living in the soon-to-be-occupied districts of northwest Russia whose social and political environment was fundamentally shaped by Stalinism. In order to understand how the population dealt with German invasion and occupation, we first need to know something about how they experienced and related to Stalin’s regime and the policies it enacted. Like Alfeyev, the majority of them were not convinced of the historical necessity or the future stability of the Bolshevik Revolution.

Embattled Peasants

Before the war, about 70 percent of the population in northwest Russia lived in the countryside. During the long 1930s, from the launching of Stalin’s first Five-Year Plan in 1928 to the German invasion, the lives of peasants underwent immense and ruinous change. The Stalin regime’s

1 Special report by the Utorgosh district NKVD department, November 21, 1940, in Voronina, Novgorodskaiia zemlia, vol. 2, 187.
campaign to industrialize the country at breakneck speed while eliminating all sorts of real and imagined opposition entailed three overlapping elements of policy that radically transformed the world inhabited by Soviet peasants: collectivization, dekulakization, and an attack on traditional village culture. All three were associated with massive coercion and violence, leading historians to speak of the period as one of war waged by the regime against the peasantry.\(^2\)

In late 1929, Stalin launched an all-out drive to collectivize Soviet agriculture by encouraging, threatening, and coercing millions of peasants to join the kolkhozes. The immediate background was the grain procurement crisis of 1927–1928, whereby high-priced consumer goods led peasants to retain or consume their products rather than bring them to the market, which in turn threatened the urban food supply. Responding to the crisis, the party decided in early 1928 that “extraordinary measures” were necessary to secure the supply of grain. Abandoning Lenin’s conciliatory New Economic Policy, Stalin dispatched 30,000 party activists into the countryside to seize grain from the peasants and override local officials who might not be acting in accordance with the new policy.

The grain seizures of 1928 had a severe impact in northwest Russia, where they generated much protest against the state’s violent encroachments. In May 1928, the Pskov district party committee reported “massive discontent in the population, not only among the anti-Soviet and prosperous elements, but also in the proletariat and the poor peasantry.” Hundreds of peasants arrived in the towns, where they formed large queues outside the food stores. In the Opochka, Novosele, Pskov, and Palkino districts, “whole crowds of peasants” appeared every day at the district executive committee to demand bread, and “defeatist attitudes” were observed amid rumors about war and the instability of Soviet power.\(^3\) Similar rumors of an imminent war in which the Bolshevik government would be toppled returned repeatedly throughout the 1930s.

After a respite during the fall of 1928, the government renewed its coercive methods in early 1929 as the grain supply again receded. For the peasants, the so-called extraordinary measures represented a return to the despised forced requisitioning of War Communism during the civil war a


decade earlier. In the first half of 1929, food conditions became dire to the point of starvation in a number of northwest Russian villages. Authorities in the Pushkinskie Gory district reported that hunger had befallen 276 peasant households, creating a “desperate situation.” A similar number of families was reported to have left for Siberia in order to escape death by starvation.\(^4\) In March and April, villages in the Novgorod district were receiving only 15–20 wagons of bread per month, while the normal number was 150–200 wagons. Malnutrition and illness soon became widespread. In some places, entire villages were starving.\(^5\) In one village in the Gdov district, peasants reportedly threatened to “storm the district executive committee or start a civil war” unless bread was handed out.\(^6\)

The turbulence of 1928–1929 escalated into a countrywide upheaval as Stalin pushed ahead with the policy of all-out collectivization in late 1929. The Bolsheviks used violence and threats to force their will upon the peasantry. Where fierce resistance appeared, such as in the Caucasus, the Red Army employed artillery and even poison gas to subjugate rebellious peasants.\(^7\) While such large-scale violence was not employed in northwest Russia, collectivization was a matter of coercion here as well. According to an April 1930 letter of complaint by peasants from the village of Kisel in the Ostrov district, the rural soviet chairman had threatened villagers into signing a protocol agreeing to enter the collective farm: “Whoever did not want to sign was told that his teeth would be knocked out and his hide pulled off.”\(^8\) In the same fashion, the head of a village library in the Pliussa district warned peasants about the methods the Communists would employ to collectivize them:

> If you don’t go peacefully, we’ll pull you in by a rope, if the rope breaks, we’ll use a chain, to the chain we’ll attach a car, if the car isn’t enough we’ll use a tractor, or else a tank. If the tank isn’t enough, we’ll bring in the infantry, the cavalry, and the artillery. Even if it’s over human bodies, we’re still carrying out collectivization.\(^9\)

The militant rhetoric employed by the regime, with frequent mention of “battles” and “campaigns” being carried out on social and economic “fronts,” created a civil war – like atmosphere that radicalized the attitude

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4 Report by the Pushkin raikom, February 28, 1929, in ibid., 478–479.
6 Report by the Gdov raiispolkom, April 13, 1929, in Ivanov, Sbornik dokumentov, 479.
7 Baberowski, Verbrannte Erde, 177.
8 Quoted in Viola, Peasant Rebels under Stalin, 94.
of the likes of this village librarian. Of course, rhetoric was backed up by violence. Many of the “collectivizers” sent out to the countryside were fully armed and sometimes joined by special army and OGPU (political police) units.  

Collectivization revolutionized the Soviet countryside from above. The 1930s, in the words of one historian, “witnessed the end of the world the peasants had made in Russia.” The peasants continued to create their world, but they now did so under new and radically unfavorable circumstances. In some important respects, collective farming was a return to serfdom: The ruling elites were again appropriating the products of peasant labor, and the passport law of 1932 restricted peasant mobility. Kolkhozniks did not work for nothing, as the serfs had, but they worked for so little that the comparison remains poignant.

The Stalinist policy of collectivization had a constructive aspect to it, in that it aspired to create a new order in the countryside, to build socialism, and to improve agricultural efficiency — and the level of peasant culture generally — by introducing tractors, fertilizers, electricity, and education. However, socialist construction in the villages was overshadowed by policies of destruction and coercion. Above all, “kulaks” were to be “liquidated as a class.” Dekulakization devastated the lives of millions of peasants in the Soviet Union. Most of those branded “kulaks” were deported with their families to distant regions of the country or resettled in the peripheries of their home districts; some 30,000 people were executed. Most were ruined economically and deprived of social status and voting rights. Various estimates put the total number of people subjected to some form of dekulakization during the early 1930s at 5–10 million. Hundreds of thousands died from exhaustion, hunger, cold, and diseases, either during the journey or in their places of exile.

Dekulakization in northwest Russia was part and parcel of the general process taking place all over the country, but it also had its idiosyncrasies. In this region, the social stratification of the peasantry was less deep than in the grain regions. The density of middling peasants [seredniaki] was greater

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10 On the violence of the campaign, see Baberowski, *Verbrannte Erde*, 172–191.
here than elsewhere, which may have made the official strategy of “divide and rule” (playing the poorer peasants against the “kulaks”) less effective, because the gap between rich and poor was smaller. Independent farmsteads [khutora] made up a large part of northwest Russian agricultural life (37 percent of all peasant households in the Pskov district were khutora; elsewhere the percentage was even higher). Furthermore, the villages and towns were relatively small and far apart, and the region was characterized by a large number of “god-forsaken places [medvezhie ugly],” as one Russian historian put it. Many peasants could probably avoid or soften the impact of collectivization and dekulakization by taking advantage of their remoteness, hiding grain, livestock, and themselves from the brigades of collectivizers and grain collectors. Later, during the mass terror of 1937–1938, NKVD officials complained that the repression of “anti-Soviet elements” in rural areas was effective only in places not too far removed from police stations.

Neither the degree of relative equality in the social structure nor the remoteness of many villages, however, saved thousands of peasant families in northwest Russia from dekulakization, deportation, and resettlement. In the years 1930–1933, some 9,350 “kulak” households – about 47,800 people – were deported from their homes in northwest Russia. Many were sent to remote destinations in the Murmansk region, the Urals, Siberia, and Yakutia, while tens of thousands were resettled within the districts of northwest Russia. At the same time, thousands of families fled their homes on their own – what Soviet authorities termed “self-dekulakization.” The incessant repressions of 1930–1933, including arrests, forced deportation and resettlement, seizure of property, and the deprivation of voting rights, directly struck more than 125,000 inhabitants of northwest Russia. Indirectly, if we take into account the family members of the repressed as well, many hundreds of thousands were affected.

In the mid-1920s, about one-third of peasant households in the Leningrad region were classified as poor (bedniak), while the middling (seredniak) and wealthy (kulak) segments accounted for two-thirds and 1–2 percent, respectively. V. I. Musaev, “Kollektivizatsiya i raskulachivanie v Leningradskoi oblasti (1930-e gg.),” in Rossiia v XX veke: sbornik statei, ed. V. M. Kovalchuk (St. Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriia, 2009), 187.


Edele, Stalinist Society, 111.


Ivanov, “Repressivnaia politika,” 38–39; Viola, Peasant Rebels under Stalin, 79–86.
Decades later, peasants from the Luga district born in the 1920s recounted their life and family stories to historians. The experience of collectivization figured prominently in the accounts of practically all of the interviewees (about sixty people), and they remembered collectivization with bitterness. The family of Aleksei Fedorov, like many others, enjoyed a relatively comfortable life during the New Economic Policy (NEP) years of the 1920s. Collectivization changed everything, as he recalled: “My ancestors were affluent peasants, but the Soviet state turned them into beggars and slaves. They were dekulakized.”

The payment in kind and cash offered to the kolkhozniks by the state was small and unpredictable, while delivery quotas and tax demands were large. In northwest Russia, however, starvation did not occur on a catastrophic scale like that in Ukraine, the Northern Caucasus, the Volga region, and Kazakhstan, where millions perished. While starvation deaths undoubtedly occurred in northwest Russia as well, extreme yet survivable scarcity was the norm. In 1941, when German officials surveyed the prewar situation in a kolkhoz in the occupied Pskov area, they found that each of its 324 inhabitants, after delivery of quotas to the state, had been left with an average daily food surplus of 180 grams of grain and 920 grams of potatoes. Anything else had to come from their own small garden plots, which the Bolsheviks had eventually allowed peasants to maintain. As older peasants told German agricultural experts, under Tsarism grain yields in the area had been 50 percent larger compared to the 1930s.

The accounts of Luga peasants confirm this picture, almost universally speaking of kolkhoz life as a time of humiliation, degradation, and poverty. They resentfully spoke of having to work za palochki (literally, “for sticks”). As Aleksandra Savina, whose family worked on a kolkhoz in the village of Merevo, recalled: “There was nothing to eat ... We sowed wheat, rye, buckwheat, and flax, but the state took everything. And as for us, we were left with some 150–200 grams per labor-day.”

20 See Vinogradov and Pleizher, Bitva za Leningrad; Vinogradov, Okkupatsiia.
21 Account of A. I. Fedorov (b. 1930), in Vinogradov, Okkupatsiia, 131.
22 Zwei Jahre Kriegswirtschaft, 19. A Bolshevik concession to the peasantry, the private plot became an important source of food and income for Soviet citizens in the 1930s. Here peasants could keep a few animals and cultivate food for their own consumption or for sale at designated kolkhoz markets.
24 Account of A. I. Savina (b. 1928), in Vinogradov, Okkupatsiia, 159. The kolkhozniks were paid in kind on the basis of “labor-days” (trudodni). In this system of payment, the time spent on a task and the skill level needed to perform it together determined one’s income. A full day of manual labor in the field thus paid less than a full day of tending livestock or driving a tractor. The kolkhoz chairman was paid at the highest rate.
the village of Nikulkino, whose parents owned three cows and were deported to Siberia as kulaks, told a similar story:

We grew all sorts of crops in the kolkhoz: barley, wheat, rye, and oats. We planted potatoes . . . We handed in everything to the state, both from our own household and from the kolkhoz – milk, meat, wool, and eggs. So what was left was only a trifle. Per labor-day we got sometimes about two hundred grams of grain, sometimes a bit more. How can you live on this?25

The poverty of kolkhoz life and the peasants’ dissatisfaction was reflected in numerous chastushki – a form of humorous and sometimes subversive folk poetry that was often sung by young people at festive occasions. The composing and performance of chastushki was one way of mocking and poking fun at the Soviet authorities, or of merely venting one’s frustration and despair.26 Many of these works were recorded and preserved by vigilant party and NKVD officials and informers; others were retained in the memory of the singers and composers. To quote a few examples from northwest Russia:27

Esli-b ne bylo morozov/Ne bylo by kholodu/Esli-b ne bylo kolkhozov/Ne bylo by golodu
Without frost/No cold/Without the kolkhoz/No hunger

Kirova ubili, skoro Stalina ubiut/Vse kolkhozy razbegutsia/Nam svobodnei budet zhit
They killed Kirov, soon they’ll kill Stalin/All the kolkhozes will be broken up/Our life will be more free

V kolkhoz prishla/Iubka novaia/Iz kolkhoza ushla/Sovsem golaia
I joined the kolkhoz/My skirt was new/I left the kolkhoz/Completely nude

Kolkhoz “Rassvet,” zakololi koshku/Sharomyga govorit: eshte ponemnozhku!
At the kolkhoz “Rassvet,” they killed a cat/The sharomyga [“idler,” nickname for the kolkhoz chairman] says: Go have a bite!

While the harvest results were disappointing throughout the decade, 1936 was a particularly bad year. When winter came, hungry peasants formed enormous bread queues across northwest Russia. In some places,

25 Account of Mariia Zverinskaia (b. 1923), in ibid., 125.
26 Davies, Popular Opinion, 196 (note 4); A. S. Arkhipova and Mikhail Melnichenko, Anekdoty o Staline: teksty, kommentarii, isledovaniia (Moscow: Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi gumanitarnyi universitet: Obedinennoe gumanitarnoe izdatel`stvo, 2010).
27 TsGAIPD SPb, 24/2v/1198, 194 (thanks to Jon Waterlow for this reference); Davies, Popular Opinion, 51–52; account of Anna Petrova (b. 1929), in Vinogradov, Okkupatsiia, 43.
people arrived at six in the afternoon to stand in line until the shop opened the next morning, and starvation deaths were reported. Some wrote desperate notes and leaflets, including the following: “I, Aleksandr Obedkov, declare that in the USSR hunger reigns, there is no bread, people get up at 2 in the morning to get a piece of bread. Gather an army and attack the USSR.” Because of the crop failure, in 1937 collective farms in the Leningrad region paid only about 330 grams of grain per labor-day. The next bad harvest came in 1940, a year that went down as “the hungriest period” in the family memories of Nikolai Dmitriev, who was born that year in the village of Borshchovo. Another witness, then a peasant girl from the village of Pelgora (Tosno district), also recalled the destitution of prewar years:

Before the war in the villages, it was difficult to get hold of bread. From early in the morning old people and children slowly moved in the direction of the store... There was usually not enough bread for everyone. Such was life before the war.

Besides materially exploiting the peasantry, the Bolsheviks also mounted an attack on village culture and peasant traditions. They sought to make the peasants Soviet by cleansing the village of remnants of the old social and cultural order. “We must ensure a war on old traditions,” urged one among the thousands of urban worker–activists sent into the countryside to carry out and enforce collectivization. Officials and activists proceeded to close down village churches, destroying them or turning them into socialist clubs, granaries, and stables. Hundreds of monasteries and monastic communes were liquidated as “seedbeds of depravity.” Church bells were removed, often to be melted down for industrial use, and religious holidays were banned. Brigades of Komsomol members specialized in publicly destroying icons and other church valuables, sometimes burning them on bonfires, sometimes “executing” saints “for [their] opposition to kolkhoz construction” by shooting the icons to pieces. The Bolsheviks targeted the clergy en masse. During dekulakization in the Pskov area, for instance, local authorities instructed that all priests in the districts of Novosele and Seredkino were to be added to the lists of kulaks. Beginning in 1934, the party adopted a more conciliatory line on religion, but

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this tolerant interlude ended in 1937. The census of that year revealed that almost six in ten Soviet citizens openly identified as religious believers, and the preceding three years of relative tolerance had even encouraged many believers to engage in politics. The Bolsheviks reacted by launching a new antireligious offensive, ordering mass arrests of priests and closing more churches. By January 1939, the Pskov department of the League of Militant Atheists could report that nineteen out of twenty-three still functioning churches in the Pskov district had been shut down and that “most priests have been arrested as enemies of the people.”

While in 1936 northwest Russia was dotted by more than 1,000 churches, served by more than 2,000 priests, by 1941 all but a handful of churches had been closed down. Stalinist policies thus created a strong association between religion and anti-Soviet sentiment.

The Soviet government also closed down peasant-run mills and shops, depriving villagers of economic independence. The “war on old traditions” went on to target traders and artisans, the thriftiest farmers, the rural intelligentsia, and peasant leaders who had given voice to the general protest against collectivization. By marginalizing or eliminating the traditional village elites, the Bolsheviks decreased peasant autonomy and increased their dependence on the state, while at the same time demoralizing the village and contributing to a general economic and technical decline.

Collectivization and industrialization unleashed a veritable mass migration of peasants to the cities and towns. Millions settled in major cities such as Moscow and Leningrad in order to escape the kolkhoz and seek work in the new industrial enterprises, while others found work in provincial cities like Pskov and Novgorod. During the 1930s, rural areas between Leningrad and Moscow witnessed a 15–20 percent decrease in the population. Arriving in the cities and towns, peasants soon found that conditions here, too, were less than favorable.

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35 Note by the Pskov district council of the League of Militant Atheists, January 16, 1939, in Ivanov, Sbornik dokumentov, 524.
38 Viola, Peasant Rebels under Stalin, 38–44; Fitzpatrick, Stalin’s Peasants, 217.
39 Hoffmann, Peasant Metropolis, 1–11.
Life in the Cities and Towns

Urban life in 1930s Russia was burdened by material shortages and cramped housing conditions. The life of urban dwellers, according to one historian, “revolved around the endless struggle to get the basics necessary for survival – food, clothing, shelter.” While Soviet peasants bore the main brunt of industrialization, workers were also squeezed. Real wages and living standards dropped as soon as Stalin’s five-year plans went into effect from 1928 onward. According to one estimate, workers’ real wages in 1932–1933 were only 49 percent of their 1928 level; this rose to 60 percent by 1937 and then dropped to 56 percent in 1940, possibly remaining below the prerevolutionary level into the early 1950s. Among Leningrad workers, the proportion of household income spent on food went up from 43.8 percent in 1927–1928 to 55.9 percent in 1934 and 58 percent in 1935. In 1932, people in cities and towns ate less than a third of the meat and lard they had eaten in 1928. At the same time, the urban population grew fast because of labor demand and an enormous movement of people from the countryside following the upheaval of collectivization (the restrictions on peasant mobility implied by the passport regime were stronger in theory than in practice). The population of cities such as Novgorod and Pskov rose by 30–40 percent in the decade before the war, and the smaller town of Luga saw its population double. Rapid population growth put pressure on the rationing system, which was in force from 1929 until the end of 1934, as well as housing.

The food situation deteriorated for most urban citizens in the early 1930s. An internal summary of Pravda readers’ letters prepared in August 1930 summed up workers’ grievances succinctly: “In the first place, the worker is hungry, he has no fats, the bread is ersatz which is impossible to eat . . . It’s a common thing that the wife of a worker stands the whole day in line, her husband comes home from work, and dinner is not prepared, and everyone curses Soviet power.” As one inhabitant of Pskov later recalled, while there was “no real starvation” in the town in the 1930s, the

40 Fitzpatrick, Everyday Stalinism, 41.
42 Quoted in Fitzpatrick, Everyday Stalinism, 42.
access to and selection of food changed for the worse: “The bakeries that existed during the NEP disappeared together with other grocery stores, only one type of grey bread was baked, and later on, ration cards were introduced.”

Rationing brought a measure of material security to the urban working population, so that they did not need to fear starvation, but that was all.

When the Soviet government ended rationing on January 1, 1935, officials applauded this as a great step toward socialism and a better life for the country’s workers. Reality, however, was more complicated. The end of rationing did reflect a strengthening of the Soviet economy, and a greater assortment of consumer goods was made available as many quasi-commercial (state-owned) stores were opened. But the end of rationing coincided with a steep increase in prices, harming low-wage workers. The situation mainly benefited those better-off segments of the urban population who could afford to buy the new goods now on display. One historian of Pskov describes how in April 1936, on the day of the opening of the city’s first “Lengastronom,” a richly stocked food store, “the Pskovites could behold almost all of the country’s food types: nine types of herring, smoked fish, smoked meats, twelve types of butter, the best cheeses, kefir, oranges, lemons, dried fruits, chocolate, wine, liqueurs, etc."

The luxuries, however, were out of reach for most of the city’s workers.

Housing conditions also worsened in the 1930s. Industrial construction was prioritized over housing, which resulted in poor living conditions for most urban dwellers. In Pskov, the average living space per individual dropped from 7.3 square meters in 1926 to 4.5 square meters in 1939. In 1937, the average space per individual in all of the towns of the Leningrad region was 4.1 square meters.

“The life has become better; life has become merrier (Stalin).” The slogan, which figured prominently in Soviet propaganda in 1936–1937, was mostly inappropriate as a description of the changes in everyday life in Soviet Russia up to that point. Important exceptions did exist: Workers and others of humble social background who had been promoted into the new Stalinist elite of administrators and managers certainly experienced material and social improvement. Another avenue of advancement was

46 Ibid., 171, 176.
associated with the Stakhanovite movement. Workers displaying Stakhanovite zeal would receive better wages, larger flats, longer holidays, and sometimes luxury items such as a private car. Yet the socioeconomic situation for the vast majority of urban workers was clearly deteriorating. As mentioned, workers’ real wages in 1940 are estimated to have been only slightly above half their 1928 levels – a dismal figure by any standard. Furthermore, the years 1938–1941 witnessed the implementation of the third Five-Year Plan, which was geared toward the defense industry to the detriment of investment in consumer goods. Long queues and severe shortages of basic necessities continued to burden urban life. In September 1938, Leningrad police noted staggering queues of up to 6,000 people standing in front of shops hoping to buy a pair of shoes or a coat. The outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939 and the Winter War three months later exacerbated the situation, as people began hoarding food and other goods. On top of all of this, draconian labor decrees were introduced in 1938 and 1940 in order to increase productivity and improve labor discipline, causing much popular grumbling and protest.

The Great Terror in Northwest Russia

The 1930s was a time of terror in the Soviet Union. Collectivization and dekulakization, striking the countryside, was only the first round of large-scale state repression. New rounds followed the 1934 murder of Leningrad party boss Sergei Kirov, culminating in the mass arrests and executions of 1937–1938. The Bolsheviks organized the violence in utmost secrecy and in accordance with a number of NKVD operational orders, the primary and best known of which was Order No. 00447, targeting “former kulaks, criminals, and other anti-Soviet elements,” including former political opponents, White or Tsarist army officers, and priests. Then came a stream of NKVD orders on “national operations,” targeting “enemy”

49 After Donbas coal miner Andrei Stakhanov, who on one August night in 1935 overfulfilled his quota by 1,400 percent.
50 Davies, *Popular Opinion*, 45; Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 170. One feature of these decrees was the expansion of the workweek from 42 to 48 hours; another was that a worker could be fired or face criminal charges for being just twenty minutes late.
nationalities accused of espionage. Under these orders, about 1.5 million people were detained, of which, according to NKVD figures, 681,692 were shot. Most of the rest were imprisoned or sent to the Gulag. Counting deaths among them as well, probably about one million people perished as a result of the NKVD operations in 1937–1938.52

Nadezhda Nevdachina, a fifty-year-old woman living in Pskov, was arrested one day in May 1935. Her offense was to have been born into the family of a priest who died in 1907 and left behind a house, one-sixth of which belonged to her as an inheritance. She was leasing out a room, and she sold milk from a cow she was tending. During World War I, she had volunteered to work at the front as a sister of charity. The police investigation found that she had never been politically active, had never belonged to a party, and had no relatives outside the borders of the country. Still, based on her family background, Nevdachina was sentenced and deported to the Urals, along with her nine-year-old niece.53 She was one of many unfortunate people: In the year of her arrest, thousands of families in the Leningrad region were branded as “anti-Soviet” and deported following an NKVD order to purge the region’s border zones.54 The ultimate fate of Nevdachina is unclear. We may assume that her relatives and friends who remained in Pskov – just like the relatives of all the other arrested, dekulakized, deported, and executed people – were frightened and confused by her arrest and deportation. Perhaps they tried not to talk or even think about it, lest they too be targeted by the NKVD as sympathizers of an enemy of the people. For many of them, the experience opened a gap between themselves and the Bolshevik regime, if only in their own minds.55


55 According to the findings of the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System, the experience of arrest (by the secret police) in one’s family significantly increased the probability of a respondent’s expressing hostility to the Soviet system. Moreover, the Great Terror was the most prominent factor cited by respondents who “once favored” the Soviet regime as a reason for ultimately turning against it. Alex Inkeles and Raymond Augustine Bauer, The Soviet Citizen: Daily Life in a Totalitarian Society (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 266, 272.
In northwest Russia (including Leningrad), some 106,000 persons were arrested between August 1937 and November 1938, and more than 50,000 of them were executed. According to statistics compiled on the basis of the people who were executed in 1937, about 44 percent of these victims had been born in the towns or villages of northwest Russia (excluding Leningrad), and some 23 percent of them – 11,500 people – were peasants. While tentative, the numbers demonstrate that the Great Terror took a considerable toll on the population of northwest Russia. They also suggest that the repression of 1937–1938 might have had a greater impact on the Russian countryside than previously assumed. Indeed, the events remained clearly present in the memories of several peasants from the Luga area. Anna Andreeva, for instance, recalled the arrest of nineteen people from the village of Milodezh:

Of the 19, only one returned alive . . . They released my father after three days. He [was forced to stand] at the police station in Oredezh for three days – his legs were swollen. They made him admit everything. But what can he admit when he’s not guilty of anything? Anyway they released him, he came home all covered with lice, and they took grandfather away too and he died there.

Resistance, Adaptation, and Enduring Grievances

In the countryside, initial negative reactions to collectivization and dekulakization were widespread and often violent. In 1930, 125 mass disturbances, with a total of 10,655 participants, were registered in the Leningrad region. Police authorities in the Pskov district remarked upon the “furious extent” of peasant resistance. Peasants attacked Soviet officials, activists, and kolkhoz chairmen; stabbed them to death; beat

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58 According to Fitzpatrick, for peasants “the terror of 1937–38 pale[d] in comparison with collectivization and dekulakization in the early 1930s.” Fitzpatrick, Stalin’s Peasants, 203.
60 Viola, Peasant Rebels under Stalin, 141.
them with their fists; and set fire to their offices and homes. Some older peasants hanged themselves in protest. More often, peasants registered their opposition in a range of nonviolent manners: by refusing to join the kolkhoz or simply leaving the village; by writing petitions and letters of complaint; by holding public speeches or making individual statements of discontent. “You say that people enter the kolkhoz voluntarily,” one peasant in the Palkino district charged during a village gathering where Soviet officials were present, “but I, for instance, don’t want to go, but I will have to anyway because I don’t want to be resettled. With such attitudes, we will have disorder in the kolkhoz.”

Dekulakization and deportation of villagers gave rise to protests not only from those targeted but from their neighbours as well. In a February 1930 report, local authorities in the Pskov district noted several instances of “sympathy and compassion” being expressed toward kulaks who were to be deported. In Opochka, a crowd of 300 peasants surrounded a group of four kulak families targeted for deportation, to protect them. Elsewhere, recorded statements included the following: “Why are you ruining the kulak? Don’t you know he was feeding us”; “Let them live, they are good people”; “Soviet power robs the kulaks and forces them to live in bath-houses and starve”; “They have robbed the kulaks, later they will rob everyone else as well.”

With time, overt resistance to the collectivization campaign faded away. The kolkhoz became an established fact of life, and besides leaving the village, there appeared to be little choice but to play along. By the mid-1930s, about 16,000 police informants operated in the northwest Russian countryside, and so the ever-present danger of being arrested, imprisoned, or executed for “anti-Soviet” and “counterrevolutionary” acts limited openly oppositional behavior. Adaptation became the modus operandi of most Soviet citizens, who continued to look for ways to work the system to their least disadvantage. For peasants, this meant not least tirelessly working their private garden plots,

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63 Ivanov, “Repressivnaia politika,” 23.
64 Viola, Peasant Rebels under Stalin, 206.
65 Ivanov, Missiia Ordena, 36.
surreptitiously enlarging them, and silently reprivatizing kolkhoz tools and animals – something the state tried in vain to control.  

Adaptation did not mean that popular grievances disappeared. In northwest Russia, as in other parts of the USSR, peasants began to fantasize about a coming war that would bring about the end of the Soviet regime and lead to the abolishment of the kolkhoz. Rumors to this effect were widespread and persistent throughout the 1930s. A few days before the Germans attacked the Soviet Union, a kolkhoz peasant in the Pskov district was reported as saying: “I don’t care who’s in power, even if Hitler comes, I don’t consider it necessary to help.” Pskovite Vera Pirozhkova recounted in her autobiography that the son of an Old Believer patriarch in a village close to Pskov, which the Pirozhkovs often visited in summer, “openly awaited the arrival of the Germans . . . saying, ‘The Germans will come, they will dissolve the cursed kolkhozes, and then we will have our own farms again’.” “Now I expect salvation only from Hitler,” another peasant near Leningrad exclaimed, one week before the Germans invaded.

The Bolshevists had subjected the peasants to a ruthless policy of exploitation and humiliation that left them disaffected, demoralized, and impoverished. The collective farm had become a symbol of everything the population, not only the peasants, despised about the Soviet order. As the researchers behind the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System succinctly put it: “The collective-farm situation is, of course, the crux of the issue for the peasant. He sees it as the cause of his deprived status and as the reason for the loss of independence, autonomy, and integrity which he so keenly feels.” In The Soviet Citizen, Inkeles and Bauer expanded on this argument:

[T]he collective farm is one instance of a government-controlled economic institution that consistently violated rather than helped the welfare of the citizenry. As a result, nothing approaches the directness, simplicity, and

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68 Zav[eduushchii] orginstruktorskim otdelom Leningradskogo obkoma VKP/b, “Spravka o delatelnosti antisovetskikh elementov v raionakh i gorodakh Leningradskoi oblasti,” June 18, 1941, TsGAIPD SPb, 24/5/15435, 133.

69 Pirozhkova, *Moi tri zhizni*, 75.


pervasiveness of the hostility toward the collective farm system. All groups without distinction and virtually unanimously wanted it eliminated. On a direct question, nine tenths of the entire sample said flatly that the *kulak* should be abolished and all the land distributed. On the oral interview the overwhelmingly predominant reason for opposing the collectives was that they conflicted with man’s natural inclination to work better and be happier on his own land, and the other major reason given was the stringency and harshness of collective farm life.\(^7^5\)

How did people in cities and towns relate to Stalinism in the 1930s? Even though industrialization was being carried out on the workers’ backs, violent urban protests were few and far between.\(^7^3\) Why was this? Stephen Kotkin, in his noted study of urban life in Magnitogorsk, argues that most people came to believe in Soviet socialism despite “ambivalence, confusion, and misgivings.” Inhabiting a “Stalinist civilization,” people invested hope in the regime because of its “laudatory ideals” and welfare measures, and despite violence and terror.\(^7^4\) Sheila Fitzpatrick, too, contends that urban residents of Soviet Russia in the 1930s mostly accepted the Stalinist government, remaining passively conforming and outwardly obedient, for three reasons: the Soviet government had become “the repository of national sentiment and patriotism”; it had “successfully associated itself with progress in the minds of many citizens”; and the Soviet state “was becoming a welfare state” despite its flaws.\(^7^5\) Valid as those points may be, a fourth and more decisive point must be added – namely, the impact of the extensive use and persistent threat of state violence.

Stalinism certainly cannot be reduced to a reign of terror, but terror was always essential to its workings. The Bolsheviks proved consistently willing and able to apply extreme violence in order to annihilate or force into submission real and perceived enemies. Of course, ordinary people recognized this basic fact, even though few allowed themselves openly (or even privately) to talk about it during times of terror. Yet some did. As one Russian village teacher confided to his diary in 1942: “Everything is maintained by threats and fear. Remove these factors, and our whole system will come apart like a house of cards from a

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\(^7^2\) Inkeles and Bauer, *The Soviet Citizen*, 244–245.

\(^7^3\) For northwest Russia (excluding Leningrad), the published literature and available sources make no mention of instances of significant worker unrest, protest, or uprisings during the 1930s. The question, however, remains poorly researched. For a study of widespread worker protest among textile and other workers in the Ivanovo region, see Rossman, *Worker Resistance*.

\(^7^4\) As Kotkin writes, “Despite . . . the violence and hatred that were unleashed, the USSR under Stalin meant something hopeful.” Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 358.

\(^7^5\) Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 225.
breath of wind ... The Bolsheviks now feel as if in a conquered country, and they behave accordingly.”

In short, people were not accepting of or acquiescent to the Stalinist order so much as they were subjected to it. In towns and villages, factories and farms, people mostly acquiesced not despite violence and terror but because of them. In the final analysis, the violently enforced absence of alternatives to “Stalinist civilization” is a necessary condition for explaining why people engaged in it, adapted to it, and strove to make the best of it.

This, of course, is not to deny that features of Stalinist civilization had popular appeal. Socialist and utopian ideals, patriotism, and a measure of public welfare were phenomena that could and did encourage support for Stalin’s government among parts of the population. The appeal of Communist ideology, too – which portrayed society as marching proudly toward a bright future – was significant among young people. To believe in the Bolshevik cause, the “revolutionary truth,” as Kotkin put it, was “a way to transcend the pettiness of daily life, to see the whole picture, to relate mundane events to a larger design; it offered something to strive for.” Striving for Communism, however, would be much more appealing to those who could actually see their own lives improving, and they made up a privileged minority. By 1937, the elite of Stalinist society – including professionals in all fields, from engineers to artists, as well as managers and functionaries – made up about 12 percent of all employees and less than 1 percent of the country’s total population. The vast majority of ordinary workers and employees in cities and towns saw little or no improvement – indeed, a sharp decline – in their life situation during the 1930s.

Besides declining material conditions, another source of urban immunity to Stalinist civilization was the fact that peasants were crowding cities and towns. The peasants carried their traumatic experience of collectivization and dekulakization with them, and the Bolsheviks’ efforts to turn urban peasants into loyal socialist proletarians largely failed. For many other urbanites, no rural background was needed for antiregime attitudes to become entrenched in the 1930s. Vera Pirozhkova, born in 1921 into a relatively well-to-do family of urban intelligentsia and workers, began to fantasize about the collapse of Soviet power through general strikes and

77 On the young and Stalinism, see Fitzpatrick, Everyday Stalinism, 224.
78 Kotkin, Magnetic Mountain, 229. 79 Edele, Stalinist Society, 166.
80 Bauer, Inkeles, and Kluckhohn, How the Soviet System Works, 220–221; Hoffmann, Peasant Metropolis; Edele, Stalinist Society, 56; Pirozhkova, Moi tri zhizni, 75, 80.
armed uprisings in the early 1930s. She remained in Pskov when the Germans approached and later worked for them, first as a translator and then as a reporter for the German-controlled newspaper Za Rodinu [For the Motherland]. To some extent, she probably inherited the anti-Bolshevik attitude of her father, who had always considered the 1917 revolution a tragedy for Russia and who had no sympathy for Communism. But the young Vera made up her political mind based on personal experience as well. She was made to take part in a grotesque voting session “for or against the shooting of ‘wreckers of transport’” while at school, and later witnessed scenes of emaciated Ukrainians begging for food while on a family trip to Crimea. Her path to eventual rejection of the Soviet state was typical of the urban intelligentsia: She acutely sensed the suffocating atmosphere of a society in which uttering a wrong word on a sensitive topic could virtually ruin your whole life. She relates the following in a key passage in her memoirs:

The famous “Short Course of the History of the All-Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik)” came out in spring 1938. We prepared for the final examination using this book, but all through the year we had to write down the words of the teacher – we did not have the book. In the handwriting, strange words and phrases sometimes appeared. Thus Valia, laughing, once showed me her notebook where it said that Lenin sat “on the bread roll” instead of “in the audience” [Lenin sidел “v bublike” vmesто “publike”] as he shouted the famous phrase, “There is such a party!” (which is ready to seize power). But I had made a much more dangerous note. Our teacher said: “The party explained to the people that war is of no use to them.” But my note said: “The party explained to the people that it is of no use to them.” [Nash prepodavatel govoril: “Partiia raziasnila narodu, chto voina emu ne nuzhna.” Ia zhe zapisal: “Partiia raziasnila narodu, chto ona emu ne nuzhna.”] When I discovered this note in my notebook, I thought that I had accidentally written the perfect truth, but I did not show it to anyone and I destroyed the piece of paper.

Pirozhkova’s example demonstrates that members of the urban intelligentsia also had grounds to reject the Bolshevik political order and, accordingly, adopt an open mind regarding the German invaders. There were many like her in the cities and towns of northwest Russia as well as in the rest of the country.

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81 Pirozhkova, Moi tri zhizni, 9–18. 82 Ibid., 35–37, 52–53.
83 The “Short Course,” printed in thirty million copies by 1948, became the official party catechism and definitive Soviet textbook on Marxism–Leninism and party history during Stalin’s rule.
84 Pirozhkova, Moi tri zhizni, 77.
Conclusion

The long 1930s, from Stalin’s political ascent in 1928 to the German invasion in 1941, was a period of vast socioeconomic and cultural upheaval in northwest Russia, just as it was in the Soviet Union at large. In those years, the Bolshevik government embarked upon a path of radical economic and cultural transformation of Soviet society. Its program brought social mobility and unheard-of opportunities for advancement to many. However, most people – especially but not only in the countryside – did not benefit from industrialization as much as they suffered its consequences. In the end, the impact of collectivization and dekulakization ranged from detrimental to disastrous for most peasants, while urban dwellers saw their living standards drop.

In their attempt to create a “New Soviet Man” and to realize their vision of a modern, industrialized, socialist society cleansed of both real and potential enemies, Stalin and the Bolsheviks introduced policies that had the effect of creating fearsome and materially miserable conditions for most of the country’s population. While millions perished as a result, most people continued to live their lives as best they could. Many youngsters and upwardly mobile urbanites (though few peasants) were energized by the lofty ideals of Stalinism and its promises of a better future. But many more were disappointed by the regime’s shortcomings and forced into submission by its pervasive use of violence. Moreover, a lot of people were inspired by Stalinism and strove to belong to its communities at the same time as they felt disillusioned and unjustly coerced. Indeed, historians have frequently noted the production of a “double consciousness” in Stalinist society. This duality, while on the one hand enabling people to identify with the Bolshevik regime, on the other hand secured a mental space for “internal emigration”; it allowed, if only in latent, silent, or covert forms, for the existence of opposition to the prevailing order. Alfeyev, the headmaster referred to at the beginning of the chapter, expressed this dual mindset in his talk about the “two worlds.”

The peasants were even less convinced than doubters such as Alfeyev of the historical necessity and future stability of Soviet rule. Visions of the

Bolshevik order being swept away were intensely present in the countryside, as is evident from the recurrent rumors of an imminent war that would overturn the regime and lead to the abolishment of the kolkhoz. On the eve of the actual war, then, predominantly peasant northwest Russia was a place where a large part of the population – probably a majority – was virtually primed for cooperation with an invading power seeking to defeat the Bolsheviks and bring about a new regime.
CHAPTER 2

Hopes and Fears
Popular Responses to the Invasion

A watchman at the “Bolshevik” mine told the workers that all the Communists will be hanged, that Soviet power is hanging by a thread, that the Germans are bringing a happy life to Russia, and that our contributions to the state loan are in vain.

Report by the Borovichi municipal party committee, June 27, 1941

Words cannot express my wrath toward the Fascist barbarians who have attacked our Soviet Union. I haven’t the power to hold back my hatred toward the Fascist dogs. I ask you to accept me into the ranks of the Red Army volunteers and I ask you not to turn down my request as this would cause me great grief.

Statement by a schoolteacher in Borovichi district, June 22–25, 1941

Two different but entangled stories capture the ambivalence of initial popular reactions to the German invasion of northwest Russia. One story is about how the pervasive rumors of an imminent time of war and upheaval leading to Bolshevik defeat – rumors that had circulated in the countryside throughout the 1930s – were coming true before people’s eyes. The experience of Stalinism had prepared the disaffected peasants for this war. A substantial part of the peasantry, possibly a majority, looked to the invading Germans with hope tied to the prospects of a new life without the collective farms and with a new government. Among townspeople, too, many could envision a new and better life without Bolshevik rule.

The other story is about how people began to conceive of their own fates as tied up with the Soviet Union and its Red Army. Tens of thousands saw their loved ones march off to the front to fight in the war; thousands volunteered. Mobilization could incline even those who despised Stalin’s rule to think of their sons, husbands, and fathers – and

2 Ibid., 24.
themselves—as engaged in a struggle for their country, for their home and hearth, against a foreign aggressor. Meanwhile, the Germans soon offered people excellent grounds for doubting their message of liberation. German troops and security forces demonstrated reckless cruelty and extreme violence on countless occasions, striking terror among the inhabitants and sowing the first seeds of popular anti-German sentiment.

Yet large parts of the population, especially in the countryside, continued to hope that the Germans would indeed liberate Russia from Bolshevik oppression and terror. This hope was shaken, but not extinguished, during the first weeks and months of the war.

Invasion and Mobilization

When the war broke out, Soviet authorities increased monitoring of army registration offices, public spaces, and workplaces in order to gain a picture of the political inclination of the population. Official reports on popular mood in northwest Russia from the period following June 22, 1941 generally convey a sense of patriotic enthusiasm and determined confidence: Recruits stepped up with displays of patriotic fervor, declaring their readiness to serve the country and crush the enemy. Thousands sent letters requesting that they be accepted as volunteers. Quotas for recruits, horses, carts, and automobiles were promptly filled. The mood of the callups was “cheerful, healthy, and confident.” Workers pledged to turn their factories into fortresses and work all day long, meeting and overfulfilling production quotas. Even kolkhoz peasants were portrayed as enthusiastic, “working better than before the war,” with devotion to the Communist party and “the beloved comrade Stalin.”

The mood reports also mention “isolated instances” of defeatist attitudes and anti-Soviet behavior. For instance, a state farm worker in the Tosno district was arrested after having refused to heed the mobilization orders; he reasoned that he did not want to “fight for a prison.” On June 23, in a village south of Lake Ilmen, an intoxicated man pulled out a

3 Ibid., 14, 16, 17, 28, 32–33, 38; Sergei V. Iarov, Istochniki dlia izuchenii obshchestvennykh nastroenii i kultury Rossii XX veka (St Petersburg: Nestor-Istoria, 2009), 400; Tikhvinskii Raioenkom-Kapitan, “Politdonesenie o khode mobilizatsii po Tikhvinskomu Raioenkomatu,” no earlier than June 24, 1941, LOGAV, R-3845/3/3, 42; Sekretar Luzhskogo RK VKP(b), “Informatsionnoe soobshchenie o polozhenii v raione v dni mobilizatsii,” June 28, 1941, TsGAIPD SPb, 0–1652/1/1894, 4; E. P. Ivanov, ed., Pskovskie khroniki. Istoritsia kraia v dokumentakh i issledovanakh (vyp. 2) (Pskov: Sterkh, 2002), 134–135.

revolver at the military registration office, waved it at a party official, and said, “I will not fight for the Soviet government, I will fight for Hitler. Hitler will conquer our country in three days, and we will help.” On the same day, a peasant in a village east of Novgorod declared, “Now we will hang all your Communists, and then our lives will become better.” Other reports mention similar incidents, as well as cases of self-mutilation and desertion among recruits. In general, the lack of peasant volunteers in the Red Army and the general difficulties the government had in mobilizing peasants (in contrast to young urban workers) suggest that such moods were particularly prevalent in the villages.

Defeatism and anti-Soviet attitudes, or what Soviet authorities labeled as such, were certainly more widespread than what internal party reports suggested. Many hid their true feelings, their fears of repression well founded. Also, given that local party organizations were responsible for carrying out agitprop and “enlightenment work” so as to improve morale and strengthen the resolve of Soviet citizens, the presence of defeatist attitudes in a district, factory, or collective farm would suggest the Communists in charge had failed to carry out this essential task. Accordingly, party officials had good reason to gloss over negative episodes or tendencies in their reporting.

The “isolated negative incidents” mentioned in the reports were probably the tip of an iceberg.

While internal reports from the first days and weeks of the war described popular attitudes in terms of political affirmation and dissent, politics was

Invasion and Mobilization


Ibid.


Reese, Why Stalin’s Soldiers Fought, 114.

Across northwest Russia in the weeks and months after the invasion, numerous death sentences were handed down on counts of “anti-Soviet agitation.” See A. V. Filimonov, “Politicheskie repressii 40-kh godov,” in Ne predat zabveniiu. Kniga Pamiati zhertv politicheskikh repressii, ed. N. P. Korneev, vol. 5 (Pskov: OMTs, 1999), 7–9.

Researching party reports on popular mood from the 1920s, Olga Velikanova observed that they tended to convey a positive image. Even during the Kronstadt rebellion in 1921, the reports found popular mood to be “perceptibly improving.” By contrast the secret police, specifically tasked with identifying threats, had to prove its raison d’être by weighting negative tendencies in its accounting of popular mood. Olga Velikanova, “Berichte zur Stimmungslage. Zu den Quellen politischer Beobachtung der Bevölkerung in der Sowjetunion,” Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas 47 (1999): 234. The same difference between party and NKVD reporting has been noted in the context of wartime popular mood: see N. A. Lomagin, Neizvestnaia blokada (vol. 1) (St Petersburg: Izdatelskii Dom “Neva,” 2004), 70.

not all that mattered to people. Soviet officials’ descriptions of popular mood tell us much about their own preoccupation with loyalty and betrayal, but less about what ordinary people actually thought and did at the time. Many first-hand witnesses left oral accounts of their experiences. Their stories reveal that fear and uncertainty often overshadowed questions of political loyalties and patriotism. Many witnesses recalled that people around them, especially older inhabitants with memories of previous wars, began to cry upon hearing news of the invasion.\(^1\) Rightly expecting wartime shortages, people scrambled to secure supplies of groceries and other necessities for themselves and their families. Aleksandra Esfir recalled a childhood memory of her mother bringing home a bag of buns from a Luga bakery shortly after June 22 and telling the children to enjoy them: “Soon, we won’t be able to eat this anymore.”\(^2\) Meanwhile, bombings sowed terror. Bombs and shells – from both sides – killed many civilians, destroyed homes, and drove thousands into the woods for cover. Some towns, such as Luga, were almost completely destroyed by bombs and shells. Bombs fell on the village of Krasnye Gory, killing a Red Army soldier and a horse, wounding several, and breaking most of the windows in the village.\(^3\) In Novgorod, bombing attacks killed scores of civilians. According to Soviet investigations, twenty-five people standing in a food queue were killed or severely injured by a bombing raid on July 17; four days later, a passenger train carrying civilians was attacked from the air as it pulled into Novgorod station, killing 80 people and injuring 150, most of them women and children.\(^4\)

The beginning of the war caused despair by forcing loved ones to part with each other. Wives, children, and siblings were left behind as husbands, sons, and brothers departed for the front. Mobilization sometimes struck village communities like lightning, entirely out of the blue. Anna Petrova, a twelve-year-old girl at the time, recalled that on the Sunday of the invasion, her village was celebrating a patron saint’s day with people from neighboring villages. Happily unaware of the rapid eastward advance of close to four million Wehrmacht and Axis soldiers that had begun about 3:30 that same morning, the people in Borshchovo were reveling in the festivities, singing and dancing. The party ended when a group of

\(^1\) For example, see the accounts of A. I. Kopaneva (b. 1931), Vinogradov Collection and V. M. Smekalova (b. 1929), Vinogradov Collection; Ivanova, Za blokadnym koltsom, 462; A. V. Vinogradov, “Luzhskii raion ot kollektivizatsii do okkupatsii” (unpublished paper), n.d., 5; Vinogradov, Okkupatsiia, 94.

\(^2\) Account of A. B. Esfir (b. 1936), Vinogradov Collection.

\(^3\) Diary of Vasilii Savelev (b. 1902), entry of August 30, 1941, in Ivanova, Za blokadnym koltsom, 242.

mounted police suddenly arrived and announced that war had begun. The officers read out a list of persons to be immediately mobilized. Anna remembered the panic rising as many were shipped off at once to the military registration office in nearby Oredezh. We do not know exactly how many recruits were mobilized from the districts soon to be overtaken by the Germans, but the figure is likely in the tens of thousands. On the other hand, many dodged the draft, despite threats of harsh punishment. In the Orel region—predominantly rural, like northwest Russia—110,000 men were called up to the army in July and August 1941, but only 45,000 eventually reported in.

The mobilization of thousands into the Red Army inclined families and relatives of recruits to think about the fate of their loved ones as bound up with that of the Soviet Union and its army. Many who had despised the Bolsheviks would now be more liable to include the Soviet state and the Red Army in the category of “us.” As German military intelligence officers would later observe, people with close relatives fighting in the Red Army were usually among those who were most hostile or reserved in their attitude toward the German occupation authorities.

That someone’s son, husband, or father was in the Red Army did not necessarily bind that person firmly to the Soviet side in the war, however. Politics sometimes divided families, as in the case of one peasant father and his son in the village of Vyskidno. As a neighbor later recalled, the father despised the Bolsheviks and welcomed the German arrival even though his son was a fighter pilot in the Red Army:

Once, I remember, we stood outside and one of our aircraft flies high up in the sky . . . And he (the father) says: “If it were flying lower and if I had a rifle, I’d shoot it down!” There was so much hate in him, apparently because he was well off before the Revolution, and Soviet power dekula-kized him and deprived him of his status. And here [another villager] said: “And what if it’s your [son] Pavlik?” . . . And he answers: “So what? If he had landed, I would’ve strangled him with my own hands.”

The potentially unifying effect of family members going to the front was also weakened by a lack of confidence in the Soviet Union’s ability to

15 Vinogradov, Okkupatsiia, 44.
16 See the August 1941 report on mobilization by the Leningrad regional military commissariat in Dzeniskevich and Cherepenina, Iz raionov oblasti soobshchatsia, document no. 39.
17 Reese, Why Stalin’s Soldiers Fought, 114.
19 Account of M. V. Mikhailov (b. 1926), in Vinogradov, Okkupatsiia, 105.
withstand the onslaught. Doubts arose as people witnessed the administrative and military chaos that characterized the Soviet response to the German invasion.\textsuperscript{20} Popular uncertainty also stemmed from knowledge about the disastrous results of the Winter War of 1939–1940 in which the Soviets, facing unexpected Finnish resistance, suffered enormous casualties. Aleksei Fedorov, a boy of eleven in 1941, recalled:

On June 22, the postman came and told us that the war had started . . . Everyone was convinced that this Germany was a trifling matter for us and that we would beat them at once. Even though we knew about the Finnish war and how many of our men died there . . . Many from our own district died, and the ones who survived told us about the number of victims. Not openly, of course, but in the kitchen, under a whisper – so that the next-door neighbor wouldn’t hear.\textsuperscript{21}

Vera Pirozhkova, who lived in Pskov during the occupation, also recalled doubts about the armed forces: “We did not believe much in the fighting capacity of the Red Army. We knew that a great many soldiers did not want to fight for the Communists. The army mostly consisted of sons of peasants who had experienced the terrible collectivization in the recent past.”\textsuperscript{22} As the Red Army retreated from northwest Russia in July, August, and September 1941, popular doubts were being confirmed. At this juncture, according to one contemporary observer, most people in northwest Russia “considered that the Soviet regime was doomed.”\textsuperscript{23}

**Evacuation and Retreat: Soviet Power Crumbles**

The German invasion overwhelmed the Red Army, forcing it to retreat on all fronts during the first months of the war. Northwest Russia was no exception. Pskov fell on July 8, and Novgorod was occupied by mid-August. By August 24, Luga was in German hands. On September 17, Pushkin – just 10 kilometers south of Leningrad – came under German control, with Leningrad itself surrounded. In these weeks, people witnessed Soviet power disintegrating right in their midst.

The eastward evacuation of industry and key personnel was the first sign that the Red Army was not about to “destroy the enemy on his own territory” in the way dictated by prevailing military doctrine. The evacuations


\textsuperscript{21} Account of A. G. Fedorov (b. 1930), in Vinogradov, *Okkupatsiia*, 134.

\textsuperscript{22} Pirozhkova, *Moi tri zhizni*, 145.  

\textsuperscript{23} Anisimov, *The German Occupation*, 8.
proceeded in a chaotic fashion at first, because of the suddenness of the German attack and the Soviets’ lack of experience. One month after the invasion, the Leningrad-region public prosecutor reported that the evacuation had proceeded “in an extremely disorganized manner.” In the Pliussa district, for example, 125 tons of grain had been prematurely destroyed, along with much valuable state property. Several district officials had panicked and departed with their families instead of staying to organize the evacuation. In the Palkino district, south of Pskov, heads of the local party organization loaded their families and private belongings onto trucks mobilized from the kolkhozes and “took off in an unknown direction,” leaving behind a number of civilians who were slated for evacuation.

In line with the policy of scorched earth, the Red Army burned down many villages, leaving the inhabitants homeless. Large amounts of farm equipment, livestock, and food supplies were destroyed or carried away by retreating Soviet forces. “It was our people who set it on fire so as not to leave the Germans anything,” a wartime resident of the village Finev Lug recalled. Of 126 buildings, 6 were left standing, and almost everything was destroyed: “We went to hide in the woods. German planes released leaflets instructing us to return home. But our homes were gone. Nothing was left, not even gloves or boots. We crowded together in the huts still standing and built dugouts. There was nothing to eat, for the bread supply went up in flames too.” German intelligence officers found that “the Russians destroyed all food supplies they could get their hands on.” While the scorched earth policy was intended to weaken the enemy, it also deprived people of food and the means to effectively cultivate the land, which in turn contributed to the famine that would engulf parts of northwest Russia in 1941–1942.

References

26 For examples, see the accounts of A. N. Artemeva (Kruglova) (b. 1927), G. A. Shitikova (b. 1931), and T. G. Lebedeva (b. 1927) in Ivanova, *Za blokadnym koltsom*, 311, 420, 440; S. E. Glezerov, *Ot nenavisti k primireniiu* (St Petersburg: Izdatelstvo OSTROV, 2006), 72. For the official order to destroy crops upon retreating, see the State Defense Committee (GKO) telegram to the Leningrad oblispolkom issued on July 23, 1941, in Dzeniskevich and Cherepenina, *Iz raionov oblasti soobschayut*, 37–38.
28 Der Chef der Sicherheitspolizei und die SD, “Ereignismeldung UdSSR Nr. 34,” July 26, 1941, in Klaus-Michael Mallmann et al., eds., *Die Ereignismeldungen UdSSR 1941. Dokumente der Einsatzgruppen in der Sowjetunion* (Darmstadt: WBG (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft), 2011), 186. Henceforth, the Ereignismeldungen (event reports) will be referred to as EM. See also Kilian, *Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft*, 98–99.
The evacuation of people targeted the elites. Trains bound for the Soviet interior were reserved for party and state functionaries and skilled workers; peasants and others were left to their own devices, meaning their feet or, if not carried off by the Red Army, their horses. In the words of one eyewitness:

Our people retreated speedily, with haste; they went away and the Germans quickly came. They didn’t even suggest that we leave. They abandoned us. They only thing they said was that the Germans are already approaching from this side, from Oredezh. Go hide in the woods, they said. And the whole village went out.

A sense of abandonment in the face of an unknown danger can be traced in many witness accounts. Vladimir Kokarev remarked that, after the Germans seized Oredezh in August, “there was nowhere to go. Whoever was a Communist had already left by train, now there was no transport anymore.” The father of Tamara Troitsyna, a tractor driver, was evacuated together with tractors and equipment, while Tamara and her mother stayed behind. She, too, retained a vivid impression of being abandoned:

Five kilometers away were the Germans, and we were here in the village. Our soldiers retreated in large numbers. And we were left behind ... Everyone was [left] in the village – women, children, and everything. The Red Army soldiers come [and we asked them]: “Our dear ones, our sons [rodnenkie, synochki], please tell us where to go. We would also like to be evacuated.”

The retreating soldiers, themselves in danger of German encirclement, could do little but tell the civilians to go and hide. Following the advice, or simply their own good sense, people sought shelter in the woods. They brought food, clothes, belongings, and whatever livestock they had. They lived in dugouts and improvised shelters for days and weeks, until German soldiers discovered them or necessity made them head back to their home villages and towns.

29 On August 14, the chairman of the Leningrad regional executive committee reported that up to that time, only families of party officials and senior executives had been evacuated, while the kolkhoz population “stayed put until the last moment,” departing, if at all, on their own initiative. Dzeniskevich and Cherepenina, Iz raionov oblasti soobshchaut, document no. 36. See also the accounts of N. D. Isakova and S. I. Antiufeeva in Ivanova, Za blokadym koltsom, 27, 383.
31 Account of Vladimir Kokarev (b. 1925), in Vinogradov, Okkupatsiiia, 21.
32 Account of Tamara Troitsyna (b. 1929), in ibid., 168.
Attached to their home and hearth, and often expecting a better life without the Bolsheviks, many peasants chose to stay put. Some violently refused evacuation. Viktor Fedorov, the son of a kolkhoz chairman, recalled the following incident taking place in the chaos of evacuation in August 1941:

We had travelled [eastwards] for about a week. The roads were ruined and German planes were bombing everywhere. After three days father caught up with us. His face was all in bruises. It turned out that the kolkhozniks of other villages had refused to go into evacuation, and when father began to insist, they beat him, saying, “You go if you want, but don’t touch us!”

Hundreds of thousands were leaving their homes to travel east – some spontaneously and others with evacuation permits or under orders. In Novgorod, which had a population of 42,000 before the war, only about 3,000–4,000 people remained when the Germans seized the city. In Pskov, about 15,000 of a prewar population of 75,000 remained. According to official Soviet figures, some 460,000 people were registered as evacuees from the Leningrad region by March 1944.

Amid the upheaval and mass movement of civilians, Soviet power was coming apart. The dissolution took the shape of retreating Red Army personnel. The ramshackle state of the army and the confusion and indeed helpless destitution of many soldiers made a deep impression on ordinary citizens. While hiding in the forests, Vladimir Kokarev happened upon a poorly equipped division of the so-called people’s militia: “A lieutenant approached me and asked: ‘Son, how do we get to Leningrad from here?’... They didn’t even have a map. And they were commanding officers! They didn’t know their whereabouts or where they were headed.” Another witness, Anna Petrova from Borshchovo, hosted a group of retreating soldiers on a house visit. The Germans had bombed the nearby bridge, so the troops were stuck and decided to stay and

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34 Anisimov, *The German Occupation*, 4. See also “Obobshchennyi akt No.1, O zlodeianiakh nemetsko-fashiistskikh zakhvatichikov i ikh soobshchenikov na territorii goroda Novgoroda v period ego vremenno okkupatsii,” March 4, 1945, GANO, R-1793/1/24, 7.
consolidate their position. She recalled that while the soldiers were sitting down to be served milk, they opened some boxes that were supposed to contain ammunition. Instead of cartridges, there was laundry soap. Petrova retained a clear memory of the soldiers sitting next to her in astonishment, embarrassed and perplexed, with many wounded comrades sprawled on stretchers outside and nowhere to go as the Germans rapidly approached. In Pskov, Vera Pirozhkova witnessed Red Army soldiers throwing away their rifles as women handed them bundles of civilian clothing, which they took under their arms as they slipped away into the crowd.

The disintegration of Soviet power and the arrival of the Germans was accompanied by much violence against Jews in the Soviet Union’s western borderlands. During what the Germans called “self-cleansing actions,” local inhabitants in parts of Ukraine and Lithuania attacked and murdered Jews on their own initiative or with German guidance and participation. Yet no such incidents are known to have taken place in northwest Russia. Popular antisemitism certainly existed here as elsewhere, but in these ethnically homogeneous heartlands of Russia there was no resentful anti-Soviet nationalist organization eager to scapegoat and attack Jews as alleged bearers of Soviet authority and recipients of Soviet privilege, as was the case particularly in Western Ukraine.

The power vacuum that followed the Red Army’s retreat created spaces of lawlessness that were both frightening and a source of survival. Expecting difficult times ahead, people in cities and towns engaged in looting of both state and private property. In Pskov, shops and offices were emptied in the days prior to and immediately following the arrival of German forces. On July 12, a German army chaplain described the scenes in a letter to his wife:

Yesterday . . . the poor people remaining in the city pottered about as if on an anthill. They randomly carried out from destroyed shops and private apartments everything possible: food in enormous bags . . . tools, and all sorts of machinery.
In the countryside, the absence of state power gave rise to turmoil and great expectations as peasants rushed to dismantle the kolkhoz system and redistribute land, grain, animals, and equipment among themselves. In the village of Kleptsy (Novgorod district), as one eyewitness recalled, discussions over how to distribute the harvest nearly got the villagers into a fistfight. While kolkhoz peasants preferred that the food be distributed according to labor-days earned, rural workers—who had been paid in cash and did not earn labor-days—insisted that the food be distributed on the basis of the number of mouths to feed. Advancing across northwest Russia, German forces encountered many such villages where independent redistributions had taken place. As the quartermaster of the Wehrmacht’s 2nd Army Corps reported, the dismantling of the kolkhozes had created “a war of all against all, causing people to forget about the harvest.”

Despite conflicts in the countryside, the spectacle of kolkhozes being spontaneously dissolved made a powerful and positive impression on most peasants. As we shall see in Chapter 5, the Germans encountered a largely grateful and compliant peasantry in the northwest Russian countryside. For many peasants, it was as if a ten-year-old rumor was coming true: The war had finally come, and it appeared to be resulting in the defeat of the Bolshevik regime and the dissolution of the hated collective farms. Yet for the time being, a more acute question loomed: Who were the new masters of the land?

**Liberators and Murderers: The First Encounters**

Before Soviet Russians encountered the first German troops, preexisting mental images of Germany shaped their expectations. Those images reflected Soviet propaganda, previous experience, and rumors.

Soviet propaganda portrayed Germany negatively up to the time of the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact. Prewar images of the demonic German—probably drawing on scenes from Sergei Eisenstein’s movie *Aleksandr Nevskii* (1938) depicting German Teutonic knights wearing helmets with animal horns—had a lasting impact on many young minds. Nina Antonova, a young girl of nine when the Germans arrived, remembered a “terrible” caricature of the horned German that appeared after the war broke out. “When later they arrived,” she recalled, “people were said to

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43 Account of I. A. Ivanova, in Ivanova, *Za blokadnym koltsom*, 81.

have seen them on enormous, tall horses. I thought: and what if they also have horns? Valentina Didenko, a young girl in Luga in 1941, remembered imagining the Germans as “not even people. The childish imagination portrayed them sometimes without arms, sometimes without legs.”

Another wartime inhabitant recalled frightening posters depicting horned Germans, as did many other witnesses from around the region. Anti-Nazi propaganda did not necessarily cause Soviet citizens to view Hitler in a negative light, however. Some admired him as a strong and capable leader.

Previous experience from contact with Germany during World War I mattered, for better or worse. Some former soldiers had been tortured in German captivity, while others had more positive memories. One peasant in a village near Pskov, for instance, had been impressed by the German farms he saw while in captivity. In 1941, he openly voiced his hopes that the Germans would come and dissolve the collective farms so that the economy could flourish again, a remark that got him arrested.

Rumors of German behavior in the occupied territories travelled fast, and they were more menacing than the printed caricatures. When twelve-year-old Tamara Troitsyna heard that the Germans were executing Communists, she hastily buried her Pioneer’s tie. Another witness recalled fearing that, as a Komsomol member, he would be hanged or tortured. Rumors about killings of Jews arrived with refugees from the Baltic countries. “The Fascists will shoot you at once if they take the city,” one Pskov wife told her Jewish husband in the days after the invasion. The husband chose to stay, as did many other Jews, either discounting the terrifying rumors or reckoning that staying put would be safer than attempting escape. Reacting with disbelief, Jewish community leaders in

45 Vinogradov, Okkupatsiia, 58.
47 See Vinogradov, Okkupatsiia, 22, 168; the accounts of A. V. Dolnikova (b. 1931), A. N. Vasileva (b. 1935), and A. G. Grigoreva (b. 1932) in Ivanova, Za blokadnym koltsom, 469, 547, 505; and interview with V. V. Kotov (b. 1930), Vinogradov Collection.
48 See Davies, Popular Opinion, 96–98.
49 See, for example, the account of Aleksei Fedorov (b. 1930) in Vinogradov, Okkupatsiia, 132, 134–135.
50 Pirozhkova, Moi tri zhizni, 75.
51 Vinogradov, Okkupatsiia, 168.
53 USC Shoah Foundation Institute testimony of Regina Galiaeva, September 28, 1997, interview code 36839.
Nevel concluded that the spread of such rumors was irresponsible. The fact that rumors about the German treatment of Jews blended with official Soviet reports to the same effect caused people to dismiss them as exaggerated or false propaganda. Many Jews, according to the diarist Olimpiada Poliakova, a wartime resident of Pushkin, could be heard saying: “Why should we go anywhere? Maybe they will intern us in a camp for a while, but then they will let us go again. It will not be worse than now.”

As in parts of Ukraine and the Baltic countries, locals in northwest Russia, especially rural inhabitants, often offered the Germans a warm welcome. Consider Poliakova’s description of her first encounter with German troops:

19 September 1941
It has come true. THE GERMANS HAVE ARRIVED! At first it was hard to believe. We crept out of our hiding place and saw two real German soldiers walking by. Everyone rushed towards them . . . The peasant women immediately dove into the trench and gathered their sweets and pieces of sugar to give the Germans. They handed all their saved-up riches over to these soldiers.

Whether motivated by a traditional obligation to receive strangers, sincere gratitude, or an impulse to submit to the new masters of the land, this behavior was not an isolated case. “Most of our populace are glad the Germans have arrived,” a rural schoolteacher in the Slantsy district noted in her diary on August 20, 1941. Two months later she again observed that “almost everyone to a man were happy when the Germans came.” Soviet partisan leaders also reported on how some inhabitants gave the Germans a warm welcome: “Thus, in the village of Verkhne, the Germans were met with bows, and people brought them bread and salt on a cloth.” In the town of Dno, a pro-German demonstration took place whereby inhabitants of the older generation displayed prerevolutionary Russian flags to welcome the invaders, whom they hoped would restore Tsarism.

56 Ibid., 82.
57 Germanova, “Fragmenty dnevnika,” 260, 268. Being a Soviet patriot, Germanova explained the troubling observations by reference to the incomplete work of the NKVD in tracking down spies and enemies in Soviet society.
58 P. A. Vaskin, “Dokladnaia za period 11 iulia po 13 avgusta 1941 g.,” August 20, 1941, GANINO, 260/1/210, 25. Offering bread and salt is a traditional Russian custom of greeting guests.
59 This account was given to Oleg Anisimov by “two reliable eye-witnesses”: Anisimov, *The German Occupation*, 5–6.
According to Dmitrii Karov, a wartime intelligence officer with the German 18th Army, 90 percent of the population in northwest Russia (though no more than 50 percent in cities and towns) “greeted the Germans happily as liberators.” While Karov’s claim is speculative and too sweeping, reporting by other German officials tends to support it. “The civilian population meets the German troops in a friendly manner, in many cases greeting them as liberators,” noted the head quartermaster of the 16th Army, while the rear-area commander of the same army reported that the rural population “everywhere” was happy to have been “liberated from Bolshevism” and was expecting German protection. In Gdov, similarly, German officials found the population in general to be positively attuned to German rule, convinced of its durability, and hostile to the Bolsheviks and the partisans. In a retrospective note, the military administration officer with the 281st Security Division wrote in December 1941 that “the peasants, as well as most of the urban population, generally welcomed the downfall of Bolshevism or at least passively observed the events.”

For many people, the arrival of the Germans enabled a release of built-up tension and spite resulting from years of Stalinist oppression and terror. A German Foreign Ministry official attached to the 16th Army staff noted the prevalence of a strong and emotional anti-Bolshevik antipathy in the population: “Again and again it was observed that both men and women, after overcoming the first shyness, began to speak freely and finally let loose the most fanatical outbursts of hate against Bolshevism, primarily directed against Stalin as the embodiment of this system.” Feelings of malice, anger, and bitterness were not just political, but also reflected the continuing spirit of discord that collectivization had sown in the Russian village. As the schoolteacher Mariia Germanova noted in her diary in September 1941, “there are so many people in the

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65 Fitzpatrick, Stalin’s Peasants, 233–261.
village who are happy that we [Soviet teachers] don’t teach anymore; so many who display malice, spite, and envy!”

In some cases, locals declared in writing their joyful reaction to the removal of the Bolsheviks and their willingness to submit to German power. Consider the following anonymous letter of gratitude, thrown into a truck carrying German troops in early July 1941:

We are very happy today for being with you, because we stand in a good relationship to you. We salute the whole German people and their Führer of the world. We salute the freedom that has returned to us . . . We salute the heroes and inform you that we have expected you with great joy. You have freed us from destitution and Communism. We await your orders and will follow them in friendship. We women salute the whole German people, who have liberated us working peasants.

The authors of another letter of gratitude, penned in late December 1941, let their names and place of residence be known. The Anisimovs from the village Mezhnik (southeast of Demiansk) styled their letter to Hitler:

To the Leader of the Great-German People, Mr. Adolf Hitler

In the name of Georgii Feodorovich Anisimov of the village Mezhnik, Ostashkov district, Tver region, we express great gratitude for the fact that the Great-German troops since 15 September 1941 have liberated us from the Bolshevik yoke and the accursed Comunist [sic] regime that has ruled over the Russian people for 24 years and we wish Mr. Adolf Hitler good luck in your future work.

Writing letters to the authorities had been part of Russian political culture for a long time. But normally, when Russian and Soviet citizens (or subjects) wrote such letters, they were addressing some particular problem, need, or wish, such as local abuses of power or difficult material conditions. The above cited letters are striking in that they refer to no such thing. The letters do not solicit help or support; they do not complain; they address no issue that needs to be handled; the authors do

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66 Germanova, “Fragmenty dnevnika,” 263.
69 “Supplication and petition was an endemic feature of Russian political culture, providing a partial substitute for popular representation and a vital bond between tsar and people from medieval times.” Davies, Popular Opinion, 158.
not appear to expect a response. By merely expressing gratitude for the removal of the Bolsheviks and affirming German rule through declarations of solidarity and loyalty, the letters appear to reflect widespread anti-Soviet sentiment among the peasantry. Yet to the extent that such letters were signed by identifiable people, we could also plausibly view them as self-protective measures, designed to elicit the future good will of the new masters of the land.

Several eyewitnesses recalled undramatic, peaceful, and even friendly encounters with the first German soldiers. Some remembered that the first Germans they saw simply passed through the village and disappeared. Consumed by other tasks, they were more or less indifferent to the local population. If they stopped, they might sit around playing harmonicas or chatting with the locals. As one eyewitness from the village of Sluditsy, Oredezh district, recalled:

“The Germans entered Sluditsy in September. [They came] easily, ordinarily, without making any noise. The soldiers and officers in green uniforms had a completely peaceful attitude toward the inhabitants. I remember how one German soldier who had taken up residence in our house sat me on his knee, treated me with chocolate, and showed me pictures of his children.”

The Germans likewise appeared “calm and friendly” as they entered Pskov, judging by Vera Pirozhkova’s account. In her memoirs, where she emphasized the difficulties of properly recounting the popular mood at the beginning of the war after decades of “distorted history,” she related the following episode from the beginning of the occupation:

“The most striking thing for the inhabitants was [the Germans’] behavior by the water pumps . . . Now queues of mostly women were forming by these water pumps. And here German soldiers approached, who also needed water for themselves and their automobiles. When they approached the pumps, the women parted in order to let the dust-laden soldiers, sweating from the heat, pass through. In the USSR every Red Army soldier had the right to bypass the queue when going to a shop, even in peacetime. And now, during wartime, as a matter of course, frontline soldiers, be they your own or foreign, had the right to replenish their water supplies without

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72 Account of V. D. Smirnov (b. 1934) in Ivanova, Za blokadnym koltson, 150.

73 Pirozhkova, Moi tri zhizni, 155.
standing in line. People would consider this perfectly normal. But the German soldiers refused. Gesticulating, they told the women to go back to the water pumps, and they went to wait at the back of the line. This was a trifle, but it made a huge impression on the population. The whole city talked about this.\textsuperscript{74}

While such encounters served to reinforce the hopes of many that a new and better life was about to begin, another story was unfolding at the same time – one in which the invaders displayed ruthlessness, disregard for the basic needs of the civilian population, an inclination to commit acts of extreme violence, and a condescending attitude toward Russians as a people.

German soldiers frequently engaged in the plunder and looting not only of chickens, pigs, and other farm animals (earning them the nickname “chicken-catchers”),\textsuperscript{75} but also of people’s private belongings. Vasilii Savelev, a schoolteacher in Krasnye Gory, wrote the following in his diary:

Upon arrival of the first Germans [on August 24], a pogrom began in the countryside. The convenience store was smashed up: boxes of soap were stolen . . . From noon, the village was teeming with soldiers, and a wild spectacle took place: they caught chickens, sheep, and piglets. They went into people’s houses and grabbed whatever they wanted. Our belongings were not ours anymore, but turned German.\textsuperscript{76}

In Krasnyi Bor, another witness recalled, the Germans “began to play the master [\textit{khoziainichat}] in the full sense of this word: they dug up the harvest from the gardens, slaughtered livestock and chickens, and took away clothes and shoes. The inhabitants were completely defenceless.”\textsuperscript{77} Around the town of Liuban, too, German soldiers behaved “as if they owned the place,” as one inhabitant later recalled – going into people’s homes, seizing belongings and farm animals, destroying beehives and carrying off the honey.\textsuperscript{78} An October 1941 partisan report noted that the Liuban population had been “completely plundered” as German soldiers went from house to house on a daily basis to find and confiscate freshly baked bread.\textsuperscript{79} In the village of Bolshie Grivy, a peasant was shot down after refusing to follow a German order to slaughter his piglet.\textsuperscript{80} German authorities repeatedly issued

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 149.  
\textsuperscript{75} Vinogradov, \textit{Okkupatsiia}, 9.  
\textsuperscript{76} Diary of V. S. Savelev, entry of August 30, 1941, in Ivanova, \textit{Za blokadnym koltsom}, 241–282 (quotation at 243).  
\textsuperscript{77} Account of S. I. Antiufeeva (b. 1917), in Ivanova, \textit{Za blokadnym koltsom}, 383.  
\textsuperscript{78} Account of M. I. Elizarova, in ibid., 362.  
\textsuperscript{79} “Administrativnoe ustroistvo v gorodakh i raionakh Leningradskoi oblasti, vremennno zakhvatchennykh fashistami,” October 18, 1941, TsGAIPD SPb, 0–116/2/7, 41.  
directives forbidding such practices throughout autumn and winter 1941, a sign that they were hard to control.  

Many first encounters happened in situations of fear and great tension. People, especially in the countryside, often met a German for the first time while hiding in shelters and dugouts outside the villages. Needing to keep track of the civilian population and fearful of ambush attacks by partisans, the Germans sent patrols into the forests to locate people and send them back to the villages where they could be counted and controlled. Being discovered by such a patrol could be a terrifying experience in itself. “I recall with terror the first Fascist I saw,” remembered one witness, a young girl at the time: “Enormous, wearing glasses and a helmet, he poked the muzzle of his gun into the small window of our shelter and shouted: Jude! Partisan!” Another eyewitness recalled the shouting, barking of dogs, and Germans yelling: “Halt, halt! Russische Schwein!”

Figure 2.1 August 1941, Novgorod district: A family shelters in a dugout.  
Source: BArch, Bild 183-B11611, photo by Gebauer

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82. Account of N. P. Sokolova (b. 1933) in Ivanova, Za blokadnym koltsom, 498.
83. Interview with V. N. Denisova (b. 1927), Vinogradov Collection.
German measures of terror and collective punishment soon began to reveal the nature of Nazi brutality. In Pskov, initial positive impressions must have been tempered if not altogether destroyed during the first weeks. Public hangings of people found guilty of sabotage took place as early as early August. One eyewitness recalled an episode in July in which three men conversing in the street were shot by passing German soldiers for breaching the ban on public gatherings. Soon after, German authorities conducted a largescale “pacification” operation in Pskov. Sometime in mid to late August 1941, after an unknown assailant had killed a German guard, SS and police forces rounded up thousands of male inhabitants between the ages of sixteen and sixty. About ten random people were shot on the spot, while the rest were transported to Pechory, 44 kilometers west of Pskov, and interned in a camp for several weeks. The camp guards beat and humiliated the prisoners and fed them poorly, if at all. Several were shot; others died from hunger or disease. Most of those remaining returned to Pskov after signing a document pledging that they would aid and not harm the Wehrmacht. According to one witness, half of the men returned crippled or utterly exhausted. Wives and mothers of those arrested sent hundreds of letters to the German commandant of Pskov in August–September 1941 requesting the release of their loved ones and protesting their innocence. One typical letter reads as follows:

In light of his poor health, I request that my husband Vasilii ... a specialist in medicine, and besides a man who has always been distinguished by his good behaviour and conduct, be released from the camps ... The persons listed underneath can attest to the trustworthiness of my husband. [Names and signatures provided]

Pskovites also reacted to the German occupiers’ condescending attitude. In the course of the first six months of the occupation, as German intelligence officials noted, the initially positive mood among parts of the Pskov

84 “Akt o zlodeianiakh nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov i ikh soobshchnikov iz territorii goroda Pskova i Pskovskogo raiona v period vremennoi ikh okkupatsii,” August 15, 1944, USHMM, RG-22.002M, Reel 16, 74.
85 USC Shoah Foundation Institute testimony of Mikhail Turetskii-Vladimirov (b. 1926), January 25, 1995, interview code 649.
87 GAPO, 1644/1/2 contains 233 pages of similar letters (here: 153).
population had turned sour not only because of the dire food situation, but also due to their realization that the Germans viewed them as “an inferior ethnic group.”

Conclusion

Ambiguity marked popular mood in northwest Russia in the first weeks and months of the war. Confronted with invasion, mobilization, and the spectacle of crumbling Soviet authority and the ramshackle retreat of the Red Army, people reacted not in the united fashion suggested by official Soviet accounts and some later historians, but in ways that exposed the fragility of the bonds between the Soviet state and its core Russian population.

In northwest Russia, as in the USSR at large, on the eve of war the majority of the population were peasants. Prewar Stalinism, which massively exploited and humiliated the peasantry, had failed to win hearts and minds in the countryside. Moreover, the mobilization of males of military age and the evacuation or flight of hundreds of thousands of party-state officials, skilled industrial workers, and townspeople entailed the departure of those most liable to identify with the Soviet regime. Remaining in the occupied territories, then, was a population of some 1.3 million, 90 percent of them kolkhoz peasants. The Red Army bade them farewell by leaving a trail of scorched earth, leaving many with a sense of abandonment by a state that had demanded much but offered little in return other than promises of a better future amid ceaseless threats of violence and repression.

The invading Germans were not met by any shows of popular resistance, protest, or widespread open hostility. Scattered partisan resistance occurred, but nothing resembling a popular movement. In many places people simply stood by, watching and wondering with a mixture of hope, fear, and uncertainty. Elsewhere, inhabitants offered the traditional Russian welcome of bread and salt and openly greeted the Germans as liberators. In sum, initial popular attitudes toward the Germans in this Soviet Russian heartland were certainly not marked by pro-Soviet loyalty. Quite the contrary: To most people remaining in northwest Russia, the Bolshevik political order did not seem worth fighting for. Even so, the German invasion did not bring about an anti-Soviet uprising either.

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88 EM 165, February 6, 1942, BArch, R 58/220, 307 (fiche 4).
89 On the partisan movement, see Chapter 7.
Uncertainty reigned during the first weeks and months. Few could be sure about German intentions or the Soviet capacity to withstand the onslaught and retake the occupied territories.

As the dust settled in the wake of advancing German forces, two different stories of life under German rule began to take shape. In the first, the Germans continued to be seen as liberators, or at least the enemy of the Bolsheviks and therefore an ally – an attitude shaped by anti-Soviet sentiment as well as the experience of decollectivization and the revival of the church, issues to which we shall return in Chapters 5 and 6. In the other story, people’s attitudes toward the occupier remained more reserved or grew hostile, shaped by the fact that their loved ones were fighting in the Red Army as well as by the fear, anger, and resentment that resulted from the brutal and condescending behavior of German troops and authorities. Think of these two stories as currents of experience – stories lived by people in northwest Russia throughout the war years.

As we shall see in Chapter 3, the northwest Russian population contained certain groups whom the Germans did not intend to rule over but rather to destroy. Their story differs from that of the majority population and must be treated separately. Soon after the Germans arrived, they set out to murder thousands of unarmed civilians because they were Jews, Gypsies, or mentally disabled. They treated tens of thousands of prisoners of war with murderous cruelty and disregard. The violence shocked bystanders and forced people belonging to the victim categories into a struggle for naked survival.
As elsewhere in the occupied territories, German forces in northwest Russia carried out mass murder of Jews and Roma. The Germans also deprived mentally and physically disabled people of food and left them to starve. On several occasions, German commanders ordered the killing of patients directly by shooting or lethal injections. Prisoners of war perished on a massive scale in 1941–1942 as a result of being deprived of food, shelter, and medical care. What avenues of survival were available to those facing German annihilation policies, and what was the impact of German mass murder on the wider population and its relationship to German power?

The Holocaust in Northwest Russia

In the late eighteenth century, Catherine the Great allowed the Jews of the Russian Empire to permanently reside only in specially designated territories, later to be known as the Pale of Settlement. The Pale stretched roughly from the southeastern shores of the Baltic Sea to the northwestern shores of the Black Sea, corresponding to parts of present-day Lithuania, Belarus, Poland, Moldova, Ukraine, and western Russia. While it was dissolved in 1915, Soviet Jews remained largely concentrated in the territories of the former Pale until World War II. Northwest Russia lay on the periphery or outside of the Pale and contained a relatively small Jewish population in 1941. In 1939, according to the Soviet census, some 37,000 Jews resided in the Leningrad and Kalinin regions (excluding Leningrad), 75 percent of them in urban areas. In cities and towns such as Pskov, Staraia Russa, Krasnogvardeisk, Luga, and Soltsy, Jews made up around 2 percent of the population, while in the southernmost districts, closer to the Pale of Settlement, several towns had a large Jewish population.
Nevel, for instance, had about 3,000 Jewish inhabitants in 1939, making up 20 percent of the population.\(^1\)

As German forces advanced rapidly in summer 1941, northwest Russian Jews faced a fateful choice. Should they stay or leave? Soviet evacuation efforts did not single out Jews in particular, focusing on party and state functionaries, skilled workers, engineers, and other key personnel. Numerous Jews were evacuated as members of those categories. For the others, the decision to stay or leave depended on conditions of geography, infrastructure, and information.

Jews residing in the northern and eastern districts had more time to decide upon and organize their flight (the Germans occupied the Leningrad suburbs only in mid- to late September), while inhabitants of the southwestern districts faced the occupiers much sooner (Pskov was taken on July 9, less than three weeks after the invasion). Successful flight, especially from the southwestern districts, also depended on access to transport. Public transport was largely requisitioned for official and military purposes, and private cars were the privilege of a very few. Not everyone was willing or able to embark upon journeys of hundreds of kilometers on foot. Many of those who did were soon overtaken by advancing German troops and returned to their homes.

The desirability of flight during the pre-occupation period crucially depended on the quantity and quality of one’s information about the anti-Jewish policies of the Germans. The Soviet press had done much to prevent awareness of Nazi atrocities by remaining silent on the matter since the signing of the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact in 1939. When information about German misdeeds suddenly began appearing after the invasion, many were inclined to dismiss it as propaganda.\(^2\) In late August 1941, Olimpiada Poliakova made a note in her diary mentioning her own and many local Jews’ ambivalence toward Soviet reports on the Nazis:

> Of course, Hitler is not the kind of animal that our propaganda makes him out to be; he will never reach the level of our dear and loved one, and he does not annihilate all the Jews “to a man,” but likely there will be some kind of restrictions for them, and this is disgusting . . . Not all Jews believed [the reports about German atrocities]. Many Jews say: “Why should we go anywhere? Well, maybe we’ll be sent to a camp for some


\(^{2}\) Moreover, Soviet reporting often refrained from mentioning Jews or other ethnic groups targeted by the Germans, instead using generic terms such as “peaceful Soviet citizens.” See Manley, *To the Tashkent Station*, 83.
time, and then we’ll be let out again. It won’t be worse than now.” And the people stay put.

The notion that Germany was a “civilized” nation was widespread. As one Jewish witness recalled, several kolkhozniks who had taken to the road in the Velikie Luki area decided to turn back and go home, reasoning that “Germans are a people of culture, we will be fine, let us go back.” A highly respected tailor in the Oпочка Jewish community, considered a clairvoyant by many, openly voiced his expectation that the Germans would allow free trade and improve conditions for the Jews, which encouraged some to stay. Others feared the Germans, but found the information being received about mass killings too extreme to believe, calculating that their chances of survival would be better if they quietly stayed put instead of attempting escape.

At the same time, the information transmitted by way of rumors, accounts by incoming refugees, letters from the front, and soldiers on leave was often concrete and consistent enough to become a cause for flight. German leaflets dropped from the air also contained clues as to what lay in store for the Jews. Leonid Masarskii, a fourteen-year-old boy at the time of the invasion, recalled picking up leaflets amid retreating Soviet troops and refugees fleeing east in the beginning of July. The text of the leaflets, imploring Soviet soldiers to surrender, usually contained the ominous ending phrase, “Beat the political commissars, beat the Jews!” Thousands of Jews did flee east and managed to escape the German occupation. According to one estimate, about half of the Jewish residents of northwest Russia fled or were evacuated.

The Germans, sometimes joined by non-German helpers, humiliated and dehumanized the Jews before murdering them. In Pskov, German authorities announced that Jews were forbidden to use public baths.

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1 Osipova, “Dnevnik kollaborantki,” 69–70.
2 Manley, To the Tashkent Station, 85–86.
3 USC Shoah Foundation Institute testimony of Leonid Masarskii (b. 1927), interview code 22126. That many Jews put faith in what their parents said about German behavior during World War I was also noted by Mikhail Turetskii-Vladimirov, a Holocaust survivor in the Leningrad region. See USC Shoah Foundation Institute testimony of Mikhail Turetskii-Vladimirov (b. 1926), January 25, 1995, interview code 649.
5 Arad, The Holocaust in the Soviet Union, 197.
6 USC Shoah Foundation Institute testimony of Leonid Masarskii (b. 1927), interview code 22126.
7 Konstantin Plotkin, Kholokost u sten Leningrada (St Petersburg: NPRO “Novaia evpoeiskaia shkola,” 2004), 15.
In Sebezh, Jews were made to carry water – sometimes four people would be forced to carry a barrel of water while a fifth was made to sit on top of it, as if to steer the others. In Luga, Jews were forced to do humiliating work for the Germans, such as cleaning soldiers’ barracks and latrines. As one witness recalled, “Harness to peasant carts loaded with empty barrels, six or seven men each, they went around ... cleaning the cesspools, carrying the load away and dumping it by the river.” In Pechory, close to the Russian–Estonian border, the few remaining Jews were similarly forced to clean streets and carry garbage to the dumps. Jewish inhabitants of Vyritsa were harnessed to a sleigh by Russian auxiliary policemen who, with whips in hand, forced them to pull the sleigh from one part of the town to another, sometimes carrying goods, other times the policemen themselves. Special food rations were stipulated for Jews. According to Army High Command instructions issued in November 1941, Jews were to receive 107 grams of bread and 143 grams of potatoes daily. In the town of Opochka, German authorities soon set out to create conditions of starvation for the Jewish population. Witnesses described how the Opochka Jews – 100–200 people – were arrested and imprisoned shortly after the Germans arrived. After seizing their belongings, the Germans held the Jews in “nightmarish conditions, in terribly cold and dirty rooms,” forced them to carry out heavy labor, and fed them so poorly that several starved to death.

The first mass shooting of Jews in northwest Russia took place in the town of Nevel. Since early August, the Germans had forced the local Jews to reside in a building on the town’s outskirts. In early September, SS men gathered the male Jews and forced them to dig pits. Then the men, women, and children – 700–1,000 people – were led to the pits and shot. Later that month the Germans arrived in the Leningrad suburb of Pushkin. Heavy fighting and shelling had led most of the population to take cover in cellars and air raid shelters. German officers ordered them to come out and immediately began separating Jews from Russians. Then they led the Jews away to be shot. Soon an announcement appeared in the

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14 Plotkin, Kholokost u sten Leningrada, 67–69.
city ordering all Jews to gather outside the German headquarters for the purpose of reregistration or resettlement. Those who did so were also carried off and murdered. In the following weeks and months, German authorities continued to track down, arrest, and kill the remaining Jews in Pushkin, reaching a total of between 250 and 1,000 victims. In September–October, German military police assisted by Russian auxiliaries arrested all Jewish inhabitants of Staraia Russa. Soon after, they were shot. In 1944, Soviet investigators found that some 2,000 Jews had been killed in Staraia Russa.

The Jews in Pskov were killed in several places. In January 1942, shootings were carried out at Vaulinye Gory, north of the city. Two months later, as neighbors told Soviet investigators in 1945, the Germans shot a number of people close to the settlement of Androkhnovo, just east of the city center. The witnesses discovered abandoned children’s clothing, stars made of yellow cloth, blood in the snow, and body parts protruding from the earth at the site of the killing. At Moglino, 12 kilometers west of Pskov, a concentration camp was established sometime during autumn 1941. After the Germans left, Soviet authorities discovered a mass grave near the camp containing 217 bodies of mostly women and children of Jewish and Roma origin. According to the forensics expert in charge of the exhumation, most of the children appeared to have been killed by blows to the head from blunt objects. Villagers living nearby testified that they had seen women and children being led away to an execution site in April 1942. An estimated 1,500 Pskov Jews and Jewish refugees were killed in and around Pskov in the course of 1941–1942.

The Jews of Sebezh were murdered in January or March 1942, according to various witness accounts. Zinaida Malashenek, a wartime inhabitant of Sebezh, later described the scenes:

19 Kovalev and Altman, “Pskov.”
We woke up early in the morning from noises and screaming. We went to the windows and saw how all the houses where Jews lived had been surrounded by the occupiers, who were armed. The women cried, and asked the Fascists about something. One young and pregnant Jewish girl in particular wept and screamed. But the Fascists paid no attention. The mass of frightened and weeping people were driven onto the lake, and led across the ice onto the opposite shore. We ran out of the house and looked at the doomed people disappearing into the distance. They were wearing ribbons. The lake was covered with snow, and the people were walking with snow up to their knees. I knew them all well and it hurt me to see their fate. After a while, sounds of gunfire reached us from the other side of the lake. We understood that they were all shot. When the Jews were driven out of their houses, one six-year-old boy managed to hide in the stove. The murderers did not notice him. Afterward he stayed in this house alone for three days. Then he went out of the house because he was hungry and all alone. After some time they killed him too. It seems his name was Iasha.23

Elsewhere, in numerous small towns across northwest Russia, Jews were killed in similar ways. In Pavlosk (Slutsk), dozens were murdered in cellars and gardens. In Vyrivtsa, local Jews were shot in a nearby forest. In Durbrovka, eleven Jews were locked inside a bathhouse and burned alive.24 About 100 Jews who had been imprisoned in Opochka since July 1941 were taken to the outskirts of the town and shot in March 1942.25 In Prikhov and Ostrov, some 240 Jewish labor camp inmates were kept alive until summer 1943, when they too were shot.26 Like elsewhere in the occupied Soviet Union, SS units returned to mass graves all over northwest Russia in late 1943 to uncover and burn the remains of the victims.27 Probably about 5,000 Jews were killed altogether in northwest Russia, implying a survival rate of only a few percent at most.28

28 Kilian, Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft, 494. Pohl gives an estimate of 2,000 victims, but only in the 16th and 18th Army rear areas (excluding the Army Group North rear area). Dieter Pohl, Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht. Deutsche Militärbesetzung und einheimische Bevölkerung in der Sowjetunion 1941–1944 (R. Oldenbourg Verlag: München, 2008), 262.
Mass Murder of Roma

The Nazis viewed Roma, or Gypsies, as racially inferior and had been persecuting them on these grounds since Hitler came to power, depriving them of rights and interning them in camps. The anti-Roma policies turned genocidal in the autumn of 1941, and the first deportation of Roma to a death camp occurred in January 1942. In northwest Russia, the indiscriminate killing of Roma appears to have begun in the beginning of 1942; before this time no mass shootings are documented. Sometime in late 1941, several Roma families were deported from Luga to the Gdov district. They were sent to the village of Filipovshchina, where they worked as farmhands. In February 1942, a German unit reportedly consisting of Germans and Estonians arrived. As an eyewitness later recalled, “the Gypsies were ordered to take their guitars and go out, without warm clothing, in the cold of minus 30 degrees. They drove them onto the bridge over the river and ordered them to sing and dance, and then they were all shot.” The massacre took place in full view of the villagers.

In February 1942, German military authorities registered the presence of forty-one Roma in the Liady district. They had to turn in their passports and report in at regular intervals. The German commanders then, fatefully, notified the local SD, or Security Service, of their presence. By this time, SD units had already murdered dozens of Roma in various districts across northwest Russia. In April–May 1942 in the village of Vasilkovichi, 192 Roma were killed at the local SD headquarters after having been rounded up in nearby towns and brought to the killing site in freight cars. A witness who lived in a nearby village recalled that the victims’ moans were audible from afar. In the following months, German forces murdered hundreds of Roma, including women, children, and old people.

30 At least one execution of two Roma in the village of Botanok, Dno district, was registered in November 1941, however. See Martin Holler, *Der nationalsozialistische Völkermord an den Roma in der besetzten Sowjetunion (1941–1944)* (Heidelberg: Dokumentations- und Kulturzentrum Dt. Sinti und Roma, 2009), 33.
32 Holler, *Der nationalsozialistische Völkermord*, 34–35.
34 Holler, *Der nationalsozialistische Völkermord*, 32–33.
The killings reached a high point in the summer of 1942 but continued until mid-1943. They took place all across northwest Russia, from Lake Ilmen to Lake Peipus, from the outer suburbs of Leningrad to the southernmost districts of Loknia and Pushkinskie Gory. In some cases, both eyewitnesses and Soviet forensics reports suggest that the victims were tortured or buried alive.37

According to German historian Martin Holler, the investigations carried out by the Soviet Extraordinary Commission in the wake of the German retreat suggest that more than 1,000 Roma were killed during the occupation. The Soviet figures, however, are potentially problematic.38 In particular, eyewitness testimony given to the Commission was often recorded years after the event – individual faults of memory would easily produce inaccuracies. On the other hand, it is also possible that cases of individual or mass killings went unregistered and uncounted by the Soviet investigators due to a lack of surviving eyewitnesses or a lack of time and resources on the part of the Commission. In any case, the eyewitness accounts collected and forensics examinations made by Soviet investigators in 1944–1945, combined with German official reports as well as postwar testimony, suggest that the Roma in northwest Russia were subjected to a policy of annihilation beginning in early 1942.

Why did the Germans murder the Roma in northwest Russia? Some historians have emphasized the security dimension in their explanations, noting that the Roma were perceived to be partisans and spies.39 It is true that, on paper, German authorities frequently associated the Roma with the partisan movement. Internal reports describe them as potential partisans, spies, and saboteurs. In particular, the mobility of nomadic Roma was presented as a danger to rear-area order and security. Central military authorities issued guidelines for the administration of the occupied territories in October 1941 stating that “roaming Gypsies [herumziehende Zigeuner] mostly make a living from theft and robbery in remote settlements” and must therefore be “arrested and transferred to the nearest

37 See Holler, Der nationalsozialistische Völkermord, 35–47.
39 Kilian, Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft, 500; Pohl, Die Herrschaft, 273; Gerlach, Kalkulierte Morde, 1066–1067.
Einsatzkommando,” which by this time usually implied murder. A few weeks later the head of the Army Group North rear area repeated the instructions to turn over traveling Roma to the nearest SD unit, adding that “settled” Roma should be left alone as long as they were not suspected of anything “political or criminal.” In order to make it absolutely clear what was to happen to “roaming Gypsies,” Hinrich Lohse – head of the security police in Reichskommissariat Ostland – issued an order in early December saying that they were to be “treated like Jews.” Thus, by the beginning of 1942, a consensus on the murder policy against the Roma (at least the “roaming” ones) had apparently been achieved. But what exactly were “roaming Gypsies”? German authorities continued to insist on the distinction between them and “settled” ones, at least on paper, into 1943. In practice, however, the criteria for defining “roaming” were never spelled out. People constantly moved around in the occupied territories, trying to find food or people to barter with. Roma families might have had a permanent place of residence from which they departed from time to time, being thus “settled” and “roaming” at the same time. The Roma murdered at Filipovshchina had been engaged in farm labor for several weeks when they were killed. They were not roaming, and they were not idle.

When examined closely, the rhetoric of German reporting about killings of Roma does not support the security threat explanation. In May 1942, the 281st Security Division reported that “ten Gypsies were shot as partisan helpers.” First of all, the fact that the category of “Gypsies” is mentioned suggests the salience of a racist motivation. If ethnicity was irrelevant, there would be no need to highlight it (“ten partisan helpers were shot” would suffice). More important, the rhetoric resonates with that employed by the Nazi leadership in relation to the “Jewish Question.” The Jews, Hitler instructed Himmler in late December 1941, were to be “exterminated as partisans.”
In another report following a massacre of Roma near the town of Novorzhev, the commander of the 281st Security Division claimed first that “Gypsies often function as partisans or partisan helpers,” and then in the next paragraph that “Gypsies” could “almost always” be suspected of partisan activities. The jump from “often” to “almost always” suggests that the matter of guilt was not really decisive, and indeed the report goes on to state that even though the German field police “could not ascertain” the guilt of the victims in this case, the “suspicious facts” were still “so weighty” as to necessitate the killing. Further delinking partisan activities and the death sentences is the fact that old people, children, and infants were found among the dead. A final observation casting doubt on the relevance of security issues is that the witnesses interviewed by Soviet investigators – who generally appeared capable of distinguishing partisan resistance fighters from uninvolved civilians – mostly spoke of the Roma victims as belonging to the latter category. In short, the evidence indicates that the security rhetoric found in German reports should be read as rationalizations and justifications marshalled to retain some semblance of military decency.

An alternative explanation for the German killing of Roma in northwest Russia has been suggested by a Russian historian, who claims that “the annihilation [of the Roma] was motivated by the latter’s lack of will and ability to carry out any sort of labor.” This argument fails to convince. First, the Roma in Filipovshchina were killed even though they were working. Second, if a person would not work voluntarily, the Germans could always send him or her to a forced labor camp. It was certainly possible to treat the Roma like other civilians. Instead, the German decision makers opted for murder, with racism as the sine qua non of the killing.

On the whole, the killings of Roma in northwest Russia were hardly part of a counterinsurgency effort, even though German officers sought to present it as such. Rather, they were an integral part of the genocidal

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47 For the eyewitness testimony and Soviet forensics investigation confirming this, see Holler, Der nationalsozialistische Völkermord, 38–39.

48 Ibid., 50–51 (note 126). Holler finds not a single case of a witness making a connection between the killings of the Roma and partisan activity.

49 Kovalev, Povednevnaia zhizn, 212.
warfare waged by the Nazis against perceived racial enemies and inferiors. Like the Jews, Roma were killed principally because they were Roma.\(^5\)

“Life Unworthy of Life”

The policy of murdering mentally and physically disabled people, the so-called T\(^4\) or “Euthanasia” program, began in Nazi Germany in January 1940 and continued officially until August 1941, at which point Hitler ordered a halt to it amid increasing protest. Unofficially, however, the killing continued in more surreptitious forms until 1945. In the Reich, the “Euthanasia” program was organized and coordinated centrally from Berlin; in the occupied Soviet territories, on the other hand, the question of how to deal with the mentally and physically disabled was for Wehrmacht and SS commanders to decide. In occupied northwest Russia, German authorities were guided by the idea of “life unworthy of life” as they let thousands of victims die from starvation or directly murdered them. The archival record reveals five documented cases in which the Germans killed inmates of psychiatric hospitals in northwest Russia. There is also circumstantial evidence of a sixth case involving a nursing home.

The first known instance took place sometime between September 19 and 25, 1941, in Mogutovo (between Pskov and Luga), where, according to a German SD report, “87 mentally ill persons had armed themselves and roamed the countryside looting.” The patients had allegedly been “incited” by “11 Communists, six of whom were Jews.” All of them – the mental patients, the Communists, and the Jews – were “liquidated.” This act of mass murder, and the nebulous language used to describe it – indicating the lack of a need to reasonably justify the killings – serves as a concentrated display of the ideological violence of the Einsatzgruppen operating in the occupied territories.\(^5\)

Many patients died from lack of food. The starving of patients should not be seen as simply an unhappy consequence of a generally strained economic situation. Nazi ideology evidently motivated such acts of indirect mass murder.\(^5\) This is clear enough in the case of the second recorded act of murdering patients, which occurred at the Kolmovo.

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\(^{5}\) Nikolai Bessonov reaches a similar conclusion with regard to Ukraine, arguing that the Germans applied “the Jewish model” in their treatment of the Roma there. See Nikolai Bessonov, “Tsygane SSSR v okкупатсii. Strategii vyzhvania,” *Holokost i suchasnist’* 2, no. 6 (2009): 17.

\(^{51}\) EM 94, September 25, 1941, in Mallmann et al., *Die Ereignismeldungen*, 554–555.

\(^{52}\) Pohl briefly mentions that patients starved to death, while Kilian makes no mention of this at all. Pohl, *Die Herrschaft*, 275; Kilian, *Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft*, 500–505.
A mental hospital in Novgorod. One witness gave the following account to Soviet investigators in 1944:

With two children... I wanted to be evacuated [when the war began], but we came upon a patrol and were sent back, and we remained in the village of Kolmovo, not far from the psychiatric hospital. I lived in Kolmovo with my family for two and a half months, from October to December [1941]. We were very hungry and we witnessed the conditions of life of the unfortunate sick ones who resided in the hospital. The Germans openly said: “These are psychiatric patients and must be annihilated.” And they were indeed annihilated by starvation. The sick were fed with frozen cabbage without bread, and the death rate among them was massive. The nurses told me that the sick were dying at a rate of 30 to 40 every day. They were buried in a mass grave. The grave was dug by the patients themselves, the strongest and calmest ones.

Another witness, a nurse at the hospital, testified to the same effect: “During the first months, the ill starved to death because the Germans refused to feed our patients.” The Soviet investigation found that 627 patients died from starvation in November and December 1941.

In addition to letting patients starve to death, the Germans organized their murder by way of lethal injection. Sometime during October 1941, the Kolmovo hospital personnel were informed that the patients were to be “evacuated.” The patients were then led, one by one or in pairs, into an office where several German officers were present. After receiving a shot in the arm, the patients were led into a car that drove them away and later returned empty to pick up new victims. Soviet investigators later reported that about 200 patients were killed in this way, by lethal injections of scopolamine.

In the same time period, inmates of the Kashchenko mental hospital in the settlement of Nikolskoe, in the Krasnogvardeisk district, were murdered in a similar way. The main hospital buildings were taken over by the Germans upon their arrival and converted into headquarters for the commandant and a field hospital for German soldiers. The 1,100–1,200 patients were crammed together in a single building. They were given

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53 “Zaïavljenie Tatiana A.,” February 7, 1944, GANO, 1793/1/24, 35.
54 “Obobshchennyi akt No. 1: O zlodieianiaakh nemetsko-fashistskich zakhvatichkov i ikh soobshchnikov na territoriakh goroda Novgoroda v period ego vremenno okupatsii,” March 4, 1945, GANO, 1793/1/24, 7–7bs.
55 “Protokol doprosa svidetelia,” January 31, 1944, GANO, 1793/1/24, 23–24; “Obobshchennyi akt No. 1: O zlodieianiaakh nemetsko-fashistskich zakhvatichkov i ikh soobshchnikov na territoriakh goroda Novgoroda v period ego vremenno okupatsii,” March 4, 1945, GANO, 1793/1/24, 7–7bs. See also Kilian, Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft, 502.
starvation rations from the very beginning. Hospital personnel tried to help by making soup out of potato peelings, bones, and other leftovers from German kitchens. Yet the patients grew weaker and weaker, and soon up to twenty people were dying every day. In early October, military authorities in Krasnogvardeisk requested that the SD “eliminate” the patients, because it was “no longer possible to feed them.” On November 19, the patients were taken to a nearby barracks and given lethal injections. The bodies were buried in a nearby antitank ditch. On November 20, an SD report noted that “855 persons were eliminated during a special action.” Hundreds of patients were apparently left alive as a potential labor force, but evidently they were murdered as well over the course of the following weeks and months. The total number of victims was between 1,200 and 1,500.

Another institution was located in Makarevo, close to the town of Liuban. On December 20, 1941, the 28th Army Corps reported to the 18th Army commander that the 230–240 female patients – “first and foremost mentally ill, but also people infected with syphilis, epileptics, etc.” – represented “a danger” not only to the civilian population but also to German troops. The reason given was that the hospital’s food supplies were running out, and the patients would soon break out, possibly attack inhabitants of the surrounding area, and potentially transmit diseases to nearby troops. “In addition,” the report continued, “in the German perception, the inmates of the institution also represent life unworthy of life.” Days later, the necessary authorizations had been given, and the killings were carried out. A wartime inhabitant of a nearby village later recalled the events:

All the disabled ones, 250 persons, were taken to a silo pit and shot. Two Russians carried this out together with the Germans: [N. N.] and another one whose name I cannot recall. Grandmother Grusha, an old, disabled woman who worked in the kitchen, begged for mercy and offered [N. N.] her gold-plated pocket watch, but they shot her anyway. The bodies were covered with branches.

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57 Müller, Deutsche Besatzungspolitik, 79–80.

58 Kilian, Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft, 503.

59 Account of A. I. Murashova (b. 1921), in Ivanova, Za blokadnym koltsom, 402.
In a fourth and previously overlooked case, hundreds of patients at the mental hospital in Cherniakovichi, Pskov district, were cut off from supplies of food and medicine soon after the arrival of the Germans, leaving them with little more than “rotten potatoes and peelings” to eat, as one of the hospital staff later recalled. With the help of the local population, minimal supplies were secured for the winter. But in early 1942, German authorities ordered the head doctor to inject the patients with a lethal drug. By spring 1942 all of the patients had either been murdered in this way or had died from starvation and exhaustion. The forensics investigation found that the victims, some 500–550 people, were aged from seven to sixty years. Witnesses among the hospital staff recalled the words of German doctors or officers who came to inspect the conditions, who reportedly said: “Why did the Soviet Union breed so many idiots? In Germany, everyone who cannot be healed in six months is subject to annihilation.”

Finally, Olimpiada Poliakova mentioned an episode in her diary, which has not been traced in the official documentation. Her entry for December 27 reads:

Madden by hunger, old people from the nursing home wrote an official request to the German military commandant and somehow managed to send him this request. It said, “We ask for permission to make food of the deceased residents of our home.” . . . These old men and women were immediately evacuated into the rear areas. One of the interpreters . . . explained to us . . . that this evacuation ended up in a mass grave in Gatchina, that the Germans “evacuate” their old and hopelessly ill in this manner. I think that this is an invention. But on the other hand, you can expect anything from the Fascists, and, it seems, from the whole of humanity.

Poliakova was ambivalent regarding whether to believe the story of how the hunger-stricken residents of the nursing home were “evacuated.” Given what we know about the German treatment of similar groups in the same area, the interpreter’s story was likely true.

In sum, the evidence indicates that as many as 2,700 mentally or physically disabled people were starved to death or murdered directly by shooting or lethal injection in northwest Russia in 1941–1942 at the hands of German officers in the security services and the army.

60 “Akt no. 9” (Pskov regional ChGK report), June 11, 1945, USHMM, RG-22.002M, Reel 16.
61 Osipova, “Dnevnik kollaborantki,” 112.
Why did the Germans kill the patients? According to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, the murder of patients in the occupied Soviet Union “lacked the ideological component attributed to the centralized ‘Euthanasia’ Program, for by and large, the SS was apparently motivated primarily by economic and material concerns.” The fact that a strained supply-and-logistics situation often functioned as the main justification for the killing, however, does not reduce the salience of ideology. On the contrary, ideology was precisely what made the killing of defenceless patients a thinkable, possible, and ultimately viable option. Absent the idea of “life unworthy of life,” some other solution to the problem of feeding and maintaining the patients, or of acquiring living and storage space for German troops, would have been found. For evidence that alternatives existed, consider the fact that German authorities transported tens of thousands of civilians away from famine-stricken regions into relative material safety in 1941–1942.

The Prisoners of War

The German army captured about 5.7 million Soviet soldiers over the course of the war. Between 2.8 and 3 million died in captivity, most of them between October 1941 and May 1942. They perished due to a lack of food, clothing, medical care, and shelter. Thousands were also executed or beaten to death by camp guards, and thousands more died while being transported or marched from one place to another. The deaths were not caused by the strained economic and supply situation that arose as the German army ground to a halt in the autumn of 1941, but by the preferred German response to this crisis, which amounted to a retreat into the Nazi worldview that regarded Slavs as disposable and their decimation as a desirable step in the process of creating Lebensraum in “the East.”

During the first weeks and months following the German invasion, the daily rations stipulated for prisoners were theoretically 2,200 calories for working prisoners and 2,040 calories for nonworking ones. In practice, the rations were significantly less. A witness who lived close to a POW

63 See Chapter 4.
65 Oberkommando des Heeres, Chef der Heeresrüstung und Befehlshaber des Ersatzheeres, “Verpflegung sowjetischer Kriegsgefangener,” August 6, 1941, GANO, 3573/1/2, 2–3.
camp in the Nevel district later told Soviet investigators that he was arrested and held inside the camp in August 1941 after attempting to give bread to the prisoners: “In the camp I saw with my own eyes how the exhausted prisoners were so weak they could barely move; they gathered grass and bark from the trees to eat. 20–25 persons died in the camp every day.”

On October 21, the rations for nonworking prisoners were officially lowered to 1,490 calories. On November 13, Eduard Wagner, quartermaster-general of the German army, stated during a conference that “non-working prisoners in the camps must starve to death.” Shortly thereafter, Hitler issued an order to the effect that as many POWs as possible should be sent to the Reich to work in industry and agriculture, which allowed rations to be increased again. As it turned out, however, under the pressures of the unfolding supply crisis, this gave little relief. The measures taken to improve the terrible situation in the camps were too little, too late for millions of prisoners.

The plight of the prisoners was registered by Soviet intelligence and described in numerous partisan reports, as well as in Soviet war crimes investigations. “Prisoners of war [in the Leningrad region],” one partisan report stated, “work repairing roads and bridges. In October they were given only 50 grams of bread and a glass of water each, and a few spoonfuls of soup without bread for dinner. For the slightest wrongdoing, they are beaten and tied to poles of barbed wire.” Prisoners in a camp in Chudovo were reportedly kept from drawing clean water from a source located just meters away outside the barbed-wire fence. Fed only small portions of soup and no bread, they were made to work from early morning to late evening building roads and bridges. Those who dropped to the ground from exhaustion were shot, and wounded prisoners received no medical attention. In a camp close to Gdov, some 2,400 prisoners were held under the open sky for days without water and food. In mid-September 1941, more than 30,000 Red Army soldiers who had been taken prisoner at Demiansk were brought to an improvised camp that

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69 “Spravka o prodovolstvennom polozhenii v okkupirovannykh raionakh Leningradskoi oblasti,” October 1941, GANINO, 260/1/102, 41.
70 “Otnoshenie fashistov k voennoplennym,” November 1941, TsGAIPD SPb, o–116/2/7, 34–35.
consisted of little more than a barbed-wire fence. “For more than a month,” a report drawn up shortly after the end of the occupation stated, the prisoners lived under the open sky. With rainfall and night frost, the prisoners began to build huts of branches and hay, which were then soaked by the rain. Like moles, people began to dig into the earth. They created dugouts for 2–3 persons without shovels or any other equipment.\textsuperscript{71}

Primitive bunks without doors or windows were set up in this camp by late October. As the weather turned extremely cold in November and December, the prisoners lacked sufficient clothing. Their warm underwear had been taken away, and soon their caps and felt boots, the \textit{valenki}, were removed as well (they were given ragged shoes instead). Long hours of heavy labor under the direction of often brutal camp guards exhausted the prisoners. In November, they began dying in large numbers.\textsuperscript{72} According to a Soviet forensics investigation, the mass graves outside Demiansk contained the remains of “no less than 22,000 persons.”\textsuperscript{73}

In the Staraia Russa camp, twenty prisoners were dying every day by the end of October 1941, according to the German head of the camp, who considered the weekly provisions available for distribution to be woefully insufficient: A weekly portion was equal to the amount that would be needed to “really satisfy a person for a single day.”\textsuperscript{74} In early December, according to a German report, prisoners in the 16th Army area were “dying like flies.”\textsuperscript{75} In January 1942, instances of cannibalism were recorded in Dulag 140 near Malaia Vyra.\textsuperscript{76}

Jewish prisoners were sought out and murdered; the security police had planned for the systematic killing of Jewish prisoners of war early on.\textsuperscript{77} One surviving prisoner from a camp in Rozhdestveno recalled that the Germans promised half a pot of soup as a reward to anyone denouncing a Jew.\textsuperscript{78} Another witness testified, “Before my eyes, one Jew was completely

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{75} V.A.A. beim AOK 16, “Verwendung von russischen Kriegsgefangenen und Zivilisten beim Wiederaufbau,” December 8, 1941, PA AA, R 60721.
\textsuperscript{76} Dulag 140, “Betr.: Kanibalismus,” January 20, 1942, BA-MA, RH 22/272a, 83.
\textsuperscript{77} Pohl, \textit{Die Herrschafts}, 233.
\textsuperscript{78} Account of Aleksandr Pavlovich Rozenberg, in Plotkin, \textit{Kholokost u sten Leningrada}, 22–23.
undressed and forced to dig a grave, upon which the naked man was shot." Political officers in the Red Army were singled out and executed in their thousands; in the first months, the Germans also targeted prisoners with an “Asian” appearance.

The prisoner camps of northwest Russia contained some 85,500 prisoners by December 1941. Prisoners had been dying in their thousands for months already, but with the onset of winter, death rates soared. From December 1941 to April 1942, some 51,000 perished. Beginning in spring 1942, rations were increased and treatment somewhat improved in order to keep prisoners alive as a reservoir of much needed labor. The death rates never reached the levels of the 1941–1942 winter months again, but life as a prisoner of war continued to be extremely difficult.

Paths to Survival

For the thousands of Jews and Roma who had not fled or been evacuated, a second option for flight presented itself when they realized that the Germans were in fact murdering people, or when they were instructed to gather at a certain location for “resettlement.” However, as was the case with pre-occupation flight, making the choice depended not only on a prior identification and realization of an impending danger, but also on one’s capacity or will to act upon such a realization, which might in turn depend on access to resources such as horses and carts. With no practical means of transport available to a family, which might include elderly people and small children, the choice to flee would be heavily constrained. The double importance of realizing the danger and having the means to avoid it is illustrated by the case of the May 1942 massacre of Roma in Novorzhev. In the lead-up to the killing, the Germans issued an announcement ordering the Roma to gather in a specific location, ostensibly in order to be transported to Bessarabia. As one survivor recalled:

Well, the Gypsies believed it, they say: “We’re going to Bessarabia.” But my father says: “Bessarabia? Where are they going to send us when bombs are falling everywhere, when there are no roads and no trains? If you go, I swear, they will shoot you all like dogs! I have a horse, let us take the children and go hide in the forest.”

In the end, this whole family survived, while most if not all of the others were murdered.\textsuperscript{82}

Fear made some go into hiding on their own, with no means of transport other than their feet. One of those who took to the road upon realizing the risk of falling into German hands was Mikhail Turetskii-Vladimirov, a fifteen-year-old Jewish boy. Spurred by rumors that the Germans were rounding up Jews, he left Pskov around July 10, 1941 and set off in the direction of Leningrad. He traveled through the countryside, avoiding main roads and stopping in villages with no German presence, where he helped villagers with wood-chopping and other tasks in exchange for food and shelter. The danger of being revealed was ever present. Villagers often understood that he was Jewish, and when on one occasion a village elder instructed him to present himself at the nearest German headquarters, he said yes but ran away. He managed to stay alive and avoid the Germans in this way for more than a year. But in late 1942, he was finally arrested and sent to the Moglino concentration camp. Here he was made to undress, and as he later recalled, it was only good luck – and perhaps the humanity of the interrogating officer – that saved his life: “From the logic of things, the fact that I was circumcised should have caught their attention . . . This was the first, but not the last case where I consider myself thankful for the German I had interrogating me. Apparently, he did not register me as ‘Jude’. If he had, I would have been shot then and there.”\textsuperscript{83} Others were less lucky. Josefine Weber, a Polish-born, Russian–Jewish woman of fifty-three, had been trying to save herself in the same way as Turetskii-Vladimirov. She was arrested and shot by a German police unit on December 23, 1942, ostensibly “for security reasons.” According to the police report, she had been “wandering about in the vicinity of Lake Ilmen” and “could not offer a persuasive reason for wandering from place to place.”\textsuperscript{84}

When people targeted for annihilation did not attempt or manage to stay below the German radar, their survival largely depended on some kind of identity concealment. Mikhail Turetskii-Vladimirov destroyed his personal papers early on, which certainly helped him survive. Getting rid of one’s papers was a common method of identity concealment, often in


\textsuperscript{83} USC Shoah Foundation Institute testimony of Mikhail Turetskii-Vladimirov (b. 1926), January 25, 1995, interview code 649.

combination with forms of mimicry and dissimulation such as changing one’s name and pretending to be Ukrainian or Russian.  

Concealment and dissimulation would often be impossible without outside help, a crucial factor in survival. Of the eleven Jewish survivors in northwest Russia whose accounts were later recorded by the USC Shoah Foundation, nine mentioned various forms of aid. Helpers from among the local population sometimes saved the life of a Jewish or Roma neighbor at great personal risk. Conversely, of course, those wishing to do harm could easily denounce Jewish neighbors (or neighbors concealing Jews) to the German authorities. Acts of compassion and acts of denunciation occurred simultaneously, sometimes resulting in the survival of one family member and the death of another. In Pskov, Regina Galiaeva’s Jewish father was murdered by the Germans after having been denounced by the family’s landlady. At the same time, a friend of the family decided to protect the seven-year-old Regina by letting her stay and hide in her apartment.  

Mark Feldman – a two-year-old Jewish boy in 1941 – survived thanks to the efforts of Tamara Nikolaeva, who had been working as a housemaid and nanny for the Feldmans in Leningrad. When the Germans arrived, the boy and Nikolaeva were staying in the latter’s home village of Zagromote. The village elder implored Nikolaeva and her parents to send the boy away to a nursing home, since he feared the Germans would shoot them all upon discovering that they were hiding a Jew. The Nikolaevs refused to do so, and the village elder apparently did not denounce them. When members of a German unit appeared and saw the dark-haired boy, Nikolaeva successfully pretended to be his mother, stating that the boy’s father was fighting at the front. Zagromote was inhabited by about eighty villagers, most of whom knew that a Jewish boy was being concealed by their neighbor, and no one, it appears, revealed the secret to the Germans. Thus, Mark Feldman’s neighbors virtually formed a protective ring around him, enabling him to survive. His age probably helped him. As Tamara Nikolaeva herself wrote, “I’m not sure how my neighbors would have reacted to the concealment of an adult Jew, but everyone pitied a small child.”

86 USC Shoah Foundation Institute testimony of Regina Galiaeva (b. 1934), September 28, 1997, interview code 36839.  
87 The account of Mark Feldman’s survival is recorded in a 1998 interview with Tamara Nikolaeva as well as in a letter sent by her to Yad Vashem in 1995. USC Shoah Foundation Institute testimony
A small child of Roma origin, Nikolai Dmitriev, was saved by neighbors in the village of Borshchovo. This village was located close to Vasilkovichi, where a number of Roma were gathered and shot in spring 1942. As Anna Petrova recalled, “We could hear their moans even here in Borshchovo. We knew that the father of our three-year-old neighbor Kolia was a Gypsy. Not only a Gypsy, but also a commander in the Red Army. Because of this we always concealed him when the Germans appeared. I helped him hide inside our Russian stove.”

A witness recalled four Jewish children living in a Gatchina orphanage in 1942–1943: “To protect them, their heads were shaved bare. During inspections, the Germans looked suspiciously at Yura [one of the Jewish children]: – Jewish? We replied: – No, Georgian!” There are several similar examples of Russians, mostly women, concealing and taking care of Jewish children in the occupied northwest Russian territories.

Outside help was sometimes offered from unexpected quarters. A member of the auxiliary police force employed by the Germans, for example, rescued a family of Roma who had been locked in a bathhouse somewhere in the Pskov region, awaiting execution. A Wehrmacht officer billeting in the apartment where Regina Galiaeva and her mother lived in Pskov helped the two change their Jewish last names. In Vyritsa, Vladimir Leibovich survived, despite denunciations from fellow villagers, thanks to the local German commandant. One late summer day in 1941, Leibovich was summoned to the German headquarters, together with his brother and mother. The commandant let them know that their neighbors had reported their identity, but instead of sending them off to be shot he told them to run away and forget their last names. A similar example was recounted by Rafail Klein, a Jewish Red Army soldier who was taken prisoner south of Leningrad in autumn 1941. Interrogated by a German officer, Klein openly affirmed his Jewish identity. The German officer went on to ask why Klein had identified as a Jew – after all, he did not much
look like one – to which Klein replied that he was circumcised and thus there was no use hiding. As Klein recalled, the officer replied, “Alas! But who would inspect you? After all, you don’t much look like [a Jew], don’t say anything! . . . There are many dogs among us. Don’t tell anyone [that you’re Jewish]!”

Other cases exist in which Russian members of the local self-government helped rescue individuals targeted for annihilation. Village and district elders were powerful actors in this respect. They could, and sometimes did, issue false identification papers to Jews. They also had the power to manipulate the official lists of inhabitants. For instance, Iakov Genrikh and his family, posing as Ukrainian displaced persons, were able to register as such with the help of the local village elder. In Pskov, Roza Grankovskaia was issued false papers by a teacher working in the municipal administration.

For prisoners of war in northwest Russia as a whole, the prospects for survival were better than they were for Jews, Roma, and the mentally or physically disabled. In absolute numbers, more prisoners died compared to the other groups, but relatively a greater amount survived. Even though tens of thousands of prisoners perished because of starvation, extreme cold, and exhaustion, tens of thousands did not. The most vulnerable were the weakest ones, the badly wounded, and those who were unable to work. Outside help was a factor in their survival as well, even if it was limited in its significance. Wives and mothers did what they could to aid imprisoned husbands and sons. The Pskov Orthodox Mission (see Chapter 6) organized charity efforts for the prisoners. Civilians passing by or living near the camps often tried to help, offering food such as turnips, potatoes, and cabbage. But here, as elsewhere in the occupied territories, the camp guards sought to repel the helpers, often violently. One witness recalled trying to slip some bread and tobacco through the barbed-wire fence at a POW camp near Gdov in 1941: “The guard noticed, caught up with us and beat us so badly that we didn’t recover for some time. One suffered broken ribs, another had his hand permanently injured.”

93 USC Shoah Foundation Institute testimony of Aleksandr (Rafail) Solomonovich Klein (1922–2009), April 23, 1995, interview code 2348.
94 USC Shoah Foundation Institute testimony of Iakov Genrikh (b. 1931), November 19, 1995, interview code 6304.
95 USC Shoah Foundation Institute testimony of Roza Grankovskaia (b. 1924), September 27, 1998, interview code 36434.
96 Iasenovskaiia, “Okkupatsii strashnye dni.” See also “Zaiavlenie,” February 4, 1944, GANO, 1793/1/24, 36; account of S. P. Muranova (b. 1927), in Ivanova, Za blokadnym koltsom, 131; account of
Most prisoners could hope for little more than temporary relief from the outside. During the worst months, survival depended more on maneuvering in cooperation and competition with fellow prisoners to secure a larger portion of soup and an extra piece of bread. Those promoted to positions of responsibility within the camp fared better, though often at the expense of fellow prisoners. Those who knew some important skill such as shoe making or the German language also had a potential advantage. Getting out of the camp was possible: some managed to escape; others were released to return to their home villages and help with the harvest. Here the ethnic component was decisive: Estonians, Finns, and Ukrainians stood a much better chance of being released.97 The most important avenue of release was recruitment by the Wehrmacht into the ranks of the so-called Hiwis [Hilfswillige] to work in transport, construction, and maintenance – driving lorries and horse carts, shining boots, carrying ammunition, and building barracks. By autumn 1943, some 40,500 prisoners were working as Hiwis in the Army Group North area.98 Many prisoners also made their way out of the camps by joining anti-Soviet fighting formations.

The Surrounding Population

How did people in northwest Russia relate to the mass murder, starvation, and cruel treatment of thousands of Jews, Roma, disabled people, and prisoners of war?

Jews in late Tsarist Russia lived in more or less hostile surroundings. They were discriminated against by the government, looked down upon by the majority population, and periodically attacked in violent pogroms. In the town of Opochka, located on the periphery of the Pale of Settlement and home to 500 or 600 Jews before 1917, the Jewish population “lived a life apart,” suffering official discrimination as well as humiliation by Russian neighbors. Jews encountered the derogatory word zhid on every corner, and Jewish boys risked being beaten when straying into Russian quarters of the town.99 Things got better under Soviet rule, when tsarist

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97 “Otnoshenie fashistov k voennoplennym,” November 1941, TsGAI PD SPb, o–116/2/7, 35; Pohl, 215–217. On similar practice in occupied Ukraine, see Berkhoff, Harvest of Despair, 106.
98 Zwei Jahre Kriegswirtschaft, 139.
discrimination was abolished and Jews were accorded equal rights. In the 1920s and 1930s, Soviet Jews became more urban, less religious, and better integrated as traditional Jewish life in the shtetl lost much of its appeal. Mixed marriages became common, and many Jews left the small towns to settle in the big cities, especially during the 1930s. The Jewish population of Opochka dropped from 526 in 1926 to 289 in 1939. Antisemitism, however, did not disappear overnight. Traditional, religiously based anti-Judaism certainly persisted, and the modern, racial kind of anti-Jewish prejudice also made inroads. By the 1930s, the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” and other antisemitic propaganda were being circulated in northwest Russia.

While much of the rural population living in remote villages probably knew little about the killings, townspeople knew more. The Germans usually murdered Jews on the outskirts of cities and towns, and the victims’ neighbors and fellow townspeople must have numbered in the tens of thousands. These people could hardly avoid noticing the persecution and eventual disappearance of Jewish neighbors from their midst.

According to Oleg Anisimov, the annihilation of the Jews intensified a feeling of vulnerability among the Russian population, who sensed that “anything could happen to them and that there was no law which offered sure protection against persecution.” Similar expressions of anxiety over the question of who would be next were registered among non-Jews in occupied Belarus as well. If we are to believe Dmitrii Karov, a Russian émigré serving as an intelligence officer in the German 18th Army, the killings of Jews also gave rise to “great indignation” among neighbors, who “refused to buy or even seize the belongings of the murdered Jews” and “often loudly expressed their resentment at these measures.” While Karov’s generalizations remain unsupported by concrete examples and evidence from other sources, it is worth noting that German authorities did find indigenous antisemitism to be less of a potent force in pre-1939 Soviet territories compared to the recently annexed western borderlands.

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102 Viola, Peasant Rebels under Stalin, 53; Fitzpatrick, Stalin’s Peasants, 294.
103 Anisimov, The German Occupation, 33.
In long-held Soviet Ukraine, for instance, German officials complained that the local population could not be induced to engage in anti-Jewish pogroms. Even though many non-Jews feared what would come next or indignantly disapproved of the killings, there were also those who helped the Germans identify, arrest, and murder the Jews. As elsewhere in the occupied Soviet territories, the Germans relied on local collaborators when preparing and executing anti-Jewish measures. Jews were not always easily distinguishable from the rest of the population by their looks, and while Soviet passports mentioned the bearer’s nationality, many Jews got rid of their identity papers as the Germans arrived. Because archives containing census data had been destroyed or carried off by the retreating Soviets, the Germans had to find other ways to register and classify the population. One way was through helpers with local knowledge. In the recently occupied town of Staraia Russa, for instance, Russian (and Estonian) members of the municipal police drew up lists of Jewish inhabitants’ names and addresses for the German authorities. The local police also participated in the later arrest of Jews and others. Some of the policemen received rewards from among the valuables left behind by the murdered Jews. The final act of killing was usually reserved for SS soldiers, but at least one documented exception exists whereby Russian auxiliary police carried out a mass shooting under German command.

Very little is known about popular reactions to the murder of the Roma. As in the case of the Jews, anti-Roma prejudice certainly existed – one witness who lived close to a site where Roma were executed, for example, later stated that they were killed “because the Gypsies didn’t work, but went around and cheated people – just like they do today.” Yet, as shown earlier, there were also people who would risk their lives to conceal a Roma child.

More than the killings of Jews, Roma, and patients, the German treatment of prisoners of war became a matter of widespread knowledge and outspoken dismay. A large number of prisoner camps were set up

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106 Berkhoff, Harvest of Despair, 73.  
107 Kovalev, Kollaborationizm v Rossi, 47.  
110 Account of V. I. Kokarev (b. 1925), in Vinogradov, Okkupatsiya, 24.
across northwest Russia, and the terrible plight of the prisoners was clear for all to see. They were marched or otherwise transported from their places of capture to the camps of destination, from camp to camp, and from camps to labor sites. People living in the vicinity of the camps or along the routes of prisoner transports became shocked witnesses to their conditions. Many tried to help by offering food, only to be threatened or even beaten by guards. There were thousands of witnesses to these scenes, and their stories surely spread out over most of northwest Russia. The partisans helped spread the stories, exploiting the propaganda value of the prisoners’ fate. The treatment of the prisoners undoubtedly influenced the popular perception of German power. Was this the “civilized nation” that would liberate Russia from the Bolsheviks?

German authorities did not fail to register the negative reactions. In mid-November 1941, the 18th Army rear area commander complained: “The population sees the misery of the prisoners every day, they see them half-starved laboring on the site or dying behind the barbed wire. They say, ‘So, there is even less to eat with the Germans than previously with the Bolsheviks.’” Half a year later, officers in the 281st Security Division recorded similar observations:

Figure 3.1 1942, Kalinin region: Women offer bread to Soviet prisoners of war. Source: E. Koloskova, ed., V obektive voina, 1941–1945 (Moscow: Liki Rossii, 2009), photo by Jäger

The treatment of the prisoners of war in many places has a negative effect on the mood. As the Secret Field Police established, women from the Opochka area managed to get in touch with their imprisoned husbands in Pskov, and also to visit them. These women told their friends what they had seen, namely that the prisoners were driven to work in poor physical condition, half-starved, lice-ridden, sick and powerless, and that if they fell over from weakness they were beaten heartlessly by the guards. These stories naturally spread quickly among the Russian population and contribute considerably to a declining mood.\textsuperscript{112}

According to Vera Pirozhkova’s memoirs, this information about the prisoners of war led “even those who hated Stalin and the Communists” to view them as the lesser evil.\textsuperscript{113}

The plight of the prisoners could also prompt negative judgments of Soviet authorities. The village teacher Vasilii Savelev registered in his diary that the prisoners were emaciated, cold, filthy, exhausted, and mistreated. Yet in both of his diary entries concerning the POWs, it is the Soviet government that becomes the target of his indignation: “The Red Army men bear a grudge against their leadership and they say that they hope it all will end soon . . . The prisoners curse their government and hatefully remember its treachery.”\textsuperscript{114}

\section*{Conclusion}

The systematic annihilation or murderous mistreatment of Jews, Roma, disabled people, and prisoners of war certainly inclined part of the north-west Russian population to view German power as a force of destruction and terrible danger to the Motherland. The fate of POWs in particular became widely known and a source of popular indignation. Many reacted by deciding to align decisively with the Bolsheviks. Consider the letter written by a young Red Army soldier to his parents in October 1943. Having survived German captivity, escaped, and joined the partisans, he wrote to inform his parents that he was alive and that his experience had given a higher, political purpose to his life: “Now, if I die,” he concluded, then it’s not in vain . . . So don’t worry about me, I have taken the only true path and I am not straying. Two years of captivity is the best school for a person, but unfortunately it is a very heavy and long one. I have lost a lot of

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{113} Pirozhkova, \textit{Moi tri zhizni}, 160.
\textsuperscript{114} Diary of V. S. Savelev (b. 1902), entries of September 25 and October 10, 1941, in Ivanova, \textit{Za blokadnym koltsom}, 246, 249.
\end{footnote}
my health, but I have also learned many things. I have learned what Fascism is really like, and I have appraised the historical truth of Bolshevism to the depths of my consciousness.115

Yet for all their horror, Nazi atrocities do not appear to have had a decisive impact on the overall political attitudes of the population at the time. No clear turn in the popular mood was registered by German officials in 1941–1942, nor do accounts by wartime inhabitants testify to such a turn. Probably most people had little or no direct experience with the German policies of annihilation. Many heard of the atrocities only through partisan propaganda, not always trusted; others knew nothing until after the war. Some witnessed or heard about individual German misdeeds, but, being unable to see the whole picture, took such events to be unhappy side effects of war. Moreover, especially during the first year of the occupation, parts of the population spent less time thinking about the true nature of the German regime and its long-term intentions than they did dealing with a question of more immediate concern: securing food for oneself and one’s family.

115 “Dorogie moi roditeli!,” October 1943, TsGAIPD SPb, 0–116/2/110, 35.
CHAPTER 4

The Ghost of Hunger

On July 22, 1941, two weeks after German troops first set foot on northwest Russian soil, the Wehrmacht’s 16th Army supply officer warned that “the ghost of hunger threatens the civilian population.” Other German officials spoke ten days later about “indestructible poverty,” noting that in some places people had not seen bread for weeks. These were the first signs of a deteriorating food situation that would result in famine and starvation in parts of northwest Russia during the winter of 1941–1942. In Leningrad’s southern suburbs and along the front line to the east, thousands of Russians (but hardly any ethnic Germans, Finns, Estonians, or Latvians) perished under conditions caused by a combination of wartime upheaval and German food policy.

Nazi economic policy was murderously anti-Slavic and provided a moral framework for Wehrmacht commanders to disregard starving Russians, which they did most callously with regard to prisoners of war and the besieged city of Leningrad, with catastrophic consequences. Yet Nazi ideology did not dictate all German measures everywhere and all the time. Wehrmacht officials in occupied northwest Russia eventually helped save many Russian civilians from starvation by transporting tens of thousands away from hunger-stricken areas.

Famine in the occupied territories never assumed the devastating proportions of Leningrad, where 1,000,000 inhabitants died of hunger and related illnesses during the German–Finnish blockade. In occupied northwest Russia, famine struck areas close to the front lines, killing thousands. Thousands of others staved off the ghost of hunger by offering their labor to nearby German units or by taking to the road in search of better conditions. Notably, conditions in the rear areas were far less serious,

2 EM 40, August 1, 1941, in Mallmann et al., Die Ereignismeldungen, 216.
especially in the countryside. Urban inhabitants usually lived in need, but peasants on the land found that the prewar relationship between town and countryside had been turned on its head, to their clear advantage. In the end, famine and hunger, for all the suffering it caused, did not lead to any traceable shift in popular political attitudes and behavior.

**Preconditions**

The food situation in northwest Russia had become strained before the Germans arrived, as people emptied shops of produce and the Red Army destroyed or carried off livestock and food supplies in order to weaken the advancing Germans.\(^3\) When German troops arrived in the localities, they found that most Soviet functionaries had fled, leaving economic life in shambles. The supply and distribution of foodstuffs had practically ground to a halt, leaving urban inhabitants especially vulnerable. Moreover, large numbers of able-bodied men had been called up to the army, which meant less manpower to bring in the harvest, a lot of which had in any case been lost or damaged because of Soviet scorched-earth measures and confiscations by German troops. The general agricultural conditions inherited from the prewar years had a negative impact as well: German specialists lamented that insufficient fertilizing, heavy weed infestation, poor quality seed grain, and schematic tilling of the land according to rigid plans caused low yields.\(^4\) By October 1941, no more than half the rye and wheat fields were officially registered and harvested, with an average yield of 400 kilograms per hectare, which amounted to only 50 percent compared to the 1939 harvest. Winter sowing was carried out belatedly, haphazardly, and under poor weather conditions. The resulting yield was finally registered as 56,000 tons, less than half of the estimated 1939 winter harvest results in the same area.\(^5\) While regional variations were considerable,\(^6\) the overall harvest of 1941 left much to be desired.

Mobilization into the Red Army, along with evacuation and flight, meant several hundred thousand fewer mouths to feed. But at the same time, more than 600,000 German troops (with about 100,000 horses)

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\(^3\) See Chapter 2.


\(^5\) Kilian, *Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft*, 396, 404 (note 143).

\(^6\) In certain districts, German officials found the size of cultivated rye fields to have increased by 20–60 percent compared to the previous year. See Wirtschaftskommando z.b.V. Hirschberg/Aussenstelle Noworshew, “Kriegstagebuch (9.6.–30.9.1941),” BA-MA, RW 31/949, entry of September 11–18.
arrived in northwest Russia by late 1941, a number that grew to 942,000 by 1943, including rear-area troops and personnel. Moreover, the Germans captured tens of thousands of Soviet soldiers during the first months. By December 1941, more than 100,000 POWs were held in the Army Group North area. The total number of German troops and Soviet prisoners more than made up for the population decrease resulting from mobilization and evacuation.

German strategy and policy provide a key to understanding why a strained supply situation developed into a famine in parts of occupied northwest Russia. In planning for Operation Barbarossa from mid-1940 onward, German military authorities correctly predicted that the supply lines of the Wehrmacht would become critically overstretched as the troops advanced hundreds of kilometers into Soviet territories. They were also aware of the poor Russian roads and the problems involved in using the wider-gauge railway system (thousands of kilometers of track had to be relaid). These considerations led German planners to conclude that, beyond the Baltic countries and Ukraine, Wehrmacht supplies could not be secured from the rear, and the soldiers would have to live off the land, obviously to the detriment of the civilian population.

The plan of feeding the Wehrmacht from local resources made sense within the larger, genocidal visions of total economic exploitation that German decision makers developed in the months leading up to the invasion. Planning officials produced calculations and guidelines that explicitly made the following point: Because food surpluses would be seized for the needs of the Wehrmacht or otherwise transported to the Reich, tens of millions of Soviet citizens would “become superfluous and will die or must emigrate to Siberia.” The guidelines emphasized that starvation would mainly befall the agricultural deficit regions, or “forest zones,” in northern and central Russia (including northwest Russia), which normally depended on imports from other parts of the country for food, while some basic provisioning was likely to remain in the Baltic countries and Ukraine. Specifically, it was a matter of

7 AOK 18, O.Qu./Iv Wi (La), “Über die Ernährungslage im Bereich des AOK 18,” December 4, 1941, BA-MA, RH 20–18/1,448, 19–20; Kilian, Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft, 87.
8 Kilian, Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft, 380.
“pushing back the Great Russian [Zurückdrängung des Großrussentums].”

Not only top Nazis but also the German army leadership expected and were prepared to face starvation among the occupied civilian population. Thus Wilhelm Keitel, head of the Wehrmacht High Command, noted in early July 1941 that soldiers would have to prepare for “acts of desperation and attacks” from the civilian population as a consequence of the famine that was expected to befall “large parts of the conquered territories.”

**Starvation**

It was not by chance that famine struck districts close to the front lines, where hundreds of thousands of German troops were concentrated. By March 1943, the ratio of troops to civilians in the 16th and 18th Army areas was 126:100 (farther behind the front, in the Army Group North rear area, the ratio was only 19:100). One area teeming with German troops was the outer suburbs of Leningrad and adjoining districts. Here the food situation was already deteriorating before the occupation. As Pushkin resident Olimpiada Poliakova wrote in her diary on August 17, twenty-five days before the Germans arrived, “The food situation is steadily worsening. Of course, no one has reserves. We all steal potatoes from the kitchen gardens.” Iulia Khordikainen, another diarist living in Pushkin, offered a similar description of the situation before the German arrival: “All food disappeared from the stores. Rationing was introduced. I got 400 grams of bread. This was too little, and we became weaker. First it was 300 grams, then 250 grams, and then nothing.” Priests with the Pskov Orthodox Mission (see Chapter 6) traveling north from Pskov in autumn/winter 1941 had to perform funeral services in peasant huts for starvation victims. As one of them later recalled, “The farther north you went, the more difficult were conditions of life.” In September 1941, Soviet partisans reported that the population in Pushkin and Slutsk (Pavlovsk) was “literally starving,” eating only potatoes and cabbage leaves

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11 Müller, *Deutsche Besatzungspolitik*, 104.
found in the kolkhoz fields. In early October, German military officials reported that the 20,000 inhabitants of Pushkin were “without food” and would starve. In late November, the same unit complained that troop morale was suffering due to the sight of starving civilians: “For example, women and children come to the troops’ headquarters and beg for food. They suggest that they would rather be shot immediately than be abandoned to an excruciating death by starvation.”

The food situation in Pushkin steadily worsened throughout the winter of 1941–1942. With increasing hopelessness, Olimpiada Poliakova recorded the evolving catastrophe in her diary. On November 15, she remarked upon the lack of all basic necessities: “Our previous misery under Soviet rule seems like an incomprehensible wealth. There is no needle and thread, no buttons, no matches... The absence of soap and tobacco feels particularly heavy.” A week later: “The people are beginning to die out. We have days when we eat nothing at all.” On December 24, “hundreds are dying of hunger in their beds every day.” Local German economic authorities also observed that “hundreds” were starving to death daily in January 1942. People dug up buried cats, dogs, and horse cadavers for food, and acts of cannibalism and the selling of human flesh were reported by German authorities in February 1942. In January or February, the Germans issued a ban on leaving and entering the city, severing a crucial lifeline to the surrounding countryside where food could be obtained. The priest Fedor Zabilkin told Soviet investigators in 1944 that he had counted seventy-six people shot for attempting to leave the city in search of food.

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16 “Prodovolstvennoe polozhenie v okkupirovannykh raionakh,” September 1941, TsGAIPD SPb, o-116/2/7, 91.
22 Extraordinary Commission report on German crimes in Pushkin, March 7, 1944, in Ivanova, Za blokadnym koltsom, 562.
According to the Soviet Extraordinary Commission for investigating German crimes in the occupied territories, 9,514 persons starved to death in Pushkin during the German occupation. In the nearby town of Slutsk, the Commission found, 6,000 people had suffered the same fate. One wartime resident of Slutsk later recalled that during the winter of 1941–1942, “starvation mowed people down one by one.” The following observation was made by a German medic in the area around Slutsk in late December 1941: “Ragged and starving civilians ... stagger and drag themselves till [their death], in −40 degree weather ... No one can help them. With weakened arms, they try to hack pieces out of frozen horse cadavers. Many children are dying in the villages; one sees many with prematurely aged faces and with bloated stomachs.”

Farther to the south, in the marshy woodlands around Miasnoi Bor where the Soviet 2nd Shock Army was encircled following a failed offensive operation at Liuban, an unknown number of civilians were trapped together with Soviet troops, beginning in April 1942. An eyewitness later recalled:

Thousands of peaceful civilians found themselves there: adults and children from the peat works in Tesovo and the villages of Finev Lug, Ogorele, Shelkovka, Glukhaia Kereat, Novaia Kereat, Kleptsy, Chauni, and others ... The circumstances in the encirclement near Miasnoi Bor in 1942 were terrible in all respects. The enemy was everywhere. Firing went on day and night ... The civilian population huddled together in shelters made out of branches to guard against mosquitoes and the night frost ... It was very difficult to get hold of drinking water. People had no food products, particularly salt, and no medicine either. And there were a great many children among them ... People died from hunger, wounds, and diseases.

Having traversed the countryside to the south and southeast of Lake Ilmen, close to the front, partisans reported in September 1941 that German authorities had confiscated the harvest, leaving many peasants without bread. In the first months of 1942, many civilians in the Demiansk area

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23 “Akt kommissii po rassledovaniu zlodeiannii nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatnychikov, g. Pushkin,” March 7, 1944, printed in Ivanova, Za blokadnym koltsom, 561.
26 Quoted in Rutherford, “The Radicalization,” 143.
27 Account of L. N. Tumanov, in Ivanova, Za blokadnym koltsom, 76.
28 “Prodovolstvennoe polozhenie v okkupirovannykh raionakh,” September 1941, TsGAIPD SPb, 0–116/2/7, 91–2.
too suffered from a dire food situation. While the scale of famine was evidently smaller than in the Leningrad suburbs, hundreds died here as well.\textsuperscript{29} The total number of civilian starvation deaths in northwest Russia during the occupation is unclear, and Soviet investigations produced figures that are not always reliable. According to summaries of the findings of the Leningrad, Pskov, and Novgorod regional commissions to investigate German war crimes, which listed numbers of victims under different categories, a total of 30,642 persons “died of torture [\textit{umerlo posle iztiazanii i pytok}],” an ambiguous category which probably includes starvation deaths.\textsuperscript{30} The total number of civilian starvation deaths in northwest Russia was likely somewhere between 20,000 and 30,000.

Famine was brought about by the introduction of hundreds of thousands of German soldiers who had been ordered to live off a land that was

\textsuperscript{29} See Jeff Rutherford, “Life and Death in the Demiansk Pocket: The 123rd Infantry Division in Combat and Occupation,” \textit{Central European History} \textbf{41}, no. 3 (2008): 347–380. “A\k{e}t o zlo\decim{e}niiakh nemetsko-

already burdened by food shortages, and it struck close to the front lines, but much less frequently in areas farther behind the front. Proximity to the coast and fishing waters also provided relief. Where famine did strike, German authorities could provide aid by bringing in more food from elsewhere or by moving civilians away to materially more secure areas. As we shall see, they eventually did some of both, but selectively.

**German Policy Responses**

The Nazi “hunger plan,” or policy of calculated starvation, was never implemented on the colossal scale that had been envisioned by prewar planners. Practical realities on the ground dictated otherwise as the war against the Soviet Union unfolded. The Red Army eventually brought the Wehrmacht to a grinding halt. Faced with the prospect of a longer war, the Nazi leadership decided Russian labor was needed in order to support the war effort. To keep Russians working, one had to treat them with some degree of decency, including a sufficient diet. Thus, Erhard Wetzel – a subordinate of Alfred Rosenberg in the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories – made the following remarks in April 1942 regarding the General Plan East and the future treatment of the Russians:

“...the suggestion put forth ... to liquidate the Russian is, apart from the fact that it is hardly possible to carry it out, also not to be considered because of political and economic reasons.” Nevertheless, a policy of ruthless

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31 For details about conditions in the countryside, see Chapter 5.
33 Scholars disagree on whether German food policy in the occupied Soviet Union is best described as a Hungerplan or a Hungerkalkül, the latter implying that the starvation of millions was not the aim of the plan but rather its foreseeable and cynically accepted consequence. See Gerlach, Kalkulierte Mord; Alex J. Kay, Exploitation, Resettlement, Mass Murder: Political and Economic Planning for German Occupation Policy in the Soviet Union, 1940–1941 (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006); Hüter, “Die Wehrmacht vor Leningrad,” 439. While Gerlach and Kay see a starvation plan, Hüter argues that ‘one cannot speak of the whole German military apparatus being consistently oriented towards a gigantic ‘hunger plan’ against Soviet civilians and prisoners of war.”
34 The concept of a “General Plan East” was introduced and discussed in the various institutions of Nazi Germany, the most central of which were the SS and the RSHA, between 1940 and 1942. The secret plan envisioned the colonization and germanization of Eastern European and Soviet territories and the removal of up to 65 million “racially undesirable” people via ethnic cleansing, deportation, or genocide. See Czeslaw Madajczyk and Stanislaw Biernacki, eds., Vom Generalplan Ost zum Generalsiedlungsplan (Munich/New Providence/London/Paris: K. G. Saur, 1994).
economic exploitation with anti-Slavic underpinnings did exist, and it did have consequences. The ways in which German military authorities dealt with different groups of starving civilians south of Leningrad during the winter of 1941–1942 illustrates the role played by ideas of Russian racial inferiority.

Though ethnically homogeneous compared to other German-occupied territories, northwest Russia was not entirely Russian. The region contained a Finnish-speaking minority of about 76,500 (including mostly Ingrian Finns as well as small number of the indigenous Votes and Izhorians), some 13,200 Estonians, and a smaller number of ethnic Germans, or Volksdeutsche, in districts south of Leningrad and around Novgorod.

The ethnic Germans were the first group slated for emergency assistance in response to deteriorating food conditions. Thus, on October 31, 1941, the head of the 18th Army, Georg von Küchler, ordered “immediate measures of assistance to alleviate the suffering of the ethnic Germans.” In the course of the following months, about 3,000 Volksdeutsche were transported to Germany from the starving suburbs of Leningrad and the Novgorod area. The plight of the Ingrian Finns, too, drew special attention from the German authorities during the winter of 1941–1942. In December 1941, the Germans offered to transport 50,000 of them over the frozen Gulf of Finland, but the Finnish government declined. In February 1942, a decision was made to transport to Estonia 16,000 Finns who were “facing death by starvation.” However, the decision was soon revoked; the 18th Army command argued that the Finns should rather be made to take part in the spring sowing, as long as they were “appropriately provisioned,” for which purpose the Economic Inspectorate North sought to provide a shipment of seventy-five tons of rye. Yet two months later the situation had become critical for thousands of nonworking Finns.

For these numbers, see “Auszüge aus Sonderbericht des S.D. über INGERMANLAND von Dozent Lt. Yllö,” July 1, 1943, BA-MA, RH 23/281, 11–11bs.


without means to provide for themselves. German officials promptly began to organize their rescue, and by mid-1943 some 18,000 Finns had been transported to Estonia. Similarly, about 6,400 Estonians were sent from northwest Russia to Estonia during 1941 and 1942. Latvians were likewise prioritized. As one wartime inhabitant of the multiethnic village of Pomerane (southeast of Liuban) later recalled, “In January 1942, the Latvians, Estonians, and one German family were evacuated from Pomerane. They were transported to places more fertile in grain.” All in all, more than 26,000 persons were targeted by German relief efforts based on their ethnicity, provided with food, and sent off to better supplied regions. By contrast, German commanders at first responded differently vis-à-vis starving Russians in the same area.

On October 3, 1941, the 18th Army supply officer issued the following reply to a request from a subordinate unit regarding how to deal with starving civilians in the area under its command: “Every supply train from the Heimat decreases the food there. It is better that our relatives have something and the Russians starve.” As army units continued to file reports warning of the mental strain experienced by troops faced with civilian starvation, the 18th Army command decided that starving civilians should not be fed from army supplies but rather sent away from the front lines. Evacuations began in October, but means of transport were lacking. In mid-November, some 50,000 civilians still remained in the areas immediately behind the front. They were, according to General von Küchler, “slowly but certainly starving to death in the troops’ midst.” Those remaining were to be kept away from German troops. On November 6, von Küchler banned all nonofficial contact between German soldiers and Russian civilians. As the general explained to his troops, the Russian civilian population “belongs to a kind that is racially alien and hostile toward us.” Shortly thereafter, von Küchler visited an infantry division in Krasnyi Bor and urged that a large barbed wire fence be set up to separate the civilians from the troops, who would then “not constantly be tempted to offer their food to the inhabitants.”

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41 V.A.A. beim AOK 18, “Die finnische Volksgruppe in Ingermannland,” April 7, 1942, PA AA, R 60769.
43 Ibid.
44 Account of P. P. Levin, in Ivanova, Za blokadnym koltsom, 390.
Frontline soldiers and some military administration and economic officials complained about the harsh measures. The 18th Army rear area commander lodged a letter of protest that concluded: “You give the people something to eat, and so all questions are resolved.” One local economic command complained that the troops’ food seizures were turning the population against the Germans. The response from the 18th Army economic department was relentless, echoing the genocidal guidelines laid down by pre-war planners: “The termination of economic activity in the forest zone as well as the hunger or perhaps even the starving to death of the civilian population living there must be accepted.”

Events on the ground did not correspond perfectly to ideological intentions, however. Even as officials were stating that Russians should be left to starve, German authorities in northwest Russia were organizing the transportation of thousands of Russians out of the starvation areas. Even though the officially stated justification for doing so was not humanitarian (as in the case of the ethnic Germans and Finns) but practical and concerned with troop security, the outcome nevertheless amounted to a basic form of emergency relief. Thus, between October 1941 and May 1942, more than 75,000 people were transported away from famine-stricken districts south of Leningrad. Similar measures were taken farther south, in territories controlled by the 16th Army. As we shall see, the situation of these refugees remained difficult, sometimes extremely so. But by being removed from the famine-stricken areas, the threat of death by starvation was greatly reduced. All the same, the measures were too little, too late for the thousands of Russians who succumbed to starvation. The northwest Russian winter of 1941–1942 thus illustrates both the murderous effects of Nazi food policy and its limits.

German food policy was also reflected in the rations handed out to workers and townspeople. Rations were a matter of dispute in German headquarters throughout the second half of 1941. The most radical line,
pushing for a policy of economic exploitation leading to foreseeable starvation, was taken by Hitler and top economic officials such as Herbert Backe and Hermann Göring. Military authorities on the ground, on the other hand, did not necessarily see such a policy as serving their interests. Thus, for example, in mid-September the 281st Security Division’s military occupation officer implored local economic commands not to allow starvation to break out among the urban population, as this would undermine trust in the Wehrmacht.  

In August, the 16th Army supply officer specified a weekly ration of 9 kg of bread, 1.6 kg of meat, 1.25 kg of butter and margarine, and 900 grams of sugar for civilian workers – clearly enough to avoid starvation.  

As autumn turned to winter, however, the radical line began to prevail, so that by late November the same supply officer was referring to an order issued on November 7 by the Army High Command stipulating starvation rations for civilians in areas under military occupation (see Table 4.1).  

Evidence suggests, however, that military occupation officials in northwest Russia did not follow these instructions slavishly; rations could be raised above the official levels, especially for laborers engaged in work directly for the Wehrmacht.  

### Table 4.1 Daily civilian rations in grams, November 27, 1941

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bread</th>
<th>Potatoes</th>
<th>Meat products</th>
<th>Fats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Workers</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>571</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heavy workers</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>714</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonworkers</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jews and children below the age of 14</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Working to Survive

The Wehrmacht always needed local manpower to carry out a range of tasks of military importance. Many of them were menial, such as cleaning soldiers’ barracks and clothes or loading military supplies onto trains and trucks. Others, such as fleeting timber, required more skill, and professionals were needed for tasks such as building and repairing bridges. Workers were also needed to uphold local industry (mostly peat, flax, and wood), to maintain roads and railways, to construct barracks and fortifications, and to drive trucks and horse-drawn vehicles. From the perspective of inhabitants threatened by the ghost of hunger, the German demand for labor was a chance to secure the survival of oneself and one’s family.

Getting a job with the status of “Hiwi” (Hilfswilliger, or volunteer) attached to it was the most attractive path. The Hiwis were generally better off than other workers, and most of them appear to have been volunteers.\(^{57}\) They worked with German units as cooks, truck drivers, ammunition carriers, messengers, translators, nurses, and so forth. They were provided with German troop rations, and many also received uniforms.\(^{58}\) Employment here, especially in the supply services and in field kitchens, provided ample opportunity to receive more food than was officially stipulated, particularly from leftovers.\(^{59}\) Overall, those recruited into the ranks of the Hiwis – about 17,500 civilians, along with 40,500 former prisoners of war within the Army Group North area by mid-1943 – could expect better material conditions than other workers.\(^{60}\) Many sought to join their ranks; they also caused embitterment among ordinary civilian workers.\(^{61}\)

Workers were always in great demand in northwest Russia, and especially so as the deportation of workers to the Reich got underway in spring 1942, sapping the area of able-bodied men and women (see Chapter 5). By early 1943, German economic authorities estimated a dearth of almost 80,000 workers, and demand only increased in the following months.\(^{62}\)

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\(^{57}\) Dallin, *German Rule in Russia*, 535.

\(^{58}\) *Zwei Jahre Kriegswirtschaft*, 138–139; “Kriegstagebuch der Wi In Nord für die Zeit vom 1.4.-30.6.1943,” BA-MA, RW 31/590, 3 (entry of April 3).

\(^{59}\) E.g., AOK 18/Oberquartiermeister, “Besondere Anordnungen für die Versorgung und für die Versorgungstruppe Nr. 537,” August or September 1943, BA-MA, RH 20–18/1348, 230.

\(^{60}\) *Zwei Jahre Kriegswirtschaft*, 139.

\(^{61}\) Der Chef der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD, “Meldungen aus den besetzten Ostgebieten Nr. 52,” April 30, 1943, BArch, R 58/224 (fiche 3).

\(^{62}\) *Zwei Jahre Kriegswirtschaft*, 137.
Working to Survive

German units would offer improved labor conditions in order to attract scarce and much needed workers, which people eagerly exploited. For instance, cleaning ladies travelled from workplace to workplace in search of higher pay, shorter hours, and better conditions, leading to German complaints about high turnover rates. A general ban on labor piracy was introduced in May 1942, but to little avail: By August that year, Wehrmacht offices were still “attempting, again and again, to attract workers employed elsewhere by granting benefits such as larger rations, shorter hours, etc.” Most probably this practice continued throughout 1943 as well, as the German army experienced further labor shortages.

Conditions were most difficult for the many single mothers. Anna Krasavina from Novgorod, a typical example of the untold thousands of women whose husbands were sent to fight at the front, had two children aged three and six to feed. Before the war, she had stayed at home with the children and tended to the kitchen garden while her husband worked at a fulling mill. During the war, with Novgorod transformed into a frontline city emptied of people, she had no farm to retreat to, so she had to take any job she could find. Sometimes she worked peeling potatoes in field kitchens, for which she received soup for herself and her children, and in the winter of 1942–1943 she got a job cleaning soldiers’ underwear. With several hundred thousand German and Axis soldiers and personnel active in the Army Group North area, employment such as this was offered in abundance and enabled many inhabitants to avoid starvation. The presence of German forces was not only a cause of the deprivation experienced by Anna Krasavina and countless others but also, paradoxically, a main source of relief and survival.

For women, prostitution was another possible way out. Brothels were set up for German troops in Pskov and elsewhere. However, institutionalized prostitution seems not to have been a widespread survival strategy among Russian women. According to Dmitrii Karov, an intelligence officer with the 18th Army, the Germans failed to recruit Russian women for military brothels in the towns of Narva and Kingisepp: “Despite the

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63 The phenomenon was so widespread that the Army Group North command issued an order reminding subordinates that workplace switching was to occur in an orderly fashion and only with authorization from the relevant employment office. See Wi In Nord (Wi.Kdo. Pleskau), “Fachliche Anweisungen Nr. 10,” January 23, 1942, BA-MA, RW 31/883.
66 Kovalev, Kollaborationism v Rossii, 81, 361.
enormous number of female refugees, many of whom were on the verge of starving to death, it was impossible to find even one Russian woman or girl agreeing to work [in a brothel], even though the material conditions promised were very good.” Karov attributed this to Russian women’s “sense of independence” and their “spiritual principles and ideals.”67 His interpretation was shared by German officials, who similarly observed a general unwillingness among Russian women to work as prostitutes. “Russian women,” an intelligence report noted in August 1942, “seem to be unsuitable for brothels . . . for psychological reasons. Illustrative of this attitude are utterances by Russian girls to the effect that they would rather kill themselves than work in a brothel.”68

If institutionalized prostitution was uncommon, informal sexual relations were certainly more widespread. Many women found that a relationship with a German soldier could yield material and physical security for oneself and one’s family. In such relationships, the German soldier might have been the conqueror,69 but women were not simply powerless subjects. By exploiting their own femininity and inherent “erotic capital,” they could obtain what they wanted and needed.70 Moreover, sexual relationships were not necessarily based on one’s power over the other but could also arise out of love, desire, and a need for intimacy, which did not cease to move people on both sides of the occupier/occupied divide.71 Such voluntary intimate relations with German soldiers would sometimes take on political overtones. In some villages in the Staraia Russa district, Soviet intelligence reported in early 1942, “voluntary cohabitation” between local peasant women and Germans was “widespread.” Some of the women evidently positioned themselves against the Soviets. While conversing with local partisans about the possible return of Soviet forces, they would say things like: “When your people return . . .”72

68 Der Chef der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD, Kommandostab, “Meldungen aus den besetzten Ostgebieten Nr. 18,” August 28, 1942, BArch R 58/698, 203–204 (fiche 6).
71 For some examples, see Kovalev, Kollaborationizm v Rossii, 348–365.
72 “Otdelnye krestianki ... govorili partizanam o prikhode Krasnoi Armii tak: ‘Vot, esli vshhi pridut ...’” “Doklad troiki Starorusskogo raiona Leningradskoi oblasti o rabote v naselennykh punktakh osvobozhdaemykh Krasnoi Armiei,” January 18, 1942, TsGALPD SPb, o-116/12/199. My emphasis.
On the Move

He who flies over or rides through the occupied Soviet area today will notice crowds of people moving along the roads; there are hundreds of thousands of them, and according to the experts, their number often may reach a million. These crowds are on the move, either to look for food or, vice versa, to bring food to the cities in order to sell it. (Report by the Ostministerium representative with Army Group North, December 1942)73

Taking to the road was a common strategy of survival in the occupied territories, by which people simply fled the starvation areas, seeking food and lodging in the villages and hoping for better conditions in places farther behind the front. And indeed, the food situation improved as one moved away from the front. Consider the story of a captured Red Army soldier who had been separated from his regiment near Volkhov in summer 1942. Being unable to get to the Soviet side of the front, he decided to go southwest into the occupied territories. He found that the farther away from the front he went, the less the German occupation was felt. Fewer complaints and grievances were heard, and people were able to feed themselves “without difficulty.” The schoolteacher Vasilii Savelev, who resided in Krasnye Gory, had a similar experience. He set out on what he called a “journey for bread” in March 1942. On April 1, after having traversed about 260 kilometers, he noted in his diary:

Beyond Porkhov people live comfortably with bread [zhivet khoroshokhlebno], they have a lot of livestock, chickens, and geese, and they all make linseed oil and churn butter. They eat well, and I was also fed well when I spent the night, with no questions asked, but only beyond Porkhov. Until I got to Porkhov, it was difficult to obtain anything to eat even for pay.75

Another long journey for bread was made by Evgeniia Smirnova, who was evacuated from Pushkin, just south of Leningrad, to the Kingisepp district together with her mother and two children in late 1941. The food situation there was strained, and the Smirnovas were forced to go begging from door to door. The locals often reacted negatively – they were, according to her account, “fed up” with “all sorts of people roaming

74 V.A.A. beim AOK 16, interrogation report (J. M. Naida), August 31, 1942, PA AA, R 60725.
75 Diary of V. S. Savelev (b. 1902), entry of April 1, 1942, in Ivanova, Za blokadnym kolosom, 265.
about” – and so she decided to head south. More than 250 kilometers later, the Smirnovas ended up in a village on the border with Latvia, where local German authorities gave them a plot of land to cultivate, enabling them to live in relative material safety. Another witness, who resided in the village of Borschchovo (Luga district) during the occupation, recalled similar treks to the south: “At that time people travelled – since no one had any bread – they travelled to those distant villages in the Pskov region to sell their clothes and underwear. The fields were larger there; they had bread. My mother also went.”

Many did not get that far. In the areas that were most severely afflicted during the winter of 1941–1942, many of those who set out to find food were already weakened by hunger to the point of collapsing. “People say,” Olimpiada Poliaikova noted in her diary in late December 1941, “that the road to Gatchina is strewn with bodies all along the way. These unfortunate ones gathered their last odds and ends and went out to exchange it for food. On the way, people who sat down to take a rest never got up.”

Official travel restrictions hampered people’s efforts to secure their daily bread. German authorities were wary of any unauthorized movement of people, particularly in the territories close to the front and especially as the partisans began to make their presence felt. Breaching the travel ban was dangerous; people who were encountered on the road without identification papers and travel permits ran a real risk of being shot. In some cases, the Germans would lift travel restrictions in order to avoid or alleviate starvation. A wartime inhabitant of Luga recalled that the Germans recognized the difficult food situation and allowed people to move along the roads during the day: “A mass of people with sleighs wandered from village to village in search of something edible, selling in return for food whatever they owned: clothes, shoes, tableware.”

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76 Account of E. G. Smirnova, in ibid., 567.
77 Account of N. I. Petrov (b. 1923), in Vinogradov, Okkupatniaia, 37.
78 Osipova, “Dnevnik kollaborantki,” 112. See also the entry of February 28, 1942 in ibid., 125, and Pavlova, “Iz dnevnika voennykh let,” 159.
79 Kilian, Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft, 251–258.
81 Account of V. I. Mitroshkin (b. 1927), in Ivanova, Za blokadnym koltsom, 214.
For the most part, official travel restrictions were ignored in practice. Throughout the entire occupation period, tens of thousands made their way into the rear areas on their own and in breach of the restrictions on movement. As one German report observed in early April 1942, “The travel ban is still in place for the immediate frontline area, but the need of the population is stronger than the fear of severe punishment.”

The influx of thousands of refugees into rear areas where the food situation had been strained to begin with could itself result in hunger and even starvation. The Army Group North chief supply officer expected as much, as is clear from an order dated December 3, 1941 stating that the areas east of Lake Samro and around Sebezh, to which 15,000 and 20,000 refugees from the northern areas were to be directed, “will likely become starvation areas [Hungergebiete].”

In early December 1941, the 281st Security Division noted that, so far, members of the local population had mostly taken it upon themselves to house incoming refugees. This would change, the report continued, if refugees kept pouring into the districts, and indeed this proved to be the case. As early as February, the 16th Army warned of “overfilled zones” to the west of Đno and Luga as a result of both controlled and uncontrolled refugee movements. In May and June, the 281st Security Division registered increasing complaints about the refugees’ negative impact on the food situation. By the summer of 1942, the ghost of hunger had descended upon the population in the Krasnye Gory area northwest of Luga, as witnessed by the diary entries of Vasilii Savelev:

12 June [1942]. Friday.

The mood is dismal. People walk about swelled from hunger. There are already many deaths owing to starvation, particularly among the elderly . . . Today I saw how people walk along the roads and on the fields after work to gather potatoes, of which there is almost nothing. They make pancakes out of sorrels and nettles.

21 June. Sunday.

People swell from hunger and many have died, there are funerals every day.

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82 EM 190, April 8, 1942, BArch R 58/221, 240 (fiche 3).
85 Ivanova, Za blokadnym koltsom, 268–270.
29 June. Monday.

Walked to Samro again for bread... This time I bartered very little, the people have become poorer. 86 Partisans come and plunder. The other day... they slaughtered a bull, took away everything edible, and went into the woods.

16 July. Thursday.

Pavel Semenovich stopped by. Starvation has made him unrecognizable—he's bloated, he breathes with difficulty. He says he will hardly survive. [A week later, Pavel Semenovich died in the forest searching for mushrooms.]

German authorities noted the conditions described by Vasilii Savelev as well, if only in euphemistic language. In July and August, the military administration officer with the 285th Security Division reported that the local population in the Osmino, Krasne Gory, and Voloshovo districts (east of Lake Samro, which Army Group North officials had predicted would become a “starvation area”) had been reduced to “great destitution” because of the influx of refugees. 87 The refugees themselves were even worse off. Many carried few supplies and received only meagre provisions during the transport. Utterly exhausted, some perished during the journey or soon after arrival. One transport from the Volkhor pocket on the northeastern front arrived in Luga in August 1942 carrying 590 persons, of whom 235 soon died. 88 Driven to desperation, one German report noted, “the refugees, partly mixed with partisans, rob the last foodstuffs and clothing [from the local population].” 89

Life on the move in occupied northwest Russia was certainly difficult, and often extremely so. Many refugees lived on the brink of starvation, and some perished. Most, however, pulled through and survived. Those who lived did so not only because of their personal health and survival skills,

86 The previous winter, Savelev had been told that people in Samro “live very comfortably,” which he held to be true because “[they have] high-quality hay and bring along lots of oats for the horses. And the horses are well-fed.” Ibid., 260.


but also through interaction with others. Locals often offered help and relief to refugees, as long as there was food to spare. Zinaida Kofman, a half-Jewish girl who had barely escaped a German killing action in autumn 1941, spent two and a half years living a seminomadic life in the Ostrov–Pskov–Gdov area, all the while being assisted by local villagers who, she later recalled, never refused to share their food. Another Jewish girl, who had survived the Nevel massacre together with her mother and sister, told of a similar experience of being aided by local villagers who offered food and shelter. The following recollection by a wartime resident of the village of Borschchovo also illustrates the readiness to aid refugees among the rural population of northwest Russia:

In the winter [of 1941–1942] a pilgrimage of refugees from the suburbs of the besieged Leningrad began . . . People walked in lines with sleighs. And there was always room in our house for everyone who asked. Papa accommodated everyone: one on the stove, one on the bench, one underneath the bench. And he always said: “Mother, go get some mushrooms.”

Local communities began organizing aid for their members. In autumn 1941, inhabitants of Krasnye Gory set up commissions to account for the damage done to households by Soviet scorched-earth measures as well as by German requisitioning and looting. In this way households who had lost potatoes and grain were able to receive compensation through redistribution. Similar small-scale relief efforts were organized elsewhere as well, sometimes aided by Orthodox clergy (see Chapter 6). Mutual aid committees were established in 1942 to aid refugees and others among the most destitute. In the town of Luga, the local aid committee counted 1,880 members by mid-1943 – probably about a third of the adult population.

There were also instances of German decency in the provisioning and treatment of the neediest. German authorities in fact made serious efforts to alleviate famine in the Krasnye Gory area in summer 1942. Despite tough official statements to the effect that Russians should be left to starve,
the local economic command decided to set aside the entire collected harvest of that year for feeding the refugees and the local civilian population. Similar measures were taken elsewhere as well. The supply officer of the 28th Army Corps ordered in February 1943 that each evacuee be provided with 375 grams of bread and 120 grams of meat and fats daily for the four days the trip was meant to last. At the same time, the 16th Army rear-area supply officer instructed that sufficient amounts of food be supplied for refugee transports and that only heated train cars be used.

There is some evidence suggesting that relief measures were real and welcomed. In early March 1943, some 5,300 evacuees were held up in Staraia Russa while waiting to be transported westward. According to the Secret Field Police, the mood among them was “good”; they expressed gratitude to the Wehrmacht for organizing the transports and providing them with supplies. Elsewhere, special welfare committees were formed to deal with incoming refugees, receiving and accommodating them upon arrival and organizing collections of food, money, and other items, sometimes “with great success.”

According to German investigations of the popular mood among refugees in the Dno and Soltsy areas in June 1943, people generally acknowledged the efforts by the German army and the local self-government to provide transport, arrange housing, distribute land, and provide seed grain and horses.

**Trade and Private Enterprise**

The Stalinist economy was more than a state-led command economy. While production was largely centralized, much of the distribution of scarce consumer goods took place through a rich network of market relations. The Bolsheviks found it necessary to legalize a regulated form of private trade at rural and urban marketplaces, but were often unable to

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maintain control of it. Illegal trade flourished, and sellers at legal bazaars would quite easily sidestep official regulations to make big profits. This feature of the 1930s Stalinist economy resurfaced under German rule, as marketplaces, both official and illegal, sprang up across the occupied territories to serve the needs of local inhabitants as well as German personnel. For townspeople in particular, and for others living on meagre rations, the bazaars were an important source of food. At the same time scarcity led to soaring prices, burdening the life of urban inhabitants while benefiting peasants.

Like the Bolsheviks, the German authorities also sought to control trade. They issued bans on demanding and paying excessive prices and ordered traders to append price tags to items on display, put up price lists outside stores, and send copies of these lists to the local German headquarters. The Germans declared that illegal traders would lose land and livestock, and they made attempts to distribute basic commodities among the population in order to bring prices down, but to little avail. While the typical monthly salary for an urban employee was 200–300 rubles, bread went for 120 rubles per kilogram by spring 1942 (by comparison, prewar bread prices had been 1–2 rubles per kilogram). Matches sold for 9 rubles a box. During the final phase of the occupation, in late December 1943, Wehrmacht officials were still complaining that “the salary paid by German offices has no relationship to the prices of food and daily necessities.” The Germans were simply unable to systematically observe transactions and enforce restrictions, and they ultimately failed to control the markets.


102 “Postanovlenie o zapreshchenii povysheniia tsen,” no earlier than July 5, 1941, GAPO, R-1634/1/1, 2.

103 Liadskaia Komendatura, “Prikaz No. 18,” August 18, 1942, GAPO, R-1634/1/1, 41.


Economic conditions during the occupation amounted to a reversal of the balance between town and countryside. In prewar years, peasants had been obliged to sell their products at fixed, low prices, but now they had the upper hand. By marketing agricultural surpluses, a peasant-merchant could earn more than even the best-paid urban employee. For the most part, however, peasants would not receive cash. Because townspeople could not afford the high prices, bartering became the norm. Matches, tobacco, gasoline, and alcohol were common currencies. Shoes and clothes were also handed over in exchange for food. People in the towns struggled under these conditions. Workers in the Pskov area, a German intelligence report noted in late October 1942, were becoming increasingly impoverished, having “sold almost all articles of daily use in order to eke out an existence, literally facing ruin.” A way out for many urbanites was simply to leave town. Several thousand Pskovites, for instance, went to live with relatives or friends in the countryside, where conditions were usually better.

In the Stalinist economy of the 1930s, small-scale merchants and artisans normally sidestepped official regulations to engage in illegal trade. In 1935, for instance, authorities discovered that only 4–5 percent of Moscow’s 8,000 licensed artisans sold their products through the legal cooperatives; the vast majority took to the black market, often making fortunes. During the German occupation, scarcity continued to prevail while private business was encouraged. Traders, artisans, and entrepreneurs benefited from these conditions. In Chudovo, for instance, as one witness recalled, “The tradesmen were very well off, and there was an incredible number of them: it was as if people yearned for the private trade that was forbidden in Soviet Russia, and all who could threw themselves upon this thing . . . Some opened restaurants and tea houses, where the main clients were Germans, despite prohibitions.” Artisans such as furriers, silver and goldsmiths, shoemakers, and tailors were reportedly overloaded with work and “lived very comfortably”; some sources paint a less rosy picture, however, noting

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109 Ermolov, Tri goda bez Stalina, 163–164.
108 Der Chef der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD, Kommandostab, “Meldungen aus den besetzten Ostgebieten Nr. 27,” October 30, 1942, BArch, R 58/222, 277 (fiche 3).
112 Elena Osokina, Za fasadom “stalinskogo izobiltia” (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1999), 157. See also Edele, Stalinist Society, 202.
114 Ibid.; Ermolov, Tri goda bez Stalina, 159–160.
that while the artisans were indeed sought after and well paid, they still went hungry like most other urbanites.\textsuperscript{115}

**Conclusion**

The prewar material destitution in northwest Russia was exacerbated by the war and the German invasion. First, stores were emptied of food and rationing was introduced. Later, the retreating Soviets destroyed or removed much food and agricultural equipment. The Germans then caused additional deprivation through their extensive requisitioning and looting. German food policy was attuned to the interests of the Wehrmacht and the German Reich; the interests of the civilian population were at the bottom of the official list of priorities. For inhabitants in the suburbs south of Leningrad and other districts close to the front line, life became a struggle for pure survival. Thousands perished, especially during the winter of 1941–1942. Salaried workers and urban employees usually led an impoverished existence, and refugees from the starvation areas frequently faced the ghost of hunger. Peasants, merchants, artisans, and entrepreneurs were better off.

Did famine and destitution have a major impact on popular political attitudes? The answer appears to be no. Consider the following diary entry by the village teacher Vasilii Savelev, who witnessed deadly starvation at first hand. Writing on the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1941, he made note of the prevailing material difficulties while at the same time pondering whether a future under German rule could turn out to be “no worse” than life under the Bolsheviks:

7 November [1941]. Friday.

Cloudy skies, five degrees [Celsius] below zero. It seems old Dvoeshkina was arrested and held all night . . . P. Demidov was also arrested. This day is notable now only for its sadness and profound pain, yet we thought, like in the past 23 years, that we would greet it with joy and revelry. Of course, life became more difficult year by year, everyone became pretty ruined and impoverished. But in these years we somehow got used to the destitution in the hope for a better future. Maybe it will not be worse with the Germans who have conquered us, but life now is very difficult, particularly because of the absence of bread.\textsuperscript{116}


\textsuperscript{116} Diary of V. S. Savelev (b. 1902), entry of November 7, 1941, Ivanova, _Za blokadnym koltom_, 253.
After another year under German rule, on the last day of 1942, Savelev wrote:

31 December 1942. Thursday.
31 December. The final day of 1942! 1943 is just around the corner, and on this occasion one wants to look back. In the year that passed, we have experienced much that is unpleasant in our lives. First: hunger and deprivation of all necessities; second: a persistent fear for one’s own life and an image of how cheap the life of a person is; third: the war of ideas continues, and in it millions of flourishing lives are lost; fourth: this whole year has been spent together with the Germans, whom we still do not fully understand.\(^\text{117}\)

Thus, it was within the context of a “war of ideas” that lives were lost. The Germans appear here not as despised oppressors but as a force one struggles to understand. At least two explanations can be found for why Savelev did not point to the Germans as the main cause of the deprivations. First, he was well aware that partisans too were forcibly removing food from the villages.\(^\text{118}\) Moreover, he learned on several occasions that famine was highly localized, as conditions were significantly better elsewhere, even in neighboring villages.\(^\text{119}\)

Savelev’s diary is but a single source, but the impression is confirmed in other accounts by wartime inhabitants of northwest Russia as well: There is generally little to indicate that hunger and material destitution became a particular cause of anti-German resentment in the population at large. And this is not surprising, given that significant sections of the population were not that severely affected by material shortages. In fact, as we shall see in the following chapter, for many peasants the economic consequences of German rule even appeared favorable, creating conditions for what some would retrospectively recall as a better, freer, and more abundant life than that which they experienced in the Stalinist kolkhoz.

\(^{117}\) Ibid., 273.
\(^{118}\) See the entries of October 10 and 14, December 16 and 19 (all 1941), in ibid., 249, 250, 258. More will be said about partisan–civilians relations in Chapter 7.
\(^{119}\) See the entries of November 8, 1941, January 5, 1942, and April 1, 1942, in Ivanova, Za blokadnym koltom, 253, 260, 265.
CHAPTER 5

“More meat, milk, and bread than in the Stalinist kolkhoz”

Life in the Decollectivized Village

Despite everything, during German rule the population in the countryside began to live a life both freer and more affluent than under Soviet power.

Dmitrii Karov

Just as in Soviet society at large, on the eve of the war the majority of northwest Russia’s population consisted of peasants. Many of them were relieved to see the Soviet authorities driven out, pinning their hopes on German promises of liberation and dissolution of the collective farms. Yet no one really knew what the new masters of the land had in store. Initial encounters with German troops were sometimes friendly, other times violent and humiliating. Most people took a reserved and cautious stance to begin with. But unlike elsewhere in the occupied Soviet territories, German authorities in northwest Russia followed through on their promises of land distribution. The dissolution of the collective farms benefited the peasantry and helped the Germans secure a temporary victory in the struggle for hearts and minds in the countryside. Alongside new freedoms, however, the new rulers also introduced new burdens into the lives of peasants, including forced labor deportations and a violent local labor regime, which tempered – without extinguishing – the optimism generated by decollectivization.

Decollectivization

As the Germans advanced into northwest Russia, many peasants seized the opportunity afforded by the sudden disappearance of Soviet power to reorganize economic life in the village. With their Soviet masters gone, in a burst of self-determination, peasants dissolved kolkhozes in numerous

1 Karov, “Nemetskaia kontrrazvedka,” 32.
places across the occupied (or not-yet-occupied) territories. As a Soviet intelligence report described it, “kolkhozes were dissolved, the communal economy dismantled, livestock redistributed, bread shared based on the number of mouths to feed, and winter sowing took place independently – anyone sowed as much as he pleased.”2 The reordering was not entirely peaceful. As villagers assembled and redistributed land and livestock among themselves, conflicts emerged along the lines of prewar social cleavages. Dispossessed kulaks who had lost everything to collectivization clashed with kolkhoz peasants over strips of land, leading to micro-level civil wars in some village communities.3 According to a mid-August German intelligence report, “total confusion” prevailed with regard to land ownership, giving rise to “economic anarchy” in the northwest Russian territories.4

Despite cases of strife, spontaneous decollectivization gave rise to hope and great expectations across the countryside. Vera Pirozhkova, having witnessed this development, later described her impressions:

The peasants were so certain that, with the disappearance of Soviet power, the kolkhozes would cease to exist as well – in their minds the two were inextricably linked – that they dissolved the collective farms at once, redistributed the land and whatever cattle was left, and began to farm independently. No one disturbed them. My father and I went to the village where we used to spend the summer, twelve kilometers from the city . . . We were there in early autumn – the occupation had not lasted long – yet we were dumbfounded at the sight of the changes that had taken place. People were cheerful [zhizneradostny] and in the mood for work.5

In principle, the German authorities initially did not condone land redistribution or privatization.6 During the first weeks of the occupation, the Germans informed the local population that, in the name of economic efficiency and in order to avoid food shortages and starvation, redistribution of land would be impossible for the time being. Some dissolved

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2 Sekretar Polnovskogo RK VKP(b), “Politicheskie meropriiatiia nemetskogo komandovaniia,” December 18, 1941, TsGAIPD SPb, 0–116/2/7, 79.
4 EM 53, August 15, 1941, in Mallmann et al., Die Ereignismeldungen, 297–298.
5 Pirozhkova, Moi tri zhizni, 169.
kolkhozes were even reestablished. At the same time, peasants were told that those who worked conscientiously and followed German orders would receive their own piece of land in the future. Yet the Germans’ power to prevent or reverse spontaneous divisions of land at the local level was limited. In many villages, hard to reach because of their remote location and the bad roads, German authorities were absent for the first halfyear of the occupation or even longer. Inhabitants of such places were left to organize economic and communal life on their own, as long as they did not come under partisan control in the meantime.

While not allowing complete decollectivization, the German authorities made steps in this direction. They decreed that while the land itself was to remain state property, seeds and yields became the property of the individual peasant. Peasants were obliged to deliver a certain amount of their produce to the German authorities, but any surplus was theirs. Furthermore, the private garden plots were doubled in size where possible, and this land would not be taxed. The Germans measured the delivery quotas so that peasants would retain an adequate quantity of grain and potatoes, and specifically “a higher amount per head than under Soviet power.”

Peasants found the new arrangements to be a relief compared to prewar kolkhoz demands. The priest Aleksii Ionov described in his memoirs an autumn 1941 encounter with a peasant outside Pskov who told him the Germans were “child’s play.” The peasant pointed out that the Germans “take half the harvest and leave you the rest,” which he considered a favorable arrangement, given that the Soviets – “our people” – in his eyes “took everything” [Nashi-to vse otbirali!]. German economic authorities reported in September 1941 that “the rural population

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12 Ionov, “Zapiski missionera.”
is forthcoming and consistently makes good deliveries,” and by mid-October, the 281st Security Division reported that the peasants’ food supply in its area had been “secured for the winter.” Observers in various German agencies continued to file reports noting improved peasant morale, punctual deliveries, and a general willingness to cooperate. The Wehrmacht’s Economic Inspectorate North noted in a retrospective (if embellished) account that declaring the harvest to be the property of the peasants “caused the whole country to breathe a sigh of relief. With feverish enthusiasm, the peasant population, young and old, resumed agricultural work after having been idle for weeks... It was no longer a matter of slaving for strangers, but of producing on one’s own account.” This description, while overstated and not applicable to every district, was not off the mark. Sure, the “feverish enthusiasm” partly reflected fear – peasants dreaded famine and strove to build up supplies for the coming winter, and they feared punishment for not complying with German orders. But as it turned out, peasants in most of the northwest Russian countryside – behind the frontline districts – remained relatively unburdened by food shortages throughout 1941. Even in some areas close to the front, the famine ravaging the towns largely bypassed the villages. The experience of relief was real, and some peasants took to writing letters to the German authorities expressing their gratitude. One such letter, probably sent in early October 1941,

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16 Most disingenuously, the report states that “no person has died from malnutrition within the entire territory of the economic command.” Zwei Jahre Kriegswirtschaft, 28. See Chapter 4 for evidence to the contrary.
17 Ibid., 20.
18 As an August 1941 announcement on the upcoming rye harvest threatened, “If a kolkhoz does not comply with our instructions but undermines them, all buildings and stables in the kolkhoz will be burned down and the inhabitants will be shot.” Ibid., 24–25.
19 In December 1941, German economic authorities reported that “difficulties” in the food situation of the civilian population had been registered in the area south of Leningrad only. Wi In Nord/ Chefgr.Fü, “Lagebericht für die Zeit vom 1.-15.12.41,” December 18, 1941, BA-MA, RW 31/585, 10.
was signed by sixty-one inhabitants of three villages in the southern part of occupied northwest Russia and is worth quoting at length:

To the Führer of the whole German people, Adolf Hitler
From the working peasants of the villages Popekovshchina, Podreche, Pcheshkovo, and Pustoshka district

We thank you sincerely for the liberation from Stalin’s servants and Stalin’s collective farms. On 10 July the armed forces of Germany, your Wehrmacht, liberated us from the yoke of the cursed Communists, the political leaders, and the Stalinist government.

Your armed forces behaved kindly towards us. We had never expected this, because our political leaders assured us that the Germans act atrociously against the peasants; this, however, is pure falsehood; the Germans treated us well. They took nothing from us; if someone needed ten eggs we were paid 50 kopeks in your currency.

Our own, cursed Communists plundered us upon retreating and drove us out in front of them. We saved ourselves by hiding in the forests and swamps. Not until the Wehrmacht liberated us from the repression of the Communists did we crawl out of the swamps, bushes, and holes in the ground in anticipation of freedom, joy, and cheerfulness. All the while we admired your troops marching past.

In the kolkhoz, we had to work the whole year through; one adult had to “earn” 700 labor-days. Per labor-day we received 200–300 grams of unpurified rye. We starved. The commissars forced us to deliver 150 liters of milk per cow against a payment of 12 kopeks per liter. Whoever did not deliver this quantity had his cow removed and was imprisoned for up to five years. Our children were without milk; the Communists took everything.

When the German Wehrmacht arrived, everyone without a cow was given one. We gathered the harvest, and the German Wehrmacht gave us bread for the whole year. We have enough hay for the German army as well. We are supplied with all foodstuffs for the year 1941. It is an honor for us to carry out all the German army’s orders. We will fight the Communists together with your troops. We thank the German Wehrmacht for the liberation from Stalin’s servants, and we ask you to forward this message to the liberator Adolf Hitler.

We thank you again in the name of three villages, sixty-one farms, and 613 inhabitants and we give our signatures.

[61 signatures]

To be sure, this letter could have been written disingenuously, intended as a pragmatic measure of self-protection in response to German liberationist propaganda. More likely, the letter reflects widespread popular

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sentiment among northwest Russian peasants at the time. The expressions of hostility against Stalin and gratitude for the new arrangements in the countryside harmonize with German reporting on popular attitudes. In the end, the changes brought on by the invasion appear to have reinforced peasant hopes that the Germans would defeat the Bolshevik regime and pave the way for a better future.

Yet as 1942 approached, the kolkhoz question still lingered. Many farms had not been dissolved or had been reestablished following their spontaneous dismantling. Peasants began to petition the Germans for the kolkhozes to be abolished once and for all.

**The New Agrarian Order and Its Reception**

In the months leading up to 1942, peasants frequently approached German authorities to ask when the collective farm system would finally be eliminated. In January and February 1942, German authorities in the Volosovo district received numerous letters of petition from local peasants requesting that land and kolkhoz property be officially redistributed. The letters amounted to further confirmation that the kolkhoz had been the major source of peasant grievances during Soviet rule. In their characterization of the collective farm as an institution that had not only ruined the peasants privately but also deprived the state of income by removing incentives to work hard, the petitioners appealed to the material interests of the German authorities. The peasants asked for land and promised diligent cultivation and loyal delivery of quotas in return.

The petitions were only the latest sign that the time was ripe for change in the countryside. German ruling circles had been debating the question of the collective farms since the beginning of the war. In northwest Russia, as elsewhere, German observers on the ground increasingly recognized the impact of the agrarian question on the struggle for hearts and minds and
began to argue that some kind of redistribution and privatization of land ought to take place.\textsuperscript{24} In December 1941, for example, the Wehrmacht’s Economic Inspectorate North wrote that “the most important question in the liberated Eastern territories and in particular in the Russian space is the distribution of agricultural land to the peasants,” adding that the only real solution would be to recognize \textit{de jure} every peasant’s right to land and to begin organizing its immediate distribution.\textsuperscript{25}

After prolonged deliberations among various Nazi agencies, a decision was made to introduce the so-called New Agrarian Order. Its main tenets were spelled out in a decree signed by Alfred Rosenberg, head of the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories, on February 15, 1942.\textsuperscript{26}

The New Agrarian Order was meant to secure peasant loyalty and productivity by officially abolishing the kolkhoz system and setting in motion a process of transition that would \textit{eventually} turn the land over to individual peasant households for private use. For the time being, however, the principle of collective farming was largely to be retained. The kolkhozes would be renamed “communal farms” [\textit{Gemeinwirtschaften} or \textit{obshchinnye khoziaistva}, semantically identical to “kolkhoz”], and the land would be worked communally as before, the only difference being that the individual garden plots would now be enlarged and become private property freed from taxation. At the next stage of the transition, the decree stipulated, land in communal farms could be distributed to individual peasant families wherever “economic and technical preconditions” were in place. In such cases, the communal farm would turn into an “agricultural cooperative” [\textit{Landbaugenossenschaft} or \textit{zemledelcheskoe tovarishchestvo}], in which individual peasant households would work, but not formally own, their designated strips of land. At the final stage, private farms in which peasants themselves decided what and how to cultivate could be created.\textsuperscript{27}


\textsuperscript{26} While Rosenberg’s “Ostministerium” was a civilian agency, some of its directives (including the New Agrarian Order) also applied to territories under military administration, because the latter were expected soon to be transferred to civilian rule.

\textsuperscript{27} For the February 15, 1942 decree on the New Agrarian Order, see Müller, \textit{Deutsche Besatzungspolitik}, 221–224. See also Dallin, \textit{German Rule in Russia}, 334–339.
In practice, the implementation of this decree was anything but clearcut across the occupied Soviet Union. As one historian pointed out, “it was applied in so many various ways as to make it meaningless to speak of a unified agrarian policy.” As we shall see, northwest Russia was characterized by a particularly liberal and widespread implementation of the New Agrarian Order.

On or soon after March 8, 1942, an official German announcement appeared on street corners and message boards all across occupied northwest Russia. Addressing the peasants directly, it declared that “a new life begins in your villages.” The kolkhoz would now disappear into the past, together with all things Communist; the German army had arrived to break the chains of servitude weighing down on the peasantry and to set the Russian peasant on the road to freedom after twenty-five long years of Bolshevik oppression: “We promised you that which you expected from us and have always yearned for, namely your land and your farm! This promise has now become law and is the cause of this celebratory act of state.” Importantly, the announcement said that an exception to the general provisions of the agrarian decree was to be made for northwest Russia:

The agrarian law envisages the communal farm [Gemeinwirtschaft] as a transitional phase towards the [private] farm; this will be out of the question for you in these territories since we already let you harvest, partition the land, and work it individually in the previous autumn, and we could permit you to do all this only because we knew that you had remained peasants in spite of servitude and persecution.29

In other words, a modified version of the New Agrarian Order was introduced in northwest Russia whereby the transitional stage was bypassed and peasant households were reorganized into so-called agricultural cooperatives. To some extent, what happened was a rubber-stamping of the spontaneous decollectivization of the previous autumn.30

According to the Economic Inspectorate North, most of the 250,000 peasant households in northwest Russia had already gone over to

28 Dallin, German Rule in Russia, 344.
30 The general stipulations of Rosenberg’s agrarian decree seem to have been made public at the same time, so that a measure of confusion prevailed at first with regard to the status of the collective farms. Thus, the 281st Security Division reported in April 1942 that peasants frequently wondered what was meant by “communal farm,” rightly suspecting in this term a concealed continuation of the kolkhoz system. 281. Sich.Div, VII, “Lagebericht,” April 5, 1942, BA-MA, RH 26–281/29.
individual or semi-individual farming by 1942. The German authorities now set out to confirm, properly register, and legally document these new arrangements. Generally, fields and meadows were partitioned into strips for individual use, while pastures, fallow land, and forests were set up to be worked collectively. The harvest went to the individual households but remained subject to German delivery quotas, the fulfilment of which was the collective responsibility of the village. Heavy machinery and tractors were kept at the machine-tractor stations supervised by German authorities and put into operation when necessary; other farm equipment and draft animals were distributed evenly among the households. Breeding bulls were brought in from Estonia to improve the strained livestock situation. Peasants could receive animals and other rewards if they proved themselves worthy by working hard or displaying particular loyalty. Private garden plots were enlarged, but only within strict limits, since the Germans, like the Bolsheviks, sought to prevent the peasants from concentrating on their own private plot to the detriment of the remaining land. Whereas under Soviet rule the private plots were usually between a fourth and a third of a hectare, now they could be enlarged to half a hectare.

In the second half of 1941, many if not most kolkhozes in northwest Russia were de facto dissolved. In 1942 this process, now legalized, continued with increased momentum. By September of that year, the land reform had come to encompass 82.5 percent of land in the area of Wirtschaftskommando (WK) Pskov, 32.1 percent in WK Dno, and 12.5 percent in WK Krasnogvardeisk. In Ukraine, by comparison, the agrarian order had at that time been implemented in only 2 percent of the cases, leaving the kolkhoz structure mostly intact. By September 1943, all 250,630 peasant households in northwest Russia were registered as having gone over to individual land use. In other words, the New Agrarian Order represented real change for hundreds of thousands of peasants and backed up German promises of a better future with actual reform.

How did northwest Russia’s peasants react to the announcement and implementation of the New Agrarian Order? In her memoirs, Vera Pirozhkova recalls that her father, working as a land surveyor in 1942,
was impressed by what he witnessed in the countryside around Pskov as he went out to measure and register the redistributed plots of land:

Everywhere the kolkhoz land had been amicably divided by the peasants, and the land surveyors only had to measure the plots of each household and record their exact dimensions. It made my father glad to witness the agreement among the peasants and their cheerful mood, their desire to work their own land. In summer 1942 the mood in the countryside was still optimistic, characterized by a hope or even a certainty that the hated kolkhozes had forever ceased to exist.35

Judging by the numerous reports and observations made by German agencies, these impressions largely reflected the overall situation. In spring and summer 1942, German authorities consistently noted decollectivization’s positive impact on the popular mood. As one typical report from June 1942 stated: “The land distribution has a strong elevating impact on the mood of the population and on their relationship to the German authorities.”36 In November 1942, the commander of the 18th Army rear area, also citing decollectivization as the main cause, observed that “the will and desire to cooperate with us has become evident almost everywhere.”37 Economic offices, too, found that popular reactions were overwhelmingly positive.38 Utterances such as the following were registered by German intelligence in April 1942 and emphasized as characteristic of the general mood among peasants in northwest Russia:

Earlier, during Soviet times, much was said and promised, but without visible results or successes. Now we can work and keep house in the best order, because all this is ours.

We are very happy that individual labor activity has been introduced, that the kolkhozes are gone. We believe in German victory. If the German forces didn’t retreat this winter, they will advance even more this summer.39

37 Quoted in Ermolov, *Tri goda bez Stalina*, 44.
39 Quoted in Lomagin, *Neizvestnaia blokada* (vol. 1), 513.
Some responses were emotional. In the 18th Army rear area, peasants reportedly received the news of the New Agrarian Order with “tears of joy and gratitude.” Elsewhere peasants “broke out in spontaneous cheers for the Führer” at the announcement of the reform. Older peasants in particular were impressed by the German decree. Orthodox clergy played an important role with their active presence at announcement ceremonies, infusing the land reform with a religious message.

Reporting on reactions to the land reform, German officials observed increased diligence and industriousness. The peasants came across as

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41 “Tätigkeits- und Lagebericht Nr. 11 der Einsatzgruppen der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD in der UdSSR (Berichtszeit vom 1.3-31.3.1942),” BA, R 70-SOWJETUNION/31, 324bs.
43 On the role of the church, see Chapter 6.
more active than had previously been the case, tilling and sowing with
greater enthusiasm and efficiency, impressing many German officials.
When peasants had the opportunity to till their own strips of land
individually, German authorities found, the labor output was “incompar-
ably greater than by communal tilling of an entire field.” Moreover, the
cattle that had gone over to individual households were being tended to
“with great care and love,” improving the livestock situation. Peasants
began repairing and carefully tending their farmhouses, stables, and
garden plots.

To be sure, observations of hardworking peasants may be explained
partly by the shortage of working hands and draft animals. Thousands of

“Betr.: Lage im Armeebereich,” July 2, 1942, PA AA, R 60724; “Tätigkeits- und Lagebericht Nr. 11
der Einsatzgruppen der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD in der UdSSR (Berichtszeit vom
1.3.-31.3.1942),” BArch, R 70-SOWJETUNION/31, 324 bs.
45 Zweite Jahre Kriegswirtschaft, 30.
47 Wi In Nord, Gr. Fü/MI/Ia, “Monatsbericht für die Zeit vom 1.5.-31.5.1942,” June 6, 1942, BA-
MA, RH 22/289, 12.
able-bodied men had been mobilized into the Red Army in 1941, and thousands more were deported to the Reich in the first half of 1942. By June of that year, in some districts only six working peasants were available for every 10 hectares of agricultural land. Horses were sorely lacking. Moreover, the fear of future food shortages must have spurred many peasants to work harder and longer.

Nevertheless, the land reform did boost morale in the countryside, as a great many peasants experienced tangible improvements. Various personal accounts provide ample evidence confirming the evaluations of German officials. One peasant woman who lived in a village southeast of Pskov during the war recalled the following:

You wouldn’t believe how we began to live [kak my zazhili] in those years! Everyone filled their barns with grain. We laid enough food in store for the winter. We kept cows and raised piglets. Some even provided themselves with horses, which was forbidden during the kolkhoz. We worked with pleasure and went to parties; there was enough time for celebrations.

Nina Antonova, who lived in the village of Borshchovo (Luga district) during the occupation, told a similar story:

The Germans gave out land: take as much as you want, as much as you can cultivate. Partition the farm however you like. And people somehow began to rouse themselves and come to life, they began to plant and sow. Life was not bad.

Nadezhda Borisova, from the village of Oslave (Volosovo district), recalled that “[w]e were like individual farmers . . . life was more free than in the kolkhoz [raskreposhchennee, chem v kolkhoze].” Another witness, Aleksei Fedorov, said that people worked harder than ever before, and that it paid off: “There was enough bread. In 1942 so much grain was threshed than I can’t even begin to tell you . . . Life was


\[49\] Kilian, Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft, 402.

\[50\] In May 1942, the 81st Infantry Division noted that the rural population should be informed with absolute clarity [“in aller Schärfe klar gemacht worden und immer wieder einzuhämmern”] that they could expect no food support from the German authorities – their supplies for the coming winter would depend on their harvest alone. 81. Infanterie-Division, Kommandant rückw. Korpsgebiet, Abt. Ib/Ic/Ia, “Besondere Anordnungen für die Standortkommandanturbereiche Nr. 1,” May 16, 1942, BA-MA, RH 26–81/62.

\[51\] Quoted in Oboznyi, Istoriia Pskovskoi Pravoslavnoi Misii, 426–427.

\[52\] Account of N. N. Antonova (b. 1932), in Vinogradov and Pleizher, Bitva za Leningrad, 59.

\[53\] Account of N. V. Borisova (b. 1930), Vinogradov Collection.
good." Boris Mironov, a wartime inhabitant of a village near Novorzhhev, provides further evidence to the same effect:

I know from what my aunt told me that every worker in the zemskii dvor received for himself and for every member of his family about 18.9 kg of rye per month and one liter of milk daily, not counting remaining foodstuffs. Even if my aunt got something mixed up, here is an emotional and non-quantitative piece of information from my mother: “In the zemskii dvor, before the partisans dispersed it, we lived comfortably. The Germans paid so well for our work that during the kolkhoz, we wouldn’t even dream of it.”

Soviet authorities, too, recognized the improved economic situation in the countryside. Having visited the Porkhov/Dno area in autumn 1942, a Soviet military official reported to headquarters that the local peasantry was well off: “Almost every household has a horse, cow, and a few sheep. They are fully supplied with bread.”

In the latter half of 1942, however, northwest Russian peasants also faced a disconcerting increase in food delivery obligations. Upon registering an improved grain harvest of 228,000 tons, only 10–15 percent less than the harvest of 1939 – a remarkable result given the economic deprivations resulting from war and occupation – German authorities decided to raise the quotas. In certain places, such as the Ostrov district, the harvest was downright plentiful, exceeding prewar results by 300 percent or more. The Germans announced they would collect 300–375 kilograms per hectare for rye and barley (up from 200–300 kg/hectare in the previous year).

Account of A. G. Fedorov (b. 1930), in Vinogradov, Okkupatsiia, 137. Several witnesses recalled that while the winter of 1941–1942 was marred by hunger and even starvation, the food situation improved tangibly after the land reform of spring 1942. See, for example, the accounts of V. I. Kokarev and A. N. Petrova in ibid., 23, 47; and Ekaterina Nikitichna Filatova interview by A. Drabkin, iremember.ru transcript, February 21, 2007, https://perma.cc/228T-THRJ.

Zemskii dvor: A former sovkhoz (state farm), renamed during the occupation.


Kilian, Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft, 404.

For the 1942 figures, see Der Chef der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD, Kommandostab, “Meldungen aus den besetzten Ostgebieten Nr. 27,” October 30, 1942, BA-MA, R 58/222, 279 (file 3). For the 1941 quotas, see Der Wirtschaftskommandeur/Oberstleutnant Becker, “Aufruf an die Landbevölkerung,” November 1941, BA-MA, RW 31/882, 33; Kilian, Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft, 397.
and they raised the milk quota from 300 to 365 liters per year (the Bolshevik quota had been 180 liters).  

Peasants reacted to the new quotas with consternation and protest. According to one German report, “whole villages practiced passive resistance.” The peasants naturally wanted to capitalize on their grain surpluses, to which they were formally entitled under the New Agrarian Order. Since they could buy next to nothing with the small amounts of cash paid by the Germans for deliveries, they would much rather sell their produce on the market or exchange it for clothes and other necessities. The German response was indecisive and ambiguous. On the one hand, agricultural officers were authorized to reduce delivery quotas wherever necessary, entering into a compromise with the protesting peasants. But on many occasions, the Germans resorted to coercion. Mass arrests, threats, and violence did result in a marked increase in deliveries, but also severely embittered parts of the rural population.

The negative reaction to the forced food collection was tempered by two factors, however. First, peasant resistance (and consequent German coercion) was localized, not universal. In the Gdov area east of Lake Peipus, for example, local German officials noted that popular mood was on the rise throughout the fall of 1942 because the grain harvest had been rich and the delivery quotas did not burden the local peasantry – in most cases, households had to deliver no more than 30 percent of the total yield. Second, German authorities in fact turned around and decided to heed the peasants’ protests toward the end of 1942, easing their

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burdens by reducing the grain quota to 60 or 70 percent of what had been initially announced. On average, the Germans ended up demanding about 200 instead of 300–375 kg/hectare of rye and barley. In the end, some 32 percent of the total registered grain yield of 1942 was to be delivered.  

The 1943 harvest also yielded good results. According to a German report on a conference held in Shimsk in November 1943 attended by ninety-one village and district elders (heads of the local self-government), the harvest results had given rise to “a feeling of material contentment” among the peasantry: “The population in general had their daily bread, partly even in very abundant amounts . . . The harvest was good, or at least sufficient, and the official delivery quotas were in no way perceived to be severe or burdensome.” As a wartime inhabitant of a village in the Volosovo district later recalled, “In 1943 we had more meat, milk, and bread than in the Stalinist kolkhoz.

While decollectivization improved life in the village, so too did the German incapacity to control the occupied territories. In fact, German economic agencies in northwest Russia only collected about 60 percent of the set agricultural delivery quotas in 1942–1943. The shortfall was mostly attributed to the partisans – German officials estimated that losses resulting from partisan influence in the economic year 1942–1943 amounted to 20,000 tons of grain and 1,200 tons of meat. Yet partisans were not the only source of the shortfall. Given the Germans’ limited ability to oversee and control the rear areas, peasants frequently managed to keep more food than they were officially supposed to. Vera Vinkourova, who resided in the village of Chashcha (one of many remote villages in northwest Russia), recalled that no one came to collect the harvest in 1942, leaving it for the villagers to keep.  

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66 Kilian, Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft, 408.


70 Müller, Die Deutsche Wirtschaftspolitik, 448.

71 See Zwei Jahre Kriegswirtschaft, 44–45; Müller, Die Deutsche Wirtschaftspolitik, 105.

72 See the account of V. D. Vinokurova (b. 1920), in Vinogradov and Pleizher, Bitva za Leningrad, 358, 360.
officials complained in September 1942, “have shown that the peasants make false statements on the extent of the sown area and that they conceal cultivated fields.”73 As one Russian émigré journalist who travelled in the occupied Russian territories keenly observed:

Compared to the “workers’ and peasants’ government,” the Germans were downright dilettantes in the art of plundering the countryside. The cow that was led by its owner from the farm to the edge of the nearby forest (but no longer, lest the partisans carry it off) remained in the household until the Bolsheviks returned. Grain dumped in a barrel or simply buried in a hole in the yard was not discovered by the German foragers and economic officers. For this reason, bread ceased to be a rare treasure in the countryside during the occupation years.74

Other forms of deception were also recorded. Villagers would attempt to conceal potatoes and grain from the German collectors by presenting documents attested by the village elder stating (falsely) that their food supplies had been confiscated by German troops. Such efforts often succeeded, especially when higher-ups in the local self-government played along. The Germans sent patrols to check for secret reserves, but they would often be unable to discover the hiding places.75 It was also possible to falsely report food losses due to partisan attacks. The real extent of such attacks – partisans frequently seized food in the villages (see Chapter 7) – provided peasants with ample opportunity for credible deception. The Germans could not always thoroughly check such reports, and even if they did, it would be difficult to discover the truth.76

In brief, decollectivization and the New Agrarian Order, coupled with limited German control, benefited the peasantry. The new arrangements in the countryside resonated with what one historian has called “the Russian peasants’ yearning for volia” (freedom to cultivate the land and enjoy its fruits),77 reinforcing peasant hopes that the Germans would bring

about a new and better life by defeating the Bolsheviks and instituting a more favorable socioeconomic order.

Alongside new freedoms, however, the Germans also introduced new burdens. As peasants went out to cultivate the fields in spring 1942, they risked being rounded up by German troops and sent off to Germany to work as industrial laborers or farm hands. They were also liable to be mobilized locally for heavy and often dangerous labor.

**Burdens**

People in northwest Russia, as elsewhere in the occupied Soviet territories, faced the prospect of being deported to Germany as forced laborers. As more and more Germans were called up to the army, the Nazi regime sought to fill labor shortages by bringing millions of residents of the occupied territories to work in German industry and agriculture. About 50,000 people were sent from northwest Russia to the Reich during the first half of 1942, which amounted to seven or eight out of every hundred working inhabitants. There was hardly a village from which one or more inhabitants were not shipped off to the Reich over the course of these months.

Some of the deportees were volunteers, but usually in a limited sense. Many were recruited from among starving refugees and residents of the suburbs south of Leningrad, where the food situation in late 1941 and spring 1942 was catastrophic. Volunteering for labor in Germany was a way to escape starvation. The Germans made such a choice easier by publicizing carefully selected letters sent from Russian workers in Germany to their relatives back home describing the living and working conditions in positive terms. Even though some of the so-called *Ostarbeiter* were luckier than others with respect to workplace conditions and the attitudes of their German superiors and hosts, their overall situation was characterized by exploitation, humiliation, and conditions resembling slavery. They lived in cramped conditions, often surrounded by barbed wire, receiving

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78 Ulrich Herbert, *Hitler's Foreign Workers: Enforced Foreign Labor in Germany under the Third Reich* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).


miserly rations and hardly any payment. Rumors of their poor treatment quickly began to circulate. “For some reason we don’t trust these evacuations,” Olimpiada Poliakova noted in her diary on February 8, 1942. “Rumors make their way through even to us, cut off completely from the world as we are, to the effect that they evacuate [people] to Germany to carry out the very heaviest labor, treating the Russians there like ‘Untermenschen’. These rumors are being held on to very persistently.”

Predictably, German authorities soon ran into trouble recruiting Ostbeiter. Most local inhabitants, if they were not desperately destitute, had no desire to be taken away from their homes and sent off to an uncertain fate in a foreign country. Peasants hoping to benefit from the redistribution of kolkhoz land were distressed at the thought of losing out by being sent away or having their sons and daughters deported. The methods of the officers responsible for the “recruitment” were blunt and brutal: Villagers were often simply seized and sent off without any prior notice. In the eyes of local inhabitants, the roundups resembled Soviet deportations to Siberia. The Germans continued to publicize selected Ostbeiter letters, but people increasingly doubted their veracity. Ultimately the German authorities could do little to neutralize the negative effect on popular mood of their own brutal measures.

More commonly, men and women in the occupied territories were mobilized for local tasks. Early on, German authorities announced a general labor duty, declaring that “all male and female persons aged 14 to 65 ... are obliged to accept any work offered.” Urban inhabitants were to report to labor offices, while in the countryside district and village elders were responsible for carrying out the registration. Those who failed to report for work risked being interned in a forced labor camp.

81 Herbert, Hitler’s Foreign Workers, 171–176. For a vivid example of the kind of tribulations the deportees had to face, see the account of Z. F. Gorbacheva, in Ivanova, Za blokadnym koltsom, 450–457.
82 Osipova, “Dnevnik kollaborantki,” 122.
86 See Müller, Deutsche Besatzungspolitik, 281.
While working for the Germans was a source of survival for many among the destitute (see Chapter 4), for peasants with plots to cultivate it was an unwanted burden. The first mass mobilization of local inhabitants for nonagricultural labor took place during the first winter, and their main task was to clear snow off roads and railways. At the same time, and throughout 1942, tens of thousands were put to work repairing and rebuilding roads, railways, and bridges, as well as felling trees and hauling timber. In the spring of 1942, 10,000 horse cart drivers were recruited to serve the transport needs of the 16th and 18th armies. By June that year, about 73,000 civilian laborers were working for Wehrmacht units, while 50,000–60,000 were working for the Luftwaffe, Organisation Todt, and other agencies.

Constructing field positions, entrenchments, ditches, and bunkers along the front became an ever more pressing military task as the tide of the war turned against the Wehrmacht. In 1942 and 1943, up to 75,000 people were engaged in this type of heavy and dangerous labor behind the front lines of the 16th and 18th armies. The prevailing conditions, as admitted by the Economic Inspectorate North, were so poor with regard to both housing and provisions that workers soon began to depart in large numbers, causing the German authorities to institute more punitive measures and set up forced labor camps.

Many sources testify to the poor conditions under which people were forced to work. A partisan intelligence report noted in November 1942 that rural inhabitants mobilized for work in forestry and road building received bread rations of 500 grams and in some cases payment of up to 6 rubles per day for working 12–14 hours. Other reports spoke of 250 grams of bread with an extra portion of soup for the most efficient workers. Vladimir Kokarev, who worked repairing railway bridges, recalled that the piece of bread handed out after a long day’s work was such that he could easily consume it by himself on his way home. "A small crust of

88 Wi In Nord, Gr. Fü/M, “Monatsbericht für die Zeit vom 1.4.-30.4.42.” May 1, 1942, BA-MA, RW 31/978.
90 Ibid.; Müller, Die Deutsche Wirtschaftspolitik, 309.
91 Untitled report on the situation in the German-occupied territories, November 1942, TsGAIPD SPb, 0–116/2/34, 5–6.
92 “Materialy k dokladnoi zapiske,” n.d., TsGAIPD SPb, 0–116/2/34, 31.
93 Account of V. A. Kokarev (b. 1925), in Vinogradov and Pleizher, Bitva za Leningrad, 23. See also the account of D. F. Emelianov (b. 1926), in Ivanova, Za blokadnym koltsom, 524.
bread with sawdust in it” was all Aleksandra Petrova recalled receiving for cleaning snow off the road near the village of Merevo in the winter of 1941. According to another witness, workers chopping wood and digging trenches near the village of Sologubovka received 250 grams of bread and a portion of thin soup each day.

As elsewhere in the occupied Soviet territories, violence was a widespread method of enforcing labor discipline. In May 1942, the head of the Army Group North rear area issued an order “emphatically” banning the use of sticks and whips, a practice he deemed “unworthy of a German.” Evidently the ban did not have the desired results, as witnessed by similar reports filed later that year and in 1943 as well. Partisan intelligence reports and summaries produced by the Soviet Extraordinary Commission for investigating German crimes add to the picture, suggesting that fierce beatings, sometimes to the point of leaving victims unconscious, were a frequent occurrence. As one witness later recalled, “not a single worker managed to escape the ‘German caress’ (beating with a stick).” Vasiliy Molchanov, an eighteen-year-old wartime resident of Liuban, wrote in his diary that the German guards beat him and the other workers with rubber sticks, twigs, or their fists for even the smallest wrongdoing.

In late 1942, German authorities put numerous civilian labor camps into operation, mostly in areas close to the front where construction and repair tasks were most pressing. In one camp near Staraia Russa, an inspection found that discontent was rife, because the “recruitment” of

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95 Vinogradov and Pleitser, Bitva za Leningrad, 152.
96 Account of P. K. Fomicheva (b. 1912), in Ivanova, Za blokadnym koltsom, 462.
97 See Berkhoff, Harvest of Despair, 131–134.
101 Account of P. P. Levin, in Ivanova, Za blokadnym koltsom, 390.
102 “Dnevnik Vasiliia Molchanova,” entries of May 27, May 29, and June 4 (all 1943).
the workers had been carried out by simply rounding up people who were tilling their fields, with no advance warning. People had not even been allowed to bring along clothes other than what they were wearing. By late March 1943, people’s felt boots had been worn out; most inmates were “running around barefoot.” Most of these unwilling workers were peasants who had been given plots of land in keeping with the New Agrarian Order. They desired to return to their homes lest the plots be taken away from them and their families suffer.

German inspectors found that provisions in the camps were miserable. The portions of bread and potatoes handed out were “totally insufficient,” according to one report, for workers engaged in heavy labor such as hauling wood across marshy terrain for 10–12 hours a day.104 “Everyone is under the impression,” another report noted, “that the circumstances under which they are forced to live and work are like the conditions of convicts and criminals.”105 The pervasive shortage of clothing—including underwear and shoes—contributed further to making conditions in the camps unbearable.106

People reacted by employing tactics of avoidance and evasion. Villagers went to hide in the woods upon spotting approaching German troops, fearing that they would be sent off to Germany or to a labor camp near the front.107 Thousands who were working in road building, on railways, and for the Luftwaffe decided to depart for the villages following the announcement of the New Agrarian Order in spring 1942— their hopes high— to try


to secure a small farm for themselves. The Germans responded by issuing a regulation punishing workers taking unauthorized absence by stripping them of the right to own land. Yet the phenomenon persisted, testifying to the limits of German power and the ability of the local population to outmaneuver the purported masters of the land.

### Conclusion

More than anything, Soviet Russian peasants resented the collective farm system and the fact that the land and its fruits were at the near complete disposal of an oppressive and exploitative state. The German invasion gave rise to spontaneous decollectivization and ignited peasant hopes of land reform. The New Agrarian Order of 1942 kindled those hopes with real improvements, strengthening pro-German attitudes among the northwest Russian peasantry. At the same time, however, deportations to Germany and forced labor mobilization created major grievances and sowed doubt as to whether the Germans were a force for positive change after all. The impact of these policies was not equally heavy in all districts and villages, but their overall effect was to embitter a large part of the population.

If decollectivization was a major rupture in the life of Russian peasants, German forced labor probably felt more like business as usual. As one historian has pointed out, “an essential pre-condition of being able to perceive forced labor as a massive encroachment upon personal freedom rights is that a previous experience of ‘free labor’ has been made.” In the 1930s, peasants in northwest Russia were also liable to be deported to Siberia as “kulaks” or sent away from the farm to work for weeks and months, without pay, in logging camps or on construction projects. In this light, German forced labor measures were nothing essentially new.

Yet in some respects, such as the scale and intensity of the forced labor mobilization and the material destitution of the workers, the burdens

\[^{108}\] Wi In Nord (Gruppe I/Fü u. Org.), “Monatsbericht für die Zeit vom 1.3.-31.3.1942,” April 8, 1942, BA-MA, RH 22/289.


\[^{111}\] Fitzpatrick, Stalin’s Peasants, 133–134.
imposed on the peasants appear heavier than that was previously the case. The violence mattered as well. The experience of being beaten and humiliated in the workplace, perhaps more forceful for its happening at the hands of a foreign occupier rather than “one’s own,” surely contributed to much anti-German scorn.

Regardless of what the peasantry thought about the burdens imposed on them by the Germans, their positive experience of decollectivization was real and widespread. Moreover, other parallel developments, this time relating to the Orthodox Church, were also bringing significant change to many people’s lives. Orthodox Christianity was deeply ingrained in Russian peasant culture and traditions, and it was politically charged—peasants had used the language of religion to denounce and protest against the Stalinist assault on their way of life during the 1930s, spreading apocalyptic rumors and imagining Bolshevism as a satanic power. As we shall see in Chapter 6, the political potential inherent in the religious question was not lost on the Germans.
On August 18, 1941, fourteen Russian Orthodox priests accompanied by two German army officers travelled from Riga to Pskov. The priests formed the nucleus of the Orthodox Mission in the Liberated Regions of Russia (better known as the Pskov Orthodox Mission), a network of clergymen which by mid-1943 consisted of about 500 priests and other staff. With travel permits issued by German commanders, the missionaries traversed the occupied districts of northwest Russia, tending to the spiritual and material needs of the population. The priests soon learned that popular religiosity was alive and well, despite the Bolsheviks’ efforts to replace traditional religion with Communist ideology. Tens if not hundreds of thousands came into contact with the priests and the reopened churches. Years later, one priest would describe what took place as “the second christening of Rus.”

Orthodox Christianity had been a defining feature of traditional culture in Russia for centuries and remained so into the Stalin era. Peasant identity in particular remained closely tied to Orthodoxy, and most peasants continued to self-identify as Orthodox into the late 1930s. The Soviet government’s violent attempt to remove religion from the lives of peasants had the effect of turning the language of religion into a language of anti-Soviet protest. The resulting opportunity to win hearts and minds through the church was not lost on the German occupation authorities in northwest Russia, who allowed a religious revival to unfold.

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1 Konstantin Oboznyi, “Pravoslavnoe dukhovestvo na Pskovskoi zemle v gody nemetskoi okkupatsii (1941–1944 gg.),” in Pskov v voennoi istorii XX veka, vyp. 1 (Pskov: Pskovskii gosudarstvennyi pedagogicheskii institut, 2009), 243–244; Volkova and Fedorova, Voinoi ispepelennye goda, 448 (note 6).


3 Fitzpatrick, Stalin’s Peasants, 214.
Origins of the Pskov Orthodox Mission

The Pskov Orthodox Mission saw the light of day thanks to the efforts of Metropolitan Sergii (Voskresenskii), who by the time the Germans invaded was serving in Riga as the regional head (Exarch) of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Baltic States. Amid the chaos of German bombing and the Red Army retreat in late June 1941, Sergii went into hiding in the basement of the cathedral in Riga. A servant of the Moscow Patriarchate for fifteen years, Sergii had been sent to Latvia following the Soviet occupation in 1940. Rising to the rank of archbishop and eventually becoming the right hand of Sergii Stragorodskii (de facto head of the Russian Orthodox Church in the period 1925–1943, then Patriarch from 1943 until his death in 1944), he was an ambitious and able priest with a successful career. He managed, along with only three other patriarchal bishops, to sidestep and survive the antireligious assaults of the Stalinist government in the 1930s. Sheer luck was probably involved, but Sergii also seems to have possessed a prodigious ability to navigate difficult and dangerous political surroundings. One German official, having investigated Sergii’s background, concluded that he was “a very wise man” who had outwitted the Bolsheviks by “playing a highly sophisticated game.”

Sergii’s relationship with the German occupation authorities began when he was arrested by German police on July 1, 1941, only to be released four days later. It appears that Sergii managed to persuade his German captors that they would be politically better off by cooperating with him in his capacity as canonical Exarch of the Moscow Patriarchate than they would be by reviving the Latvian and Estonian national churches under the Patriarchate of Constantinople (whose head, at the time, was an ally of London). Sergii furthermore argued, not implausibly, that the Russian Orthodox Church under Moscow had never truly come to terms with the atheist Bolshevik regime, which had caused the church enormous

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6 M. V. Shkarovskii, *Krest i svastika: Natsistskaia Germaniia i Pravoslavnaia Tserkov* (Moscow: Veche, 2007), 322; Wassilij Alexeev and Theofanis G. Stavrou, *The Great Revival: The Russian Orthodox Church under German Occupation* (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Company, 1976), 83. The Latvian and Estonian Orthodox churches were under Constantinople’s jurisdiction until the Soviet occupation in 1940, at which time they were forced by the Bolsheviks to pledge their allegiance to the Moscow Patriarchate.
suffering and loss. His message to the Germans was that, in his capacity as representative of the suppressed Russian church in liberated territory, he had a moral imperative to call upon Russian believers to rise against the Communists. Sergii’s message resonated with local German commanders. In early July, he contacted the Army Group North command to suggest sending a group of Orthodox missionaries into the occupied districts of northwest Russia. By the middle of August, he had received the go-ahead, and fourteen priests were dispatched to Pskov on August 18, 1941, marking the birth of the Pskov Orthodox Mission.

The Mission could not have come into being without approval from the new German authorities. While the Nazi leadership did not envision upholding any significant cultural institution that embodied Russian and Slavic identity in the long run, Hitler recognized the need to temporarily come to terms with the church and make propagandistic use of it during the war against the Soviet Union. Thus, official Wehrmacht instructions on religious policy in the occupied Soviet territories stated that the national consciousness of non-Bolshevik Russians was “tied to deep religious sentiment.” The directives predicted that “joy and gratitude for the liberation from Bolshevism will often be expressed in churchly form,” and instructed Wehrmacht personnel not to disturb religious services and processions. The hands-off stance was officially confirmed in a decree issued by Hitler in late July 1941, and again in October.

General Franz von Roques, head of the German occupation administration in the Army Group North rear area, took a liberal stance on church matters. Von Roques was himself an avowed Christian, and the religious enthusiasm he observed in the occupied Russian territories seems to have made an impression on him at an early stage. By August 1941, a few weeks into the occupation, German authorities were opening churches and handing out crucifixes to the population, according to NKVD reports. In the settlement of Taitsy, German soldiers even helped restore a local church, painting walls and making crosses.

Von Roques’ approach to the Russian church was deemed too activist by the Army High Command, which ended up launching an investigation into the matter. Von Roques

7 Shkarovskii, Krest i svastika, 323.
8 Ibid., 326; Hasenclever, Wehrmacht und Besatzungspolitik, 274.
9 Müller, Deutsche Besatzungspolitik, 53.
10 Hasenclever, Wehrmacht und Besatzungspolitik, 274.
lamented after the war that his superiors had frustrated his ambitions in the field of church policy and relinquished an effective means to influence the population. Several military commanders came to share von Roques’s view during the occupation, advocating a more active exploitation of the high popular esteem enjoyed by the clergy and their antagonistic relationship to the Bolsheviks. In contrast to the case of the Reichskommissariat Ukraine, where civilian Nazi authorities increasingly obstructed church life, the military administration in northwest Russia did not impede religious revival. On the contrary, its tolerant stance was precisely what enabled the introduction and operation of such an organized effort as the Pskov Orthodox Mission.

While the Mission could not have been organized openly without German permission, it was not set up by German authorities as a propaganda structure, as some historians have argued. On the contrary, local grassroots initiatives were an important and possibly decisive driver. Even before the Mission had been established, local inhabitants began putting their churches back into operation. From Pskov in the south to the outskirts of Leningrad in the north, local priests had begun to administer religious services on their own account, before the arrival of the Mission. Metropolitan Sergii’s decision to establish the Mission appears to have been influenced by requests sent to him from people in Pskov and elsewhere in the occupied Russian territories. One of the Mission’s former psalm-singers recalled:

You know, after the Red Army retreated hundreds of thousands of people were left to their fate. The people poured into those churches that were still standing. Never before were so many tears shed and deep sighs heard inside them. People sent petitioners on foot to Pskov asking that priests be sent out.

The makeup of the Pskov Orthodox Mission also testifies to the local roots of the organization. While the leadership largely consisted of Russian émigrés to the Baltic countries, many of whom had been educated as

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priests in prerevolutionary Russia, a majority of the Mission’s clergy were local inhabitants of northwest Russia, many of them priests who had survived the antireligious terror of the 1930s. Some had spent years in forced labor camps; others had been evicted from their homes as “kulaks,” living on the margins of existence on the outskirts of villages and towns. Another part of the clergy consisted of local parishioners who were ordained during the occupation. The Mission’s rank and file was diverse in both social origin and age, consisting of peasants, workers, and intellectuals ranging from their late twenties to their late seventies.19

Rebuilding a Churchly Wasteland

As the missionaries entered the northwest Russian territories in August 1941, they found that church life had all but ceased to exist. While this region had been home to more than 1,000 working churches in 1936, by 1941 no more than a handful remained. As one of the priests, Aleksii Ionov, recalled in his memoirs, “the Soviet government had transformed the enormous area . . . into a churchly wasteland. The beautiful churches had been destroyed, desecrated, and turned into storehouses, workshops, dancing clubs, movie theatres, and archives. The repressed clergy had for the most part died in Siberian concentration camps.”20 Soon after arriving in Pskov, most of the missionaries departed again in order to carry out their work and organize church life in the districts of northwest Russia. They were issued special permits by the German authorities allowing them to travel freely and exempting them from labor duties.21 One year later, the priests had established a wide-reaching network of churchly activity, with some 220 churches put into operation.22

The activities of the Pskov Orthodox Mission were manifold. Its primary concerns were spiritual, but in order to set in motion a spiritual revival they had to establish a material and economic infrastructure. The priests set out to organize the restoration, consecration, and opening of churches and shrines (with help from, and sometimes on the initiative of, local inhabitants). For financial support, the Mission maintained a business department that administered a candle works, a church paraphernalia store, and an icon-painting workshop. Demand for candles, icons, crucifixes,

21 Oboznyi, Istoriia Pskovskoi Pravoslavnoi Missii, 415.
prayer books, and the like was large throughout the region. By October 1942, the Mission’s icon painters had refurbished the iconostases in seven churches and built a number of new ones as well. The Mission also provided parishes with wine and flour for communion, lamp oil, and building materials. The resulting income covered the salaries of the Mission’s administrative employees. The clergy, for its part, received no official salary but kept part of the voluntary contributions offered by parishioners. Of the latter, 10 percent – estimated in late 1942 at 100,000 rubles monthly – went to the Mission administration; the remainder was used to pay local churchwardens, cantors, choristers, cleaners, and janitors. By the end of 1943, the Mission was working with a surplus, which it used to educate new priests.

The missionaries worked hard to reopen schools and introduce religious education across northwest Russia. Initially and throughout the first year of the occupation, German authorities allowed religious education, which was welcomed by a large part of the population. In the Pushkinskie Gory district, one priest obtained the local German commandant’s permission to organize the opening of seventeen schools beginning in November 1941, while another missionary in the Opochka district was credited with the opening of fifteen elementary schools in May 1942. “A full Scripture course with prayers” was reportedly being taught there “at the request of the people.” The priest Aleksii Ionov recounted in his memoirs that, while attending a teachers’ conference in autumn 1942, he managed to persuade both the teachers and the local German commander that Scripture had to be taught in schools. His argument was, first, that the Russian people had always been – and still remained – religious, and second, that the local tax-paying peasantry was entitled to see their children religiously educated. Subsequently, Ionov recalled, “icons gradually appeared in all schools, prayers were said before and after lessons, and Scripture was taught twice a week.”

By August 1942, a ban on religious education had been introduced, but it did not last long. Responding to vigorous protests lodged by the

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24 Ionov, “Zapiski missionera.” The Germans also reported that the Mission intended “gradually to install icons in all school premises.” Der Chef der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD, Kommandostab, “Meldungen aus den besetzten Ostgebieten Nr. 28,” November 6, 1942, BArch, R 58/222, 12.
Mission, the German authorities, already harboring doubts about the decision, soon retracted the ban. Unlike in the Reichskommissariat Ukraine, where the teaching of religion was generally banned by mid-1942, religious education continued in many if not most schools across northwest Russia throughout the occupation, not least because of the persistent efforts of the missionaries and local priests.

Just as persistently, the priests were engaged in charity from the start. Again, this sets northwest Russia apart from the Reichskommissariat Ukraine, where church charity was not allowed. The efforts were directed at poor people, refugees from the frontline areas, and homeless children. In Pskov, the Mission established a small orphanage in autumn 1942, collecting furniture and other necessities from among the parishioners, who also contributed to securing the food supply. The German economic commander (head of the Wirtschaftskommando) in Pskov—"a great Russophile," in the eyes of one former missionary—aided the orphanage by allocating food. While the taking in of homeless children was certainly seen as an end in itself and a religious duty, the missionaries also saw an opportunity to foster and educate youngsters in the spirit of the faith. The orphanage primarily accommodated children in their early teens, "so that they can be prepared for religious-educational work among children and youth already within the next few years." The priests were looking ahead and envisioning a new postwar order in which the Orthodox Church would again flourish.

Charity efforts had an important grassroots dimension. Having conducted an audit into church accounts in Luga in March 1942, the German authorities noted that the population there was "prepared to make significant offerings despite the current state of distress," and brought in 1,000–1,500 rubles at every service. Informal Red Cross organizations and similar public aid institutions were established by priests and local inhabitants in many places throughout northwest Russia. Wherever churchly life was reestablished, the priests and

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26 Berkho, "Was There a Religious Revival," 551.
27 Ibid., 540.
29 G. Benigen to K. Zaits, October 2, 1942, GAPO, R-1633/1/3.
parishioners actively participated in relief efforts by offering money, clothes, food, and other necessities.  

German military authorities at the local level recognized in the priests a source of public welfare. In December 1941, a German commandant in Vyritsa urged a priest to collect warm clothes among his parishioners for poverty-stricken refugees. Soon, about 100 items had been gathered. This was no isolated case: According to Oleg Anisimov, the wartime head of a Riga-based welfare committee concerned with Soviet refugees and a perceptive observer of the conditions in the occupied territories, the German military authorities “as a rule” cooperated with the priests in their relief efforts.

Soviet prisoners of war were an important target of the Mission’s charity efforts. As early as August 19, 1941, the day after their arrival in Pskov, the missionaries urged the head of the Pskov-Pechersk monastery to send help to the starving POWs, which resulted in four carts arriving in Pskov carrying flour, bread, eggs, and other goods donated by the parishioners. In the town of Ostrov, the priest Aleksii Ionov organized a “Russian Red Cross” whose main efforts were directed at a local POW camp holding some 200 people. As Ionov recalled in his postwar memoirs, the organization, tolerated by local German authorities, was able to provide the prisoners with “a humane meal twice a week,” which apparently helped reduce the camp’s death rate. In other cases, particularly when the German SD (security service) was involved, charity efforts directed at POWs were blocked. When SD officers learned that Sergii Efimov, one of the Mission’s leaders, was urging locals to collect food for starving prisoners, he was removed from his post and sent back to Latvia. Aware of German hostility, in a summary of their activities presented to the SD in September 1942, the Mission’s leadership mentioned charity directed at orphans, poor people, and refugees, but remained silent about POWs. Below the German radar, the priests continued to display stubborn resilience in their efforts to help Soviet prisoners of war.

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33 Shkarovskii, Krest i svastika, 362. Ionov, “Zapiski missionera.”
34 Oboznyi, Istoria Pskovskoi Pravoslavnoi Missii, 314–315.
35 Der Chef der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD, Kommandostab, “Mitteilungsblatt Nr. 10,” September 21, 1942, BArch R 58/225.
36 On the continuing charity efforts directed at POWs, see Oboznyi, Istoria Pskovskoi Pravoslavnoi Missii, 316–318; Shkarovskii, Krest i svastika, 368; Ekaterina Loshenkova, “Tserkvi Porkhovskogo
One should not overestimate the impact of the Mission’s welfare activities. In late 1943, a German intelligence report found them “insignificant, lacking the ability to offer any greater amount of aid.” In Pskov, the Mission reportedly had an income from charity of 10,000–12,000 rubles per month; in other places, the figures were somewhat lower. Sums such as these were of limited value at a time when scarcity had sent prices soaring and bread sold for 120 rubles per kilogram. Though limited in its scope and overall effect, the priests’ charity work nevertheless imbued the Pskov Orthodox Mission with a significant material dimension that made a real difference for many of the poorest and most exposed inhabitants of northwest Russia.

A Political Mission?

Operating under permission from the German authorities, the Pskov Orthodox Mission had to navigate in a landscape of German as well as Soviet interests and demands. At the front, the war was raging between the Wehrmacht and the Red Army. In the occupied territories, a smaller war was being fought between Soviet partisans and German security forces. A psychological war was also being fought for the hearts and minds of the local population. While the pursuit of religious duty was at the core of their project, the priests inevitably also became entangled with politics and power.

The role of the Pskov Orthodox Mission as a political actor remains a heated issue among Russian historians today. Two main interpretations have emerged. While some historians accuse the Mission of submitting entirely to the occupation regime, becoming a political tool in the hands of the German security services, others see the priests as being engaged in a strictly religious endeavor, sidestepping German demands and thus avoiding complicity with Nazi crimes. Each position captures important elements of the Mission’s role, but both tend to make overly sweeping claims which result in a black-and-white picture of the Mission.
In postwar memoirs, former members of the Mission defended their reputations against allegations of treason. Consider the words of the priest Georgii Benignsen, published in 1946 after he had fled the advancing Red Army and ended up in Germany:

Our life and work under German occupation was an uninterrupted battle against the Germans for the Russian soul, for our right to serve this soul, to serve our own people who escaped one yoke only to fall under another. Today, some people wish to present our struggle as cooperation with the Fascists. God is the judge of those who want to stain our sacred and bright cause, for which some of our men, including priests and bishops, died from the bullets of Bolshevik agents; others were arrested and killed by Hitler’s Gestapo.42

Attempts by German authorities to exploit the priests for their close relationship to the local population in order to “carry out their criminal measures,” Benignsen claims, were “rigidly repulsed” by the clergy.43 In a similar vein, the missionary Aleksii Ionov, in his memoirs published in the United States in 1954–1955, denied any political collaboration with the Germans, stating that “the Mission received no instructions of any specific nature from the German authorities.”44 While the Mission cannot be reduced to a mere instrument of German power, the priests did act in ways that furthered the interests of the occupier.

The Germans encountered in the clergy, who considered the Bolshevik regime hostile and even satanic, a natural ally. By late August 1941, German intelligence officers found the priests to be “praying everywhere in the churches for the victory of the German army and even of their own accord encouraging the population to fight the partisans together with the Germans.”45 In September 1941, a priest in the village of Gortsy near Lake Ilmen delivered a sermon likening the coming of the Germans to the story of the Good Samaritan: “And so, like in the Gospel, the strangers – not our own – came to help us, and they helped us get to our feet. They have even promised to help us in the future!”46 Another sermon, delivered in Krasnogvardeisk in March 1942, went further, hailing Hitler as a benevolent master who had “stretched out his fatherly hand” to the Russians and

43 Ibid., 136. 44 Ionov, “Zapiski missionera.”
45 EM 69, August 31, 1941, in Mallmann et al., Die Ereignismeldungen, 384.
46 German translation of a sermon delivered by a priest in Gortsy, September 28, 1941, PA AA, R 60721.
destroyed the Satanic power” of Bolshevism.\(^{47}\) Having registered the prevalence of such sentiments among the clergy, some German officers reckoned that the priests should be “won over” and “shaped into propaganda activists,” given their influence upon the local population.\(^{48}\) Indeed, though the priests in the Mission were not simply converted into agents of German power, several examples suggest that, in important respects, the Mission did come to function as a vehicle for German propaganda.

For example, the priests took an active part in promoting the “New Agrarian Order” decreed by the German authorities in spring 1942. On that occasion, the Mission issued a public announcement restating the principles of the decree and encouraging peasants to receive this “message of peace” from the German government “with deep and profound gratitude.” Now that the “twenty-five-year long night” of Bolshevik rule was coming to an end, the announcement said, it was everyone’s duty to “fight as bravely as the German frontline soldiers do” in order to achieve the “rebuilding and rebirth of our homeland.”\(^{49}\) For the official launching of the New Agrarian Order on March 15, 1942, priests cooperated closely with German local authorities, including propaganda companies. After festive announcements in the towns of Krasnogvardeisk, Kingisepp, Krasnoe Selo, Liuban, Siverskaia, and Volosovo, the German agency responsible noted that these events had been well attended and attributed this partly to “the emphasis on the connection with the Church.”\(^{50}\) Other German observers lauded the priests for consistently and successfully using their influence with the local population to further the aims of the New Agrarian Order.\(^{51}\)

In the spring of 1942, the SD office in Pskov passed down instructions to the Mission requesting priests to “take enthusiastic part” in the coming anniversary celebrations of the German takeover of towns and villages, to organize religious processions, and to hold thanksgiving prayers expressing


\(^{49}\) “Aufruf der Leitung der Orthodoxen Mission an die Bevölkerung der befreiten Gebiete,” n.d. (no earlier than March 15, 1942), BA-MA, RW 31/919.


For instance, in Podgoshchi near Shimsk during the Easter of 1942, the clergy arranged a large religious feast, including thanksgiving services, in honor of the liberation from the Bolsheviks.\footnote{The priests took an active part in the anniversaries of the “liberation” in both 1942 and 1943. See Oboznyi, Istoriia Pskovskoi Pravoslavnoi Missii, 428–432.}

Were the priests cooperating willingly? One of the former missionaries, Georgii Tailov, later described the Germans as relating to the priests “in a polite but demanding way.”\footnote{V.A.A. beim AOK 16, “Betr.: Lage im Armeebereich,” July 2, 1942, PA AA, R 60724, 1.} The clergy put up little or no resistance to these demands. Very few priests gave the Germans any reason to apply violence; reports of punitive measures taken against priests are few and far between. Whether out of fear or conviction or a mixture of both, the majority of them continued to preach in a pro-German fashion. The German intelligence service kept watch over what happened in the churches through random inspections carried out by translators in civilian clothing and through a network of informants and agents recruited from among churchwardens and choristers. It would have come to German attention if the church was turning anti-German. Numerous intelligence reports from various German agencies instead testify to the contrary.\footnote{Georgii Tailov, “Vospominaniiia o. Georgiia Tailova o ego rabote v Pskovskoi pravoslavnoi missii 1941–44 gg.” Pravoslavnaiia zhizn (Orthodox Life) 51, no. 1 (2001): 10.}


Despite the political dependability of the clergy in the eyes of German authorities, there were limits to the priests’ readiness to serve German interests, and their relationship to the partisans illustrates these limits. If the missionaries were willing to hold pro-German sermons and encourage popular support for German measures such as the New Agrarian Order, they were generally reluctant or unwilling to denounce individual partisans
and their supporters. Relatively few seem to have contributed actively to the German antipartisan campaign. German authorities noted in February 1942 that “individual Russian priests” were “occasionally” providing information about partisans. The German security services wanted more, and in early 1942 they instructed the Mission leadership to distribute circulars to local priests instructing them to collect and transmit information about “unreliable persons” harboring anti-German attitudes, as well as about partisans and their helpers and sympathizers. The results, however, were ambiguous and of limited value to German antipartisan warfare. Most reports contained little or no concrete information about the partisans and their whereabouts, instead taking the shape of a general overview of popular mood.

According to Dmitrii Karov, a Russian émigré and intelligence officer with the German 18th Army during the war, most priests in the area refused to be recruited as secret agents – with some, as he saw it, “brilliant and valuable exceptions.” Laymen working in the churches – churchwardens and choristers – more often agreed to serve as agents. If the data reported by the Leningrad oblast KGB chief in February 1945 are reliable, these exceptions to the rule of non-involvement were serious enough in their consequences. According to the report, “144 Soviet patriots” engaged in anti-German work had been revealed and handed over to the German SD during the occupation “as a result of the treacherous activity of the Orthodox Mission and the clergy subordinated to it.” On the other hand, a number of priests actively assisted partisans with supplies and information, and some of them – the numbers are unclear – were executed by the Germans as a result.

Over time, church–partisan relations became more amicable. The changing nature of the partisan movement helps explain why. In the early phase of the war, the partisans were few and mostly recruited from the ranks of Communist activists and guerrillas brought in from the Soviet rear. These partisans largely considered the priests in the occupied territories to be “enemies of the people.” In the Sebezh and Idritsa districts in the

58 Oboznyi, Istoriia Pskovskoi Pravoslavnoi Missii, 440.
60 Karov, “Nemetskaia kontrrazvedka,” 17–18, 45.
62 Shkarovskii, Krest i svastika, 376–377; Ermolov, Tri goda bez Stalina, 275–276.
fall of 1942, partisans burned down churches and shot priests. Elsewhere, priests were forbidden to carry out religious work. In 1942–1943, however, the partisan movement became more popular and locally anchored. Partly as a result of this, it began to take a more conciliatory approach to the church. Another reason for the change in the partisans’ attitudes was the Soviet government’s gradual liberalization of religious policy, beginning in 1941 and culminating in September 1943 as Stalin permitted the church to take part in Soviet society once again. It even became an effective partisan tactic to change one’s attitude toward the church, as witnessed by one priest, who reported in March 1943 that partisans in some districts were responding to the revival of church life by propagating religious freedom, even issuing apologies “to God and the Russian people” on behalf of the Soviet government for the antireligious policies of previous years. “After this,” the priest noted, “people are less afraid of the partisans and are even beginning to sympathize with them.” By August 1943, partisans in certain areas were found to be attending religious services.

The church could also function as a politically neutral meeting place for Russians serving in the German auxiliary police, and other Russians who were attached to partisan units. As Dmitrii Karov recalled, in the Idritsa district there was only one church and one priest. Policemen as well as partisans wanted to marry, baptize children, and bury their dead in church. In order to avoid armed clashes, the priest appointed certain days for visits by partisans and other days for visits by auxiliary police. Meetings between the two groups did take place, however, and what developed was a kind of unofficial truce that often ended in a “general drinking party.” The church temporarily united people who would otherwise see each other as mortal enemies.

The priests’ general reluctance to denounce partisans underscores their ability to act independently of German demands and interests. How did they exercise this independence when confronted with the mass murder of Jews and Roma? German killing units murdered thousands of Jews and about 1,000 Roma in northwest Russia. In many of the localities where

64 Ibid., 109–111; Kilian, Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft, 334–335.
65 Quoted in Oboznyi, Istoriia Pskovskoi Pravoslavnoi Missii, 443.
68 See Chapter 3.
the Mission established a presence, such as Pskov, Luga, and Vyritsa, Jewish communities of up to a thousand people existed when the Germans arrived. It is highly unlikely that news of the ongoing humiliations and killings would bypass the Mission.

Yet a conspicuous silence with regard to the fate of the victims of German genocidal policies pervades the postwar memoirs of the priests. Only one of the missionaries who left published memoirs mentions the fate of the Jews at all, referring briefly to “the terrible shootings of Jews.”

Judging from archival materials and later publications about the Mission, the persecution and murder of thousands of Jews and Roma provoked no official reaction of any kind. The only known exception to this indifference is an example of active complicity by which one priest was found guilty, in a postwar trial, of having helped the Germans locate Jews and Communists in hiding. Compared to the missionaries’ persistent efforts to aid prisoners of war, orphans, and other particularly weak groups, their silence with regard to the Jews and Roma is striking and supports the conclusion of historian Yitzhak Arad: “As far as we know [the Russian Orthodox] church ignored the fate of the Jews and did not come out in their defense.”

Whether caused by acquiescence or indifference, the nonresponse to the German assault on the Jews suggests that the missionaries’ outlook contained an element of antisemitism. Hostility toward Jews could seep into the missionaries’ worldview both from political anti-Bolshevism (which commonly associated Bolshevism with Jews) and from traditional, religiously based anti-Judaism. Russia, of course, was no stranger to modern antisemitism – the first edition of the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” was published in Russia in 1903. This most notorious of modern antisemitic works circulated in the districts of northwest Russia in the interwar period. Significantly in this context, Christian groups

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69 See Benigsen, “Khristos Pobeditel,” 134. Georgii Tailov did mention Jews twice in his memoirs of the war years, but not in relation to the Holocaust: one concerns an incident in which partisans had plundered his personal belongings, including a silver cross (“the nuns watched as these young Jewesses ‘nationalized’ all these things”); the other is in regard to the director of the Pushkin Museum in Mikhailovskoe (“he, a Jew, had run away with the retreating Red Army”). Tailov, “Vospominaniiia,” 7, 13.


were found to be responsible for spreading antisemitic and Nazi propaganda in the region in the late 1930s.\textsuperscript{72}

While navigating German demands, the priests were attempting to strengthen their position as bearers of Russian national traditions and identity. In this field, the Mission was independently political, which unnerved German security services, wary that a reinvigorated national pride could fuel popular anti-German resistance. Sensing the suspicious attention of the German authorities, many priests found ways to express attitudes of Russian patriotism concealed in a religious wrapping. As Oleg Anisimov observed:

In the absence of an independent Russian press, the priests were often the only mouthpieces of the national aspirations of the population. The German-controlled press was not allowed to speak of Russia’s national greatness, but the priests could mention it and even exalt it, by weaving political themes into religious texts. And many of them did so.\textsuperscript{73}

While German authorities took the preaching of Russian patriotism to be a political action with anti-German implications, the priests and the laity did not necessarily make the same connection. Russian patriotism could be reconciled with tolerance of the German presence if the latter were understood as a means to rid Russia of the Bolshevik regime of militant atheism. In this sense, the priests stood for an anti-Soviet kind of Russian patriotism.

A fiery exposition of a religiously based anti-Soviet patriotism appeared in the Mission’s official publication, the \textit{Pravoslavnyi Khristianin}. In the September/October 1942 issue, an article entitled “To the Russian Patriot – the True Son of the Holy Orthodox Church” began by explaining why the Russian Orthodox people had been suffering under “the curse of God that has weighed down on Rus for a quarter of a century.” The answer was that the Russians had sinned: They had “committed a terrible crime” by letting Orthodox Russia collapse into ruins and by replacing it with “a Tower of Babel with the blasphemous and shameful nickname of USSR.” Yet this Bolshevik Tower of Babel would not remain standing: “Not fortresses, nor weapons, nor tanks, nor airplanes, nor partisans in the rear, nor millions of victims at the front, nor any other kind of support – nothing will keep the Bolshevik tower from falling apart, because it was built on a fundament of lies and deceit, it was reinforced with the cement

\textsuperscript{72} Viola, \textit{Peasant Rebels under Stalin}, 53; Fitzpatrick, \textit{Stalin’s Peasants}, 294.

\textsuperscript{73} Anisimov, \textit{The German Occupation}, 24.
The Popular Response

Former priests typically stressed the depth of popular piety at the time. Their accounts give the impression that people responded to their overtures with gratitude and enthusiasm, actively coming forth to participate in the religious revival. As one priest, who had served as cantor in the town of Gdov during the occupation, evocatively wrote in a letter to the Metropolitan of Leningrad, Aleksii, in early 1944:

In my days as cantor and psalm singer in the city of Gdov I experienced all sorts of popular currents. I can inform you that the Russian completely changed as soon as the Germans appeared. Ruined churches were re-erected, church utensils were crafted, sacred vestments were brought in from wherever they had been preserved, and churches were built and repaired. Everything was painted. Peasants placed clean, embroidered towels over the icons. There was much joy and consolation. When everything was ready a priest was invited to consecrate the church. Such joyous events took place during this period that I cannot even describe it. People forgave each other. Children were baptized. There was a real celebration; Russian peasants were celebrating, and I felt that the people here were seeking consolation.76

75 Ibid.
Another priest described the efforts of local inhabitants to clean up, refurbish, and prepare the newly opened churches for services as “literally a miracle.” The priests were approached by locals offering donations and various forms of help, including building materials for the churches, liturgical articles, vestments, books, and sheet music that had been hidden for years, buried in the ground or concealed in walls. Local initiatives were numerous: As soon as the priests reached Pskov, they began receiving invitations to hold services in churches outside the city. As the word spread, people from more distant districts began appearing in Pskov as well, often having made long journeys on foot, to request that priests be dispatched to tend to the faithful in their home villages. “When we arrived in Pskov,” one missionary recalled, “people were walking by on their way to church with tears in their eyes. During the first mass in the cathedral all the worshipers made their confession. It seemed to us as if the priests had not come to strengthen the people, rather the people were strengthening the priests.” The missionaries’ arrival coincided with one of the great feasts of the Orthodox Church, the Transfiguration. The large Trinity Cathedral in Pskov, which held several thousand, was filled to capacity, and a steady stream of people approached the priests to receive blessings for themselves and their children, to be anointed with holy oil, and to make confession. In Ostrov, the story was similar: After the dilapidated cathedral (which the Bolsheviks had turned into a granary) had been repaired and reopened, up to 800 people at a time appeared for services, often filling the pews long before the service began. “The people yearned to pray,” one priest recounted. “They yearned to repent. There was much human pain, and it had to be overcome. The churches were overcrowded: there were tears, prayers, lamentations. That’s how mass proceeded. People prayed fervently.”

Postwar accounts by former priests are clearly biased in favor of popular piety and the priests’ positive reception. This emphasis was a way for them to fend off charges of collaboration with Nazi Germany. “We were not collaborators,” one reads between the lines of their accounts, “we were simply following our spiritual calling; we were there for the Russian people who needed us.” Nevertheless, the priests’ stories of popular participation

Figure 6.1 1942: Cross procession in northwest Russia.
Source: RGAKFD, 3/261/52

Figure 6.2 1942: Cross procession in a northwest Russian village.
Source: Novyi Put, October 1, 1942
in church life are corroborated by many different sources. In mid-August, German observers found the local population to be attending religious services “almost without exception.” People had taken religious icons out of their hiding places and put them up on their walls, and many were even attempting to attend Wehrmacht services, both Roman Catholic and Protestant. Religious processions gathered thousands of people. Parents brought their children to church for baptism in large numbers. The administering of marriages, funerals, and other ceremonies was in great demand. In July 1943, German officers found that in the remote village of Kudever, where the clergy had still not established a presence, some 400 children had been baptized and 1,800 confessions made in the course of a three-day visit by a priest from a neighboring district.

German intelligence reports speak unanimously of a great upsurge of popular religious feeling and participation beginning in August 1941. The reports suggest that religious participation in northwest Russia was widespread and of a popular character throughout the whole period of occupation, right up to the very end.

Besides popular piety (the more popular since the most atheist segment of society – party and state functionaries and young men in general – had been evacuated or drafted), much of the religious upsurge stemmed from the harsh and uncertain conditions of everyday life during wartime, which gave rise to a need for spiritual shelter and consolation. The church became a space for sharing grief and pain. As the priest Georgii Benigsen recalled, people were eager to “open up their hearts” and “lose their false shame for one another” during prayers and confessions, because not only had the Bolsheviks claimed victims in almost every family but the war with...
Germany was also taking its painful toll. On the same note, Aleksii Ionov remembered a mass held in Ostrov in October 1941 during the Intercession feast:

All the people – “Soviet” people – sing in a local and beautiful chant . . . People kneel and kiss the icons, they come forth to be anointed, and I hear how the singing is interrupted by crying and sobbing. What are the Russian people crying for on this joyous feast? With joy, since the celebration has come at last? Or do they remember the pastors who served in this church long before me and who perished in prison? Or do they recall their close ones arrested and deported to concentration camps in the far north?

The church became an important grieving space in the occupied territories, resembling a similar wartime development on the other side of the front. Before the war, as Dmitrii Shostakovich wrote in his memoirs, publicly mourning the victims of Stalinist terror was too dangerous: “One had to cry silently . . . Nobody must notice it. Everybody was afraid of everyone. Grief choked, strangled us.” The war, however, changed everything, so that “the secret, isolated grief became everyone’s grief. One was allowed to talk about it, one could cry openly, openly mourn for the dead. People needed no longer to be afraid of their tears.”

The popular response to church revival was also a political response. The reopening of the churches enhanced the legitimacy of German rule in the eyes of many faithful. The following scene provides a telling example: In October 1941, inhabitants of the Leningrad suburb of Slutsk approached the German commandant and requested that the town be given back its prerevolutionary name of Pavlovsk, which was duly approved. The renaming was announced in connection with a church holiday, which proved a great success. The church was “overflowing with people,” and believers reportedly came forward to thank “the true Christian Adolf Hitler” for “free[ing] the city from Satan and his helpers.” In another dramatic manifestation of the political potential of religious revival, people in the town of Taitsy removed portraits of Lenin and Stalin from a recently reopened church and set fire to them.

Besides symbolizing the removal of the Bolshevik regime, the revived church appealed to many people, especially the young, as a symbol of

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90 Quoted in Bonwetsch, “War as ‘Breathing Space’,” 145–146.
92 Shkarovskii, “Tserkov zovet.”
national identity and tradition. Despite the Soviet state’s efforts to the contrary, Russian Orthodoxy remained a paramount feature of what it meant to be Russian, especially (but not exclusively) among the peasantry. The account of one wartime resident of Pskov demonstrates how close the connection between religious and national identity could be: “Everything was new for us. We learned how to participate in church services, together we memorized the Orthodox calendar’s religious holidays. We realized that we were Russians, that is, Orthodox, like our forefathers were. This was our small spiritual brotherhood.” The church as a symbol of Russianness probably contributed to an increasing tendency of Russian national identification in the occupied territories in 1942–1943.

Not everyone offered the priests a hearty welcome. “Elderly people received us with tears of joy in their eyes,” recalled one of the missionaries. Youths and children, on the other hand, “at first looked at us as if stupefied. Most of them were looking at a real-life priestly figure for the first time in their lives, having until then seen them only in the shape of caricatures and cartoons in anti-religious publications.” But there was no universal dismissal of the priests among the young. German officials often noted that youngsters were turning up for services and church events alongside the older generations. Some of the priests successfully organized evangelical study groups for younger people. According to Aleksii Ionov, the demand for such groups at the time greatly exceeded his capacity. A January 1943 report by one of the priests suggested that religious lessons were highly popular among children as well as parents:

At the teachers’ conference on 30 January 1943 it was unanimously decided that religion will be taught in schools, because parents and the pupils themselves demand it. Yesterday the mother of an eight-year old girl told me that the girl would not go to school unless there were religious

96 See Chapter 8.
99 Ionov, “Zapiski missionera.”
lessons ... Pupils in the Piatchino village are so interested that they stay behind after class, asking the teacher to tell them bible stories. The same is reported by teachers in Brovsk, Kirikovo, and Ostrov. The fact that the 100 prayer books that I picked up in Pskov were sold out immediately at one school in Strugi may serve as evidence.\(^{100}\)

Some people, of course, were hostile or indifferent to the church. Years of Soviet antireligious propaganda had left its mark: “Bolshevik-influenced segments of the population, particularly worker circles,” one German report noted, resisted the priests’ overtures.\(^{101}\) Many of the faithful, too, probably rejected the priests for their willingness to pray for a German victory, because they recognized the destructive nature of German rule or because their loved ones were fighting in the Red Army.\(^{102}\)

Others saw a survival tactic in identifying as a believer. According to Georgii Tailov, some peasants stole icons from a nearby church following the German invasion and put them up in their homes in order to conceal their antireligious persuasions.\(^{103}\) Similarly, Aleksii Ionov recalled an encounter with a peasant who was wearing a self-made cross around his neck made out of Soviet coins. The peasant, displaying no particular interest in the priests, explained his reason for wearing the cross: “So that the Germans don’t take me for a Communist.” Such dissimulation, Ionov later learned, was quite widespread and may partly explain German observations of icons adorning the corners of peasant huts.\(^{104}\) By spring 1942 a powerful rumor had spread throughout the countryside that the Germans would “love and spare” people who displayed icons in their homes.\(^{105}\) This rumor was certainly reinforced by another, similar one, rooted in real German practice, which said that the Germans were rounding up and murdering Communists.\(^{106}\)


\(^{103}\) Tailov, “Vospominaniia,” 6–7.


\(^{105}\) During “mass agitation work” in unoccupied districts of the Leningrad region in March and April 1942, a group of party activists was repeatedly asked by local peasants whether it was true that the Germans treated people with icons in their homes more favorably. “Otchet za period s 27.3 po 23.4.42,” April 25, 1942, TsGAIPD Spb, 24/2d/47, 13.

\(^{106}\) Vinogradov, *Okkupatsiia*, 168.
Conclusion

The revival of the church restored an important dimension to the lives of people in northwest Russia. The simple ability to freely engage in religious practice again brought relief to large parts of the population. Churchgoers found shelter and consolation within the walls of a sacred space where the harshness of war and occupation gave way to choral singing, burning incense, and beautiful icons. The widespread participation in church life was a testament to the resilience of popular religiosity and a product of prewar and wartime suffering and uncertainties.

The activities of the Pskov Orthodox Mission were political as well as spiritual, and they helped stabilize the German occupation regime. Priests delivered pro-German thanksgiving services and sermons, prayed for Hitler’s victory, encouraged people to follow German orders, and sometimes, more fatefuly, assisted German security services in their hunt for partisans. They did not do so just because the Germans forced them to. Being more than negatively disposed toward the Bolsheviks in the first place, many of the priests considered it a moral duty to aid what they saw as a righteous struggle against the atheist Communist regime. In short, the priests were independently anti-Bolshevik. Although their pro-German stance had its limits, the majority willingly encouraged the population to support the German war effort. No evidence indicates that the priests and the Mission ever tried to undermine the German order. On the contrary, German officers became more and more convinced that the church was a reliable ally in the struggle for Russian hearts and minds. Even as late as April 1944, when the German retreat from northwest Russia had been underway for months, some priests were praising German rule in their sermons.¹⁰⁷

The priests appealed to a popular sense of Russian patriotism in their capacity as bearers of the thousand-year-old tradition of Orthodoxy, a patriotism which for obvious reasons had anti-Soviet implications. Yet churchly patriotism could easily be turned against the German authorities as more and more people came to realize that Nazi Germany was an even greater destroyer of Mother Russia than Bolshevism had been. Consider the example of Vasilii Molchanov, the son of a priest, who blended

¹⁰⁷ Der Vertreter des Reichsministeriums für die besetzten Ostgebiete beim Oberkommando der Heeresgruppe Nord, “Betr.: Haltung und Lage der russischen Bevölkerung im Bereich der Heeresgruppe Nord,” April 14, 1944, BArch, R 6/75.
anti-German, religious, and Russian patriotic themes in his diary entries of 1943. Notably, the words “Soviet” or “Bolshevik” stand out by their absence:

[How I wish for] the return of everything genuine, of everything Russian. The time will come, in any event, when these cursed Germans will be driven out, they will have to pay with their own lives for the profanation of our Russian land ... Lord! Avenge, strike these violators of the Russians with Your wrath ... I am completely certain that the Lord will not allow this humiliation of the Russians.  

In the end, the Pskov Orthodox Mission’s project to carve out a Russian Orthodox space in the occupied territories was quite successful. The missionaries achieved a great deal with limited means: They helped bring about a popular religious revival, opening more than 200 churches and offering relief and spiritual solace to a large part of the population. In doing so, they also paved the way for church life to exist into the late 1950s. Many of the churches opened during the occupation continued to operate after the war, and while many of the Mission’s priests fled west or ended up in the Gulag, dozens continued to serve in the churches.  

As the Soviet government disintegrated in the weeks following the German invasion, people in northwest Russia faced the prospect of a new social and political order under the Germans. Yet Soviet power did not cease to exist, instead continuing to challenge German rule in one way or another. Many expected the Soviet state to collapse, but it did not: Moscow and Leningrad remained in Soviet hands, and the Red Army kept on fighting. In the occupied territories Soviet power continued to exert itself in two ways: concretely through the activities of partisans and other Soviet agents, and abstractly by way of the perceived possibility and expected consequences of the Red Army returning and reestablishing Bolshevik rule. The people of northwest Russia thus faced not only the demands of the new German regime, but also continuing and often violent efforts by the Soviet state to uphold its authority in the occupied lands. What characterized popular political attitudes and behavior in this changing terrain of power?

Studies of civilian populations under foreign occupation have commonly analyzed power relationships through the prisms of collaboration and resistance. In the context of European struggles with Nazi Germany, however, the terms “collaboration” and “resistance” are so heavily charged with retrospective value judgments—tied as they are to notions of treason and heroism—that they complicate attempts to account for the terms of involvement as perceived by individuals at the time. I therefore propose a different conceptual approach, namely to think about acts that would

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Participation in Local Governance

In Hitler’s vision for the future, Soviet Russia would cease to exist as a sovereign political entity and the country would be split up into German colonial dominions. Accordingly, there could be no talk of a Russian government à la Vichy. For the time being, however, the Germans had neither the manpower nor the local knowledge to effectively rule, administer, and exploit the vast conquered territories on their own. Because the Soviets had dismantled most of the local administrative apparatus in the weeks following the invasion, evacuating party and state officials as well as destroying or removing local archives, the German authorities set out to rebuild a system of local government.

The structure of the new local administration largely corresponded to its Soviet predecessor. It had four basic units: district (raion or uezd), town, subdistrict (volost), and village. On the village or kolkhoz level, the village elder (starosta) was in charge. The volost, usually corresponding to the prewar rural soviet, was led by the district elder (starshina), who was in turn subordinated to the district head (raionnyi nachalnik). Mayors of towns were appointed and subordinated to the district head, or, if the population exceeded 10,000, placed directly under the German commandant.\(^1\) District heads and starshiny were usually appointed from among the

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intelligentsia – specialists with local knowledge such as agronomists, engineers, rural soviet chairmen, and teachers. While some village elders were appointed by German authorities, usually the Germans left the decision to the village communities. In the Porkhov district of about 930 villages, for instance, village elders had for the most part been elected by the population before the Germans arrived. Soviet partisans, too, reported that village elders were being elected.

Village and district elders, starosty and starshiny, had been used in the local government of Tsarist Russia before the Bolsheviks replaced them with kolkhoz and rural soviet chairmen. The German introduction of prerevolutionary designations was meant to symbolize a break with the Soviet past. Yet this reversion to pre-Soviet times was sometimes contradicted by continuity in terms of personnel. The Germans, perhaps surprisingly, did not shy away from employing Communists as higher-ranking representatives of the local administration, as long as they had been thoroughly inspected with regard to political reliability. On the village level, the former kolkhoz chairman would often remain in his post. For peasants, selecting the former kolkhoz chairman as village elder could help to ensure at least some degree of predictability under otherwise uncertain conditions of war and occupation.

Some village communities tried to secure a measure of autonomy by deliberately selecting the “village idiot” as their elder. This tactic was hardly new: Nineteenth-century peasants had done the same in order to defend

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4 Kovalev, Kollaborationism v Rossi, 142.
5 “Administrativnoe ustroisto v gorodakh i raionakh Leningradskoi oblasti, vremenno zakhvychnykh fashistam,” n.d. [late 1941], GANINO, 260/1/102, 7–9; Kovalev, Kollaborationism v Rossi, 144.
7 Note by OK I(V) 862 (Porchow), March 23, 1942, BA-MA, RH 23/298, 59.
8 See, for example, Sekretar Polnovskogo RK VKP(b), “Politicheskie meropriiatiia nemetskogo komandovaniia,” December 18, 1941, TsGALP SPb, 0–116/2/7, 79; “Administrativnoe ustroisto v gorodakh i raionakh Leningradskoi oblasti, vremenno zakhvychnykh fashistam,” n.d. [late 1941], GANINO, 260/1/102, 10.
their independence against Tsarist encroachments. In 1941 this practice resurfaced, as witnessed in the village of Merevo:

We selected [the village elder] ourselves. We called a gathering and chose one who would be more stupid, a worse one. We elected Uncle Vanya Baranchik [baranchik meaning “little sheep”]. This is a nickname, his surname being Baranov. People said: “Pick Ivan, you won’t get anything meaningful out of him anyway.” “Well, Baran it is!” And so we chose him.

Intravillage conflicts rooted in the history of collectivization and dekulakization often complicated the elections. In the 1930s, thousands of “kulak” families had been evicted from their homes and resettled within their home district or region. With Soviet power gone, many of these people now returned to their native villages, where they would often be obvious candidates, from the German point of view, for the post of village elder. Villagers who had participated in or benefited from dekulakization, on the other hand, would naturally be less inclined to endorse such a candidate. Consider the account of Aleksei Fedorov, whose father served as kolkhoz chairman in the village of Zaitsevo (Pskov district) before the war:

Now [soon after the German arrival] the so-called unreliable ones began to return – people who talked a lot [mnogo boltali], and who were deported for that reason to beyond the 101st kilometer. Our men approached father and requested him to continue heading the village, since they feared that the Germans might appoint some of these returnees as village elder.

Probably only a minority of villages continued to be run by their former kolkhoz chairmen, given that large parts of northwest Russia were teeming with formerly repressed peasants. In the districts of Kingisepp, Volosovo, Osmino, Liady, Krasnogvardeisk, Slutsk, Tosno, and others, a majority or even virtually all of the population consisted of dispossessed and disenfranchised people and their close kin. Such peasant victims of Soviet repression

12 Account of A. I. Petrova (b. 1914), in Vinogradov, Okkupatsiia, 152.
13 The expression refers to the Soviet practice of exiling political undesirables by banning them from living within 101 kilometers of urban centers.
15 Lomagin, Neizvestnaia blokada (vol. 1), 525; “Doklad troiki Starorusskogo raiona Leningradskoi oblasti o rabote v naselennykh punktakh osvobozhdemykh Krasnoi Armiei,” January 18, 1942, TsGAIPD SPb, 0–116/12/199, 4–7.
would presumably select one of “their own” as their village elder, leading to a further desovietization of the countryside.  

The local government was intended to act as an extension of the German occupation administration. Village elders, the most numerous intermediaries between German authorities and the population, were tasked with manifold duties, including keeping an eye out for Red Army soldiers and partisans, organizing a local police force, and making sure that agricultural delivery quotas were met. Yet the local government officials were not simply German puppets carrying out their prescribed duties. It would be too facile to ascribe to them the status of “collaborators.” Clearly the German authorities desired to keep the Russian officials on a tight leash, using them as an instrument for pacification and exploitation, but whether they achieved this in practice is an empirical question.

The local officials possessed Eigensinn. In other words, when relating to German power they often had other ends in mind than those pursued by the Germans, such as safeguarding their own personal interests, those of their families, and those of their communities. The space for such autonomy was broader at the lower administrative levels. Unlike the district heads, who frequently met with their German commanders, village elders were largely removed from the centers of power and seldom met personally with their superiors. To the extent that the Germans lacked the means to control day-to-day village affairs, local officials were able to harness German power to pursue their own ends.

The village elders and other local officials used their autonomy in different ways. Some strove to protect their communities or particularly exposed individuals, even at great personal risk, as in the case of helping to hide or conceal the identity of Jews. Others were more eager to execute the will of the occupiers. As Oleg Anisimov saw it, those Russian officials

In his study of the Ukrainian Vinnitsya region, Amir Weiner argues that a “profound sovietization of the countryside” took place during the war, partly driven by popular peasant opposition to returning kulaks and other “former people” favored by German authorities. While this theory might be true for Vinnitsya, it hardly seems valid for northwest Russia. Weiner, Making Sense of War, 303–307.

Note on the duties of village elders, November 1941, TsGAIPD SPb, 0–116/2/16, 60; Raionnaia Komendatura (Luga), “Ukazanie prav i obiaznosti burgomistrov i predstavitelei pomestii,” n.d. [early 1942], TsGAIPD SPb, 0–116/2/16, 149, 149bs; Kovalev, Kollaborationism v Rossii, 145.

As does Kovalev, Kollaborationism v Rossii, 141. Jürgen Kilian, too, seems to put too much faith in the ability of German officers to control the village chiefs. Kilian, Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft, 166.

Note on the duties of village elders, November 1941, TsGAIPD SPb, 0–116/2/16, 60; OK I/(V) 862 (Porchow), note on administration, March 23, 1942, BA-MA, RH 23/298, 59+bs.

See Chapter 3.
who used their power to look after their own “were regarded by the population as benefactors rather than as traitors, [while] those who showed too much zeal in serving the Germans were despised, if not hated.”

This observation chimes with personal testimonies of wartime experiences in the countryside. In most accounts, a clear dividing line separates the “good” and the “bad” village elders. The good ones were praised for deeds such as withholding grain deliveries (for instance by falsely claiming that the village had been plundered by partisans) or warning inhabitants of imminent German actions such as forced labor roundups and antipartisan raids.

Tamara Troitsyna, who spent the war years in the village of Zapishene, recalled how the starosta helped her family:

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How he helped us! We would not have survived if not for him. Mama had six children – one smaller than the next! [Because of him,] we delivered nothing of what we cultivated to the Germans. You had to give such-and-such an amount of grain to the Germans. Mama said to [the village elder]: “How can I give [the Germans] anything? God help me feed this horde!” And so the village elder covered us, because we were his own people [prikeyval nas, potomu chto my – svoi]. He went and found a way out, so that it looked as if we had delivered.
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In other words, local government officials could be guided by low-level community loyalties as well as larger political loyalties. They could even function as “switch points of power,” using their position to neutralize the forces emanating from German authorities and policies. Succeeding with such behavior required manipulative skill, which many Soviet citizens possessed – experienced as they were in dealing with the extensive claims of Soviet power in the prewar years. Incompetence on the part of the Germans also enabled local officials to use their power in ways not intended by their superiors. Anisimov found that many German officers, especially those who spoke no Russian and lacked

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22 On withholding grain deliveries, see Dzeniskevich et al., *V tylu vraga* (1942), 206–207; Petrov, *Partizanskoe dvizhenie*, 125. See also Nachalnik Novorhezkogo raiona, note on grain deliveries, October 27, 1942, TsGAPD SPb, 0–116/2/6, 518, in which the Novorhez district head chides his subordinate district elders for not delivering the set quotas and expresses doubt as to their excuses (“many district elders assume that they are justified by all sorts of references to partisans”).
translators, were “for all practical purposes completely dependent on the Russian administration under [their] orders.”

The image of local officials protecting their communities by derailing German force needs to be nuanced. Many of them harnessed the power of their positions to protect certain people and families while harming others. Village communities in Soviet Russia were often marked by disunity, and conflict characterized the Russian countryside in the aftermath of collectivization. Village elders could and often did wield the power vested in them to settle old accounts, harming or disposing of enemies in the village, taxing certain households disproportionately, or denouncing people as Communists, anti-German agitators, or partisan helpers. Denunciations were not without risk for the denouncer, however, because German authorities sometimes investigated them thoroughly. A false denouncer risked being deposed and imprisoned or sent to a forced labor camp.

Naturally, the village elder himself would also be vulnerable to denunciations by the villagers. He had much to fear both from the Germans and, as we shall see below, the partisans. His best bet would be to behave as fairly and evenhandedly as possible to keep the village peace. A more cohesive village community probably stood a better chance than others of emerging unharmed from the war years, as illustrated by the account of Valentina Ilin, a wartime inhabitant of a village in the Pskov region:

It is good that people in our village were united and harmonious, like one family. This saved us. For instance, in another village there were both partisan families and politsai [auxiliary police] families. They denounced each other. One night partisans came and shot many of these traitors. Then the Germans decided to carry out a demonstrative act of reprisal. For this they gathered people from all the surrounding villages and hanged many of them.

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26 According to Sheila Fitzpatrick, “[a] spirit of free-floating malice seems to have hovered over the Russian village throughout the 1930s.” See Fitzpatrick, *Stalin’s Peasants*, 233–261 (quotation at 233).
27 “Doklad troiki Starorusskogo raiona Leningradskoi oblasti o rabote v naselennykh punktakh osvobozhdaemykh Krasnoi Armiei,” January 18, 1942, TsGAIPD SPb, 0–116/12/199, 4–7.
Clearly, a well-grounded fear of death limited the space for autonomous action. The Germans usually did not hesitate to execute officials found to be subverting their interests. Customary obedience, being used to life in an authoritarian society, also kept local officials in line. Many of them simply continued to function in the same way as before the war. The day-to-day activities of rural soviet chairmen in the 1930s, which consisted of “running around the countryside collecting taxes and self-taxation, forcing people to go out for wood, [and] seeing that compulsory labor obligations were carried out,” were not very different from the way in which Russian self-government officials worked during the occupation. Not least, many simply endorsed the German view that Bolshevism should be destroyed and were more than willing to play by the German rules to further that aim.

While local officials were often able to carve out spaces for action beyond and even contrary to German intentions and interests, subverting or harnessing German power for their own ends, on the whole they still clearly played a supportive role. Had they consistently worked against the German regime, the Germans would have found out. But as Wehrmacht officials on the ground saw it, the opposite was the case. As long as partisan activity remained low, Russian self-government was typically described as working “unobjectionably almost everywhere, contributing substantially to pacification and the reactivation of the economy and public life,” indicating that the local government indeed functioned as an indispensable pillar of support, freeing up German resources for the larger war effort.

**Policing the Province: Auxiliary Police and Antipartisan Forces**

Initially, the Nazi leadership had no intention of recruiting indigenous Soviets, and certainly not Russians, for police services. As Hitler stated in

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31 Fitzpatrick, *Stalin’s Peasants*, 175.

mid-July 1941, “It can never be allowed that any other than a German carries a weapon!” His admonition that Slavs and other non-Germans must remain unarmed soon came to nothing under the pressure of military circumstances. The expected swift victory over the Soviet Union failed to materialize, and weakened frontline units soon had to be reinforced by rear-area troops, which resulted in personnel shortages in the occupied territories. In this context, the use of local manpower for rear-area policing and security tasks became unavoidable.

At first, Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian police and antipartisan units were set up, partly under Wehrmacht supervision and partly under the local Einsatzkommandos of the SS/SD. Volunteer recruits from the Baltic countries, Estonians and Latvians in particular, made up a substantial part of the security forces operating in northwest Russia. Some of them went into Russia from their home countries with the purpose of helping the Germans in the fight against Bolshevism, while others were recruited from among Red Army deserters, prisoners of war, and the local northwest Russian population. By February 1942, close to 7,000 Baltic volunteers served in the various security forces in the Army Group North area, and in many cases, Estonian personnel greatly outnumbered Germans. Being well regarded as a “race” in the Nazi view, the Baltic volunteers were accorded preferential treatment, receiving much better pay and more privileges compared to their Russian colleagues. They were easy to recruit, their motivation fueled by a desire for revenge for what they felt “the Russians” had done to their homelands in 1940–1941. Their zeal frequently translated into acts of violence. “The savage behavior of the Estonian security units towards the population and their property,” as one German report noted in April 1942, had become a cause for official concern. “The Estonians,” the report went on, “are apparently, in part, waging a war on their own account.”

According to another contemporary

33 Pohl, Die Herrschaft, 173.
35 Kovalev, Kollaborationizm v Rossii, 19.
37 Kilian, Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft, 174.
38 For instance, by summer 1943, ten Germans and fifty-three Estonians made up the staff in four of the SD field offices in northwest Russia. Ibid., 178–179.
observer, many Estonians “nourished a wild hatred [of the Russians] and a burning desire to take revenge for what the Estonian population had to go through under Soviet occupation.” In the Vyritsa, Tosno, and Oredezh districts, Russian inhabitants reportedly approached partisans from the Soviet rear to request protection against the Estonian police forces.41

Gradually, Russians were taken into armed German service as well. The first armed groups of Russian volunteers appeared during the initial weeks and months of the occupation and had a distinct grassroots character. They formed spontaneously during the power vacuum between the Soviet withdrawal and the German arrival as self-defense groups armed with guns picked up from fallen soldiers.42 Evidently, many of these groups were set up to guard against partisan assaults. As one witness recalled in her memoirs, “detachments of youngsters wanting to defend their villages against the partisans” sprang up in the countryside around Pskov.43

Spontaneously formed groups were replaced by (or turned into) official units by late 1941, as German commanders’ requests to allow the use of armed Russian auxiliaries in order to counter emerging partisan threats were heeded.44 Higher military officials somewhat grudgingly allowed the use of armed Russian volunteers, imposing some limitations. For instance, Russians were not to carry automatic weapons. Yet official distrust dissipated at the local level: Many German commanders trusted their Russian volunteers and quietly allowed the use of automatic weapons and machine guns.45 Other German commanders tricked their higher-ups so as to bring more Russian auxiliaries under their orders simply by declaring them to be “Ingermanlandians” or “Ukrainians.”

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41 Karov, “Russkaia politiia,” 49. Popular fear of the Estonian auxiliaries shines through in many post-Soviet witness accounts. See, for example, the accounts of V. I. Mitroshkin (b. 1927) in Ivanova, Za blokadnym koltsom, 215, and M. I. Zverinskaia (b. 1923) in Vinogradov, Okkupatsiia, 124. On the Estonian relationship to the German occupiers in the context of the Holocaust, see Anton Weiss-Wendt, Murder without Hatred: Estonians and the Holocaust (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009).


43 Pirozhkova, Moi tri zhizni, 170.


45 Karov, “Nemetskaia kontrrazvedka,” 85.

46 Karov, “Russkaia politiia,” 2 (in “The organization of the police from the end of 1941 until 1942”).
The auxiliary police forces were entrusted with more and more duties as time went by, resulting not only from the weakening of German rear-area troops, but also from an increasing German conviction that the local police were managing their tasks efficiently. They collected taxes, carried out house searches and passport controls, registered inhabitants, investigated minor criminal offenses, enforced curfews, and made arrests. They also monitored public marketplaces; fought against secret homebrewing and speculating; escorted prisoners; patrolled roads and railroads; guarded granaries, storehouses, and other important objects; and helped recruit or round up civilians for labor in Germany. They also were supposed to make up a network of informants, reporting to their superiors about anti-German attitudes and behavior among the local population.

Clearly, the police recruits were not simply engaged in the general upkeep of law and order in the localities, but also participated – or were caught up – in the larger ideological war waged by Nazi Germany against Jews and Bolshevism. The policemen were under orders to reveal and arrest Jews, Communists, Komsomol members, and people with pro-Soviet attitudes, and in general, as one set of service instructions stated, “to wage a merciless war against all adversaries of the regime established by the Germans.” A number of them ended up participating in acts of mass murder.

The roles of the auxiliary policemen were not limited to those assigned to them by the Germans. As in the case of local government officials, practice was not always consonant with regulations. Some harnessed the power of their position (and their guns, if they had any) for purposes of self-enrichment, exploiting their knowledge of fellow villagers and their backgrounds to avoid being held responsible. As Tamara Tetiaeva, a wartime inhabitant of a village close to Idritsa, later recalled:

The policemen behaved very brutally ... For instance, they completely robbed our family. And not only our family. Rural inhabitants were left without horses, without cattle, without anything ... The policemen were locals, they knew us, they knew that my father was in the [Red Army], that [my family] were all Communists. True, they did not report this to the Germans, but the policemen themselves knew it perfectly well and they

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47 Dmitrii Zhukov and Ivan Kovtun, Ruskaia politsiia (Moscow: Veche, 2010), 64–65; Hasenclever, Wehrmacht und Besatzungspolitik, 228; Karov, “Russkaia politsiia,” 8–9 (in “The organization of the police from the end of 1941 until 1942”).
48 Zhukov and Kovtun, Ruskaia politsiia, 96.
behaved accordingly towards us. That is why they came and took everything, they knew that we would not complain.49

On the other hand, armed policemen also wielded their power as a means to defend themselves, their homes and hearths, or their families and loved ones from constantly looming threats of harm and death. Indeed, many armed units had come into being as ways to defend localities against outside violence. Moreover, village police were sometimes in a position to derail German punitive actions and rescue fellow villagers by sabotaging German measures, although this, clearly, carried great risk.50

Sometimes a single village was the home of both partisan fighters and auxiliary policemen, which could have a divisive and destructive effect if the respective families denounced each other. But at other times the bonds of community, family, and kinship stretched across the police–partisan divide, so that in a given locality, members of a partisan unit would have relatives among the members of the local police force. This could in turn have a pacifying effect, as brothers, cousins, uncles, and nephews did what they could to avoid fighting one another. Moreover, at times village policemen and partisan groups would close ranks to defend a village against assaults by antipartisan squads coming from the outside. And sometimes the two adversaries simply made unofficial agreements not to fight each other.51 In short, the dynamics of encounters and interactions between auxiliary police and partisans could be determined by strictly local logics rather than those of the larger German–Soviet war.

More thoroughly implicated in Nazi German violence than the stationary village police were those recruited into the mobile antipartisan detachments. The German war against the partisans was extremely brutal and claimed thousands of civilian victims (more on which will be said presently). Local inhabitants recruited into such units inevitably became participants in the killing of partisans and civilians, and some also engaged in looting and rape in the villages. One detachment of Russian antipartisan fighters active in the southern parts of northwest Russia in 1942–1943, led

49 Account of T. P. Tetiaeva (b. 1931), in Vinogradov, Okkupatsiia, 16.
by a certain Menshikov, operated with such boundless brutality as to cause
protest even from the German security police. Another detachment, a
so-called jagdkommando set up by the SD in Luga in November 1941 and
headed by a twenty-one-year-old former student of the Leningrad Medical
Institute, sowed terror in the districts of Luga, Novorzhev, Ostrov, and
Pskov in 1942–1943. Secretly dressed up and posing as Soviet partisans,
these men – seventy in all by spring 1942 – traversed the villages searching
for and executing partisans as well as their (alleged) helpers and sympa-
thizers. The 667th Eastern Battalion was another Russian-based anti-
partisan unit with much blood on its hands. In late December 1942, for
example, the battalion carried out a largescale massacre near the village of
Bychkovo (Poddore district) following a partisan assault on one of the
unit’s transports. After attacking two villages using mortars and machine
guns, killing dozens of inhabitants, the battalion members drove the
surviving villagers – about 160 people – onto the ice on the river Polist
and shot them.

Like the Russians working for the local self-government, the auxiliaries
proved themselves in the eyes of their superiors. German officials consist-
ently praised the quality of the locally recruited police and antipartisan
units, despite occasional complaints regarding discipline. According to
Dmitrii Karov, the fight against the partisans would have been “impos-
sible” without their participation. And indeed, by 1943 two thirds
of the personnel employed in mobile antipartisan formations under the
three Security Divisions in the Army Group North rear area consisted of
non-Germans, mostly Russian and Baltic volunteers. It is safe to say that
the auxiliaries made a significant contribution to the enforcement of the

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52 Karov, “Nemetskaia kontrrazvedka,” 86. 53 Kovalev, Kollaboratsionizm v Rossii, 31–32.
54 See the extensive documentation reproduced in M. N. Petrov, Tainaia voina na novgorodskoi zemle
(Velikii Novgorod: Izdatelsko-poligraficheskii tsentr Novgorodskogo gos. universiteta, 2005),
616–820.
55 See, for example, Sich.Div. 281, Abt. VII, “Betr.: Verwaltungsbericht,” December 7, 1941,
BA-MA, RH 26–281/25a; Der Kommandierende General der Sicherungsgruppen u. Befehlshaber
VII, “Lagebericht für Juni 1942,” July 9, 1942, BA-MA, RH 26–281/29; Sicherungs-Division 285,
“Gefechtsbericht über das Unternehmen ‘Holzeinschlag’,” April 5, 1943, BA-MA, RH 23/300,
26–285/43, 4bs; Korück 584, 1a, “Gefechtsbericht über das Unternehmen ‘Frühjahrsbestellung’,
April 29, 1943, BA-MA, RH 23/300, 80bs; Korück 584, Qu., “Meldewesen – Monatsbericht,”
July 27, 1943, BA-MA, RH 23/300, 188.
56 Karov, “Russkaia politsiia,” 1 (in chapter 8: “The role of the police in the struggle against the
partisans”).
57 Kilian, Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft, 184.
German occupation regime, and specifically to the repression of organized anti-German activity, which included the execution of partisans or their suspected helpers as well as indiscriminately murderous reprisal measures.

How did the local population view their countrymen who supported the Germans by serving in the police and antipartisan forces? To some extent this would depend on one’s political orientation in the German–Soviet war, but the behavior of the policemen and auxiliaries mattered much as well. They could be perceived as defending village communities against pillaging partisans, for example by guarding grain storehouses. On the other hand, policemen who engaged in extortion or took part in brutal acts of collective punishment and forced labor roundups were certainly feared and scorned.

“During anti-partisan operations,” one German report noted in June 1942, Russian volunteer fighters “were reviled by local inhabitants with expressions such as: ‘You are traitors, you want to shoot at your own people.’”

The language by which the auxiliary forces came to be known reveals much about their popular image. During the war, two terms surfaced to describe them: karateli and politsei (or politseiskie). The first, literally meaning “punishers,” was a term that broadly referred to members of mobile antipartisan units (karatelnye otriady, “punitive detachments”), be they German, Baltic, or Russian. Karateli were heavily armed people who descended on villages to conduct searches, arrests, and executions. They were the ones who burned down villages and murdered civilians in indiscriminate acts of reprisal. Politsei, a somewhat less ominous but still negatively charged term, usually referred to Russian stationary police in villages and towns. It is clear from personal witness accounts as well as partisan intelligence reports and postwar Soviet war crimes investigations that karateli and politsei were pervasively associated with experiences of terror and violence. The ubiquity of the terms and the stability of their meanings strongly suggest the great extent to which the auxiliaries sowed fear among the civilian population.

58 Korück 584, Qu./Ia/Ic, “Meldewesen und Monatsbericht,” October 26, 1942, BA-MA, RH 23/298, 249.
60 See, for example, the accounts of T. P. Tetiaeva (b. 1931) and A. N. Petrova (b. 1929), in Vinogradov, Okkupatsiia, 16–17, 48; of V. N. Denisova (b. 1927) and A. I. Kopaneva (b. 1931), both Vinogradov Collection; and Elena Tsepliaeva, “Khutorskoi khoziain,” Shimskie vesti, September 3, 2011, https://perma.cc/TyW3-BA8K; various partisan reports in A. R. Dzeniskevich et al., eds., V tylu vraga. Borba partizan i podpolshchikov na okkupirovannoi territorii Leningradskoi oblasti. Sbornik dokumentov v 4-kh tomakh. 4 vols. (Leningrad: Lenzidat, 1979–1983); Oredezh district Extraordinary Commission report, 1944 or 1945, reproduced in Vinogradov, Okkupatsiia,
Motivations to Serve

Material and other privileges as well as enrichment opportunities attracted people to serve in the local administration and police forces. While higher-ranking administrators were relatively well paid, receiving upward of 1,000 rubles per month, high prices caused by scarcity reduced the importance of money. A more salient attraction was the opportunity afforded by such a position to obtain food or other goods by extortion, bribery, and other underhand means. As Anisimov found, “the farmers supplied food to the members of the local administration in exchange for every service or favor.” No less important, members of the local government and police recruits were promised larger and better rations, free medical care for themselves and their families, exemptions from taxes and labor obligations, and generous land allotments. These promises were not empty. According to Nikita Lomagin, serving in the police was “highly popular among the population [because] the policemen and their families were in fact spared the hardships of the occupation.”

While policemen and local officials were spared some hardships, they also ran high risks, being the primary targets of partisan terror. Thus, in spring 1942, the German commandant in Pustoshka had to spend months searching for a qualified person to fill a district elder vacancy, because no potential candidate dared to accept the offer. Heads of the local administration, policemen, and members of antipartisan units risked not only their own lives but also those of their families, who were frequently targeted by the partisans. Nevertheless, the privileges accorded to them could be seen

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208–214. In his study of Belarus under German rule, Bernhard Chiari noted that many civilians feared the native Belarusian policemen more than they did the Germans. Chiari, Alltag, 185.
65 Lomagin, Neizvestnaia blokada (vol. 1), 475.
66 Kilian, Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft, 169.
to outweigh the risks, especially in times and places where the partisan movement was weak or absent.

Prospects of economic relief and gain in the context of a strained material and food situation were important, but they can only partly explain the willingness to engage in administrative and police cooperation. The material situation, after all, was not equally desperate everywhere and all the time. As shown in Chapter 5, peasants in large parts of northwest Russia even lived better than before the war. It seems probable that in most cases, going into the local government or police was an act of choice rather than necessity.

The choice to serve German power came naturally to a lot of people, for both political and patriotic reasons. Northwest Russia contained an abundant supply of people who despised the Soviet regime for reasons grounded in their own personal experience. It is probable that most peasants were anti-Soviet patriots who wanted the best for Russia but had been alienated from the Bolshevik regime by its ruinous policies of forced collectivization, militant atheism, and mass repressions. Being receptive to German promises of a new life without the Bolsheviks, many inhabitants were further impressed by German-sponsored decollectivization and church revival, which gave them reason to believe that the German war effort was worth backing. Not surprisingly, sons of repressed kulaks and other so-called “former people” (byushie liudi – a category in the Bolshevik language denoting persons who had been disenfranchised, dispossessed, or otherwise repressed for political reasons) were heavily represented in police and antipartisan units as well as in the local government apparatus. For prisoners of war, signing up to fight in antipartisan formations often meant escape from starvation in the camps. Yet pull factors were at work here as well. Prisoners were not equally mistreated everywhere, and when in early 1942 Dmitrii Karov visited a POW camp in Kopore (west of Leningrad), where prisoners were well provided for and did not starve (they were fed by Wehrmacht units for whom they worked during the day), he still encountered an enthusiastic response when calling for volunteers to join an anti-Soviet fighting detachment:

I was given a list of more than one hundred names of people wanting to join the detachment. All the signatories wanted to fight against the Soviets. The candidates were given paper and pen and asked to write short

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autobiographies. The next day I received more than three hundred biographies with requests to be taken up into the detachment. Reading them, I was amazed by the fact that, despite different professions – from worker to professor – all these people were somehow victims of Soviet power, if not themselves then their closest family members. Towards the evening I received another hundred biographies, written on all sorts of paper.68

Even Soviet authorities were forced to admit the fact that Stalinist terror was a major cause of popular support for the Germans. As one partisan commander noted, hinting at the Great Terror, “the Germans adroitly exploit the mistakes of the [Soviet] judicial organs, [which they made] when a number of people were sentenced for no reason at all.”69 Another Soviet intelligence report, unusually candid, found that not only economic concerns but also “hatred of Soviet power, of the kolkhoz, [and] injury as a result of political and social repression” were important reasons why so many local inhabitants – including former party and state functionaries – chose not only to submit passively to German rule, but also to support it actively by serving in the administrative and police apparatus.70

The salience of decidedly anti-Bolshevik attitudes can also be seen in the fact that former clergy and other Christian believers were prominently represented in the local governments of many areas. Having acquainted himself with Russian officials in the Kingisepp area, Dmitrii Karov found that “they were all elderly people, believers in God, most of them Old Believers.”71 Moreover, in the Siverskaia and Kotly districts (between Narva and Leningrad), as well as in the southwestern districts of the Leningrad region, Karov reckoned that a majority of the village police belonged to the community of Old Believers.72 This group came across as reliable supporters of the German war against the Bolsheviks. According to Russian historian Igor Ermolov, an armed detachment of about 200 Old Believers, established in October 1941 and successfully deployed in the battle for Tikhvin, later became the backbone of several detachments of Russian volunteer fighters.73

Being anti-Soviet did not necessarily imply being pro-German. Some local officials were simply Russian patriots who believed they could use self-government as a way to lay the foundations for a better political order to come. Many of them, having been brought up and educated in Tsarist

69 “Zapisi besedy s komandovaniem 2. partizanskoi brigady (Batalonnyi komissar Luchin A.P.),” October 4, 1942, TsGAIPD SPb, o-116/12/162, 5.
70 Quoted in Hill, The War, 50.
72 Karov, “Russkaia politsiia,” 51.
73 Ermolov, Tri goda bez Stalina, 284.
Russia, viewed the new self-government as reminiscent of the zemstvo system established by Alexander II in 1864, which, until its demise in 1917, functioned as an instrument of local empowerment as well as an arena for freely discussing public issues. Anisimov found that these men wanted to build a new Russia based on prerevolutionary patterns – a Russia free from both Bolshevik and German overlordship, as suggested by their nearly unanimous support for the Vlasov movement in 1943.\(^\text{74}\) They perceived the initial terms of involvement with German power as allowing for such a long-term goal. With time, however, many of them would come to realize that Nazi designs brutally contradicted their hopes for a new and independent Russia.

Communists and other pro-Soviet loyalists sometimes made their way into the local government apparatus, subverting German power in the process. For instance, Viktor Fedorov recalled how his father – the prewar kolkhoz chairman in the village of Zaitsevo (Pskov district) – was instructed to accept the post of village elder upon meeting with the head of the underground district party committee. He remained village elder

\(^{74}\) Anisimov, *The German Occupation*, 12, 18.
throughout the war, displaying a loyal face to the Germans while at the same time trying to protect the population. After the war, the NKVD found him to have behaved properly from the Soviet point of view, and he went back to his job as kolkhoz chairman. His case was not unique. For example, the kolkhoz chairman in the village of Trebekha (Porkhov district) served as village elder from October 1941 through the entire occupation. Soviet authorities investigated his wartime activities in 1944 and found that he had successfully concealed his party membership from the Germans and substantially aided Soviet underground agents in Porkhov and partisans of the 3rd Partisan Brigade by reporting on German troop movements, distributing Soviet pamphlets, collecting weapons and ammunition for the partisans, and concealing a partisan commander in his home.

Not all Communists were loyal, however. In fact, more than a few party members and Soviet functionaries quickly transformed into the most dedicated anti-Bolshevik servants of the German regime. As Anisimov observed, a “very active minority” of remaining party members and local Soviet elites made up the most energetic and spirited anti-Communist organizers in northwest Russia. Working for German propaganda and intelligence offices, they came across as “much more determined and courageous adversaries of the Soviet regime than the average Soviet citizen.” Other sources confirm this surprising observation. For instance, following the reestablishment of Soviet power in the Volot district in early 1944, the local party secretary reported that most of the Communists who had remained on occupied territory acted as “accomplices” (posobniki) of the Germans. Olimpiada Poliakova, who lived in Pushkin, south of Leningrad, during the war, provides additional evidence to the same effect. Having talked to Communist party members who were then working for the Germans in Tosno in spring 1943, she noted the following in her diary:

No one hates the party like these partiists ... [One of them] says that however despicable and stupid the Germans may be, this can still not be compared ... to what goes on in the Bolshevik party. It is very strange for

76 “Protokol No. 2 zasedaniia biuro Porkhovskogo RK VKP(b),” August 21, 1944, GANIPO, 894/2/1, 80.
77 Anisimov, The German Occupation, 12–14.
us to be witnessing and listening to all this now. And almost all the propagandists who work here are former party members.\textsuperscript{79}

Material interests as well as political and patriotic passions motivated tens of thousands of people in occupied northwest Russia to help support and enforce the German occupation regime. Many signed up for the sake of privilege and power, but political motivations were no less salient. In the final analysis, decisions to actively support the German regime could have various motivations, but always presupposed one crucial factor: the lack of any robust kind of pro-Soviet loyalty.

\textbf{Relating to Soviet Power: People and Partisans}

Soviet partisans presented themselves as the foremost force of anti-German subversion. Much vaunted in Soviet propaganda and historiography, the partisan movement has by now been critically examined by many Western and Russian scholars. The Soviet portrayal, depicting the civilian population joining with heroic partisans in a “war of all the people” (\textit{vsenarodnai a borba}) against the German intruders, quickly fades when exposed to the available evidence. Today we know that the initial Soviet efforts at resistance in the enemy rear were neither very popular nor successful.\textsuperscript{80} Northwest Russia was no exception. Three factors limited popular participation in the first two years of the occupation: narrow partisan recruitment, peasant animosity toward the partisans, and brutal German antipartisan tactics.

Even though the Soviet leadership publicly called for a “great patriotic war” and a “war of all the people,” practical policy dictated otherwise. According to official instructions issued in July 1941 regarding the organization of underground cells and partisan groups, recruits should be drawn from among trusted Communist cadres and those non-Party citizens who had explicitly demonstrated loyalty to the regime. While relying on images of a united “Soviet people” in its propaganda, the Soviet government seemed at the same time to doubt the loyalty of its subjects.\textsuperscript{81} The initial basis of the partisan movement was accordingly narrow. Communists and Komsomol members represented 70–80 percent of the members of

\textsuperscript{79} Osipova, “Dnevnik kollaborantki,” 161 (entry of May 6, 1943).


partisan detachments operating in the Leningrad region up to December 1941 (by contrast, party members made up about 5 percent of Soviet workers, and even fewer among peasants). Many of them were not locals, having been transported across the front from the Soviet rear. The policy of exclusiveness meant that partisan ranks were closed to inhabitants who might have been mentally prepared and physically fit to fight for their home, hearth, and country, or even for Stalin and the Soviet state, but whose political merits did not meet the strict criteria for participation.

Beginning in spring 1942, the Soviet partisan movement as a whole increased in size. The successful Soviet counteroffensive at Moscow in December 1941 certainly propelled this development, along with brutal German occupation policies. Part of the increase resulted from Red Army stragglers and escaped prisoners of war joining the partisan ranks. Moreover, the share of locally based partisans increased so that by summer, a majority of Leningrad-region partisans were recruited from among the local population. By August 1, 1942, a total of 2,613 “local partisans” were fighting with the four detachments operating in the Leningrad region, making up about 70 percent of their total strength. Among these local fighters, however, peasants made up a clear minority. Even though largely locally recruited, the partisans as a group were hardly representative of the region’s overwhelmingly rural population.

In September 1942, the Soviet People’s Commissariat of Defense issued an order stressing the need to expand the partisan movement by drawing on “the broadest masses of the Soviet people on the occupied territory,” thus formally abandoning the politically exclusive character of the movement. Yet this order did not have an immediate impact on the total number of partisans active in northwest Russia. Their numbers continued to vacillate between 2,500 and 5,300 until October–November 1943, when an explosive increase occurred (see Figure 7.1). Even though the total number of partisans active in northwest Russia did not rise drastically until late 1943, both Soviet and German sources suggest that the popular willingness to join or support the partisans was increasing from the beginning of that year. The partisan movement gradually became more

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84 Dzeniskevich et al., *V tylu vraga* (1942), 110.
85 Ibid., 169.
88 See also Chapter 8.
attractive and less exclusive for ordinary inhabitants. Not only non-Communists and common peasants but also people who had served in armed German police and antipartisan forces could now join their ranks. Yet the movement’s composition is not the only measure of its popularity. We must also consider the attitude of the civilian population in the midst of which it operated.

“We were more afraid of Soviet power than the Germans”

The use of violence and threats to obtain supplies and recruits in the villages was a staple of partisan tactics, a fact that lent credibility to articles in the German-controlled Russian-language press denouncing “Stalin’s partisans” as “enemies of the Russian people.” Especially in the first year, the partisan movement was poorly organized and haphazardly supplied. Instances were even reported of entire units falling apart

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Figure 7.2 Number of active partisans in the Leningrad region, 1941–1944.
*Source: Hill, *The War*, 77, 165*
because their members were starving to death. Food and clothes had to be obtained from the local countryside, but peasants, whose food supplies had already been depleted by retreating Soviets as well as advancing Germans, were less than willing to help. As one former partisan recalled, conflicts would be settled by violent means: "It happened that a partisan came and said he needed a fur coat, but the peasant also needed it! So it turned out that the one who needed it more was whoever had a gun in his pocket." Another northwest Russian partisan was similarly candid about the methods of food collection. As he stated in 1943, looking back at his experiences, "In 1941–42 the population did not help us with regard to food supplies, so we had to... go into the villages and collect livestock and food by force.”

Recruits were frequently drafted against their will. One day in late August 1941, a group of partisans appeared in the village of Orekhovtsy to the south of Gdov. Heavily armed, they gathered the villagers and announced that they were building a partisan army on orders from the headquarters in Leningrad. Everyone fit for military service, they declared, must join; anyone hesitating would be shot on the spot. Eighteen-year-old Aleksandr Nikolaev was one of the forced recruits. After about three weeks, he escaped the partisan detachment and approached the German commandant in the nearby town of Iamm to report on the partisans, who had been seizing recruits and food in the surrounding countryside for weeks. The partisans had also attacked German troops and infrastructure, resulting in bloody reprisal actions against local peasants.

Nikolaev’s case was not unique. In July 1942, another partisan, captured by the Germans near Staraja Russa, told his interrogators that his unit was made up “exclusively of forcibly recruited persons... only the commanders were real partisans (i.e., volunteers).” Mariia Zverinskaia, a wartime inhabitant of the village of Nikulkino near Luga, recalled an encounter with a group of partisans:

There was iron discipline. Four partisans came to us and ordered: “Girls, get ready, get your things together, let’s join the detachment!”... Of course, no one wanted to go, but there was discipline: they gave orders, and you

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92 Dzeniskevich et al., V tylu vraga (1942), 110.
94 Quoted in Lomagin, Neizvestnaia blokada (vol. 1), 530.
had to go, otherwise you’d be shot... How could we refuse to carry out orders given by Soviet authorities? This would be treason to the Mother-land. Execution on the spot. We were afraid. We were more afraid of Soviet power than the Germans.  

The partisans were under orders to “annihilate the invaders and their accomplices.” Foremost among the targets were the members of the local self-government and police forces. Yet the question of who was really an “accomplice” to German crimes was unclear. Many village elders, as we have seen, displayed loyalty to their German superiors while at the same time using their position to safeguard the interests of the villagers, in effect limiting or even subverting German power. Sometimes they put their lives on the line by rendering aid to partisans. Yet such people could nevertheless become victims of the partisans’ drive to punish “traitors.” One wartime inhabitant of the village of Iazvinka (between Luga and Chudovo) recalled her encounter with a group of partisans in late January 1942. Returning home from a trip to a neighboring village, she found that partisans had occupied her house and gathered a number of arrested men inside: “There were also familiar faces among them. Vaska Zaitsev – the village elder of Zadubovie – and our own [elder], Ivan Moriakov. Ivan... was a good man, he gave nothing to the Germans, but the special department nevertheless decided, ‘To be shot!’ They shot 47 of 50 arrested persons.”

People who carried out small-scale tasks for the Germans were targeted as well. Interviewed by party officials in 1944, one partisan gave the following account of the methods used to sabotage milk deliveries from the villages:

We told the German-appointed dairy manager that if she (this was usually a woman) received any milk, we would shoot her. We told her to tell the peasants to go back. She would answer: “How can I do that, the Germans will kill me?” I would answer: “Take your choice: either the Germans kill you, or the partisans will. It’s better to have the Germans kill you than the partisans.”

Not only the alleged wrongdoers but also their families were frequently targeted. In one case, the village elder to be shot was not at home, so the

97 Account of M. I. Zverinskaia (b. 1923), in Vinogradov, Okkupatsiia, 124–125.
99 Account of E. A. Petrova (Shabalova) (b. 1910), in Ivanova, Za blokadnym koltom, 170.
100 Transcript of conversation with Ivan Trofimovich Trofimov, June 19, 1944, TsGAIPD SPb, 0–4383/1/34, 248.
henchmen killed his sister-in-law instead. A wartime inhabitant of the village of Zapishene recounted that partisans murdered her young cousins while they slept because their father had worked for the local administration. Partisans entering the previously German-held village of Korpovo (southeast of Lake Ilmen) in early 1942 reportedly murdered thirteen women and children, without any formal proceedings. An eyewitness later told German intelligence officers that as they shot one of the women and three of her children, the partisans accused her of having had sexual relations with German troops.

Pockets of concentrated partisan power arose in the midst of German-occupied Soviet territory. Much vaunted in contemporary Soviet propaganda as well as in postwar Soviet historiography, these were spaces in which Soviet institutions were in fact reestablished to some degree. Such a partizanski krai – “partisan zone” – appeared in northwest Russia in fall 1941. On September 3, the political heads of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade held a meeting and resolved to resurrect institutions of Soviet power in the Belebelka district (southwest of Staraja Russa), having found that the Germans were absent from most villages. According to partisan reporting and later Soviet historiography, the civilians inhabiting the partisan zone happily welcomed the return of Soviet rule: “They were ready to share their last jug of milk, their last piece of bread, and the last shirt on their body with the partisans.”

One notable event by which the partisans sought to demonstrate the pro-Soviet loyalty of the local peasantry was the organization of a major food collection effort to aid the starving population of Leningrad in early 1942. In March of that year, a string of carts, carrying tons of meat, grain, and other foodstuffs, successfully made its way from the partisan zone across the front line into the Soviet rear, eventually reaching Leningrad together with a delegation of partisans and other participants.

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101 Account of V. I. Bazhinov (b. 1925), member of the 11th Partisan Brigade, in Ivanova, Za blokadnym koltsom, 227.
102 Vinogradov, Okkupatsiia, 179.
104 Dzeniskevich et al., V tylu vraga (1942), 113–116.
106 Dzeniskevich et al., V tylu vraga (1942), 44–46; S. Vitushkin, “Cherez dva fronta: k 60-letiiu partizanskogo oboza v Leningrad,” Novgorodske vedomosti, March 6, 2002; S. M. Kliatskin,
The delegation handed over a letter addressed to Stalin that portrayed the aid effort as being collectively organized by “partisans and kolkhozniks of the Dedovichi and Belebelka districts.” To the letter, which emphasized the destructive activities of the German forces in the area and the consolidation of Soviet power in the partisan-controlled districts, was attached a number of notebooks containing 3,000 signatures.  

Did people voluntarily sign and give up their food for Leningrad? Contemporary partisan reports insist that they did, portraying the relationship between partisans and local peasants in the partisan zone as “one united fighting camp.” A Soviet historian wrote, thirty years later: “Everywhere gatherings and meetings were held at which the collective farmers unanimously put their signatures on the pages of the notebooks . . . Each one brought everything he could to help the Leningraders: a sack of wheat or rye, a bucket of grain, a bulk of meat, or a jar of honey.” No sources other than partisan reports are cited for this and similar statements, so the question is left open. Many peasants, especially those with family and relatives in Leningrad, surely wanted to contribute as best they could. Others likely felt there was no choice but to give up some food (and a signature) when faced with armed and determined representatives of Soviet power.

The partisan zone probably enjoyed some popular support, especially to the extent that the partisans were seen to be protecting people from German violence. Yet the image of a peasantry selflessly devoted to the partisan and Soviet cause, “offering their last piece of bread” and so on, reflects only part of the actual conditions on the ground. As elsewhere, partisans in the zone used violence and threats to elicit and enforce peasant obedience.

One of the first measures of the 2nd Leningrad Partisan Brigade in the Belebelka and Dedovichi districts was to establish a special troika consisting of three representatives from the party, state, and police apparatus to direct economic and political life and eliminate opposition. Resurrecting the troika, a tried and true instrument of Stalinist terror, meant a
new round of revealing and annihilating alleged enemies of the regime. A report by the 2nd Brigade noted that, as soon as the Germans arrived in the districts now belonging to the partisan zone, “the enemies” had immediately begun “carrying out their subversive activities, which were first of all aimed at the disintegration of the kolkhozes and the murder of individual activists.” (If seeking to dismantle the kolkhozes was an act of “enemies,” then the great majority of the rural population in northwest Russia would have to be subsumed under that category. This in itself indicates the deep gulf between Soviet partisans and Russian peasants.) Besides arresting and executing alleged enemies and traitors, the partisan zone authorities ordered that kolkhozes be immediately reestablished. The Dedovichi troika later reported that sixty “traitors,” including twenty-two “kulaks,” were shot during the first nine months of the troika’s operation. Village elders were replaced with former kolkhoz chairmen, farm tools and animals were recollectivized, and the harvest was redivided based on the “labor-day” principle. “The elements hostile in attitude to the kolkhoz,” the report noted, “were liquidated.”

German military intelligence also found that partisan–civilian relations in the partisan zone were less than harmonious, noting that young people in the villages would hide when partisans approached. When the Germans announced in May 1942 that the population of a number of villages located on the northwestern margins of the partisan zone was to be transported into the German rear, about 10 percent of the population refused and fled in the direction of the partisan-controlled area, while the rest went along with the German evacuation. This suggests, at the very least, that a majority of the population did not see life in the partisan zone as worth struggling for.

The fact that the locally recruited element of the partisan movement increased in 1942–1943 probably had a positive effect on the civilian–partisan relationship, because local partisans would naturally be more
attuned to the interests of their zemliaki – their fellow villagers. They would also have been less likely to approve of or participate in actions that would harm the local population. Some partisans wielded their power to protect families and fellow villagers, sometimes even negotiating informal truces with German forces.\(^{117}\) In one village near Novgorod, where a number of German soldiers were stationed, such a tacit deal helped keep the peace during the occupation:

In the forest [outside the village] lived the partisans, those who could not remain in the village because they were Communists and kolkhoz activists. But in this locality, as villagers recounted, the partisans made no move against the Germans, because this would have resulted in reprisals against the peaceful population. They approached their relatives secretly, at night, to collect food. They received everything they needed, and were implored not to do anything. The Germans, for their part, also preferred to keep the peace in this way and did not spend much effort going after the partisans.\(^{118}\)

Arrangements like these, however, ran counter to the goals of the Soviet partisan leadership, who wanted instead to increase the level of conflict. German reprisal actions against civilians were deliberately provoked so as to increase popular hatred of the Germans and support for the partisans. If a partisan unit was too locally bound and thus too reluctant to use such methods, Soviet authorities would deploy a “foreign” unit with no bonds to the local villages in order to get the job done.\(^{119}\)

Partisan terror was not confined to the partisan zone. In the Ostrov district, in the course of only two weeks in March–April 1943, partisans reportedly killed 166 Russians, among them 28 women and 16 children.\(^{120}\) According to investigations by Russian authorities in the 1990s concerning the rehabilitation of victims of wartime partisan terror, partisans in the Novosele district shot hundreds of people – including women, children, and the elderly – and they often did so on the basis of rumors and personal hostilities. The killing was frequently accompanied by


\(^{120}\) 281. Sicherungs-Division, Abt. Ic, “Erfahrungsbericht,” April 24, 1943, BA-MA.
drunkenness, pillage, and rape. In short, the partisans sowed fear among the civilian population, limiting their popular appeal. Thus even as late as in February 1943, German officials were still reporting an overwhelmingly antipartisan attitude in the countryside.

If partisan exclusivity in the initial period and the partisans’ measures of violence and terror served to limit and discourage popular support for Soviet partisan power, an equally salient factor (which also created conditions for the eventual growth of the partisan movement) was the murderous ferocity of the German counterinsurgency.

**The Antipartisan War**

Before the invasion of the Soviet Union, Hitler let Wehrmacht soldiers know that they would not be taken to court for crimes committed against the civilian population, as long as the misdeeds did not jeopardize troop discipline. Besides offering legal carte blanche to German soldiers with regard to their treatment of Soviet civilians, Hitler called for all partisans to be annihilated and empowered officers to decide whether to execute “suspected persons” and whether to carry out collective reprisal measures against whole villages. While Hitler’s preinvasion decrees reflected the overall spirit of Operation Barbarossa as a war of extermination, Stalin’s July order to set in motion a partisan war further radicalized the German dictator’s visions. As he stated during a meeting with his closest aides on July 16, 1941: “The Russians have now ordered a partisan war behind the front. This partisan war also has its benefits: it enables us to exterminate whatever opposes us.”


Hitler’s message resonated on the ground in the shape of a blunt and brutal counterinsurgency campaign. From June 22 to December 31, 1941, the 285th Security Division reported that 1,500 “partisans, civilians, [and] Red Army men” were killed in battle or subsequently shot; its own casualties amounted to two dead and five wounded. For the period of December 1941 to February 10, 1942, a total of 1,275 “partisans” were reported killed in the Army Group North rear area, with a total of twenty-four casualties on the German side.

Despite Nazi bloodlust, many German army commanders understood the perils of arbitrary violence and collective reprisals. As early as July 1941, the 16th Army quartermaster warned that “inappropriate severity” would alienate the local population, the bulk of which, as he saw it, had greeted the Germans as liberators. Three months later, Franz von Roques, head of the Army Group North rear area, ordered that civilians be “treated well” as long as cooperation with the partisans could not be verified or reasonably suspected, and that collective reprisal measures be applied only in exceptional cases, since the peasants would otherwise be “driven into the arms of the partisans.” The Army High Command and even Hitler himself eventually also called for restraint.

Messages of moderation yielded limited results because they contradicted the core message of the German political and military leadership, to the effect that the war against the Soviet Union was an ideological war of annihilation. Wehrmacht and security police units thus proceeded to murder inhabitants and burn down villages in the wake of partisan attacks. Alarmed, the commander of the 281st Security Division registered the following complaint in February 1943:

Once again, there is reason to stress that the trust of the population in the German military agencies should not be shattered by indiscriminate measures and unjust punishment. Collective measures against villages, particularly the incineration of whole localities, are to be carried out only after conscientious inquiry and only in cases in which the inhabitants have

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128 Hasenclever, Wehrmacht und Besatzungspolitik, 374.
demonstrably of their own free will aided the bands . . . I cannot endorse it when, as in one case, more than 200 local inhabitants, among them women and children, were shot without further ado, their villages burned to the ground.130

Despite such admonitions, large-scale massacres did not cease. In late November 1943, in but one particularly gruesome example, the village of Krasukha (Porkhov district) was surrounded by German forces following a nearby attempt to blow up a car carrying a German general. About 280 villagers – including children and old people – were burned to death inside a barn or shot as they tried to escape.131 Overall, according to the findings of Jürgen Kilian pertaining to the Army Group North rear area, the share of civilian victims of antipartisan operations dropped from 82 percent in 1941 to 76 percent in 1942 and 65 percent in 1943. Even though the share of civilian victims decreased, it remained high. Moreover, the absolute number of civilian victims increased: While an estimated 4,662 civilians were killed in 1942, the number for 1943 was 6,494.132 Kilian estimates the total number of civilian victims of the antipartisan war (in the Army Group North rear area only – that is, not including the 16th and 18th Army rear areas) at 15,000.133

The German antipartisan war played into the relationship between the civilian population and the partisans in contradictory ways. On the one hand, it had the unintended consequence of driving parts of the local population into the arms of the partisans. Presenting themselves as “avengers of the people” (narodnye mstiteli), the partisans attracted people who had witnessed German atrocities and desired revenge. The story of Vladimir Khorev, then a sixteen-year-old resident of the village of Nivki, Poddore district, is a case in point. One day in November 1941, German troops organized the execution of two alleged partisans in Khorev’s village. As he later recalled, one of them – the former secretary of the local rural soviet – had possibly cooperated with partisans, but the other one, called Dikovskii, was a man of limited mental abilities. Dikovskii used to do odd jobs such as cutting firewood and tilling gardens for other villagers.

132 Kilian, Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft, 586. 133 Ibid., 582–587.
On that fateful day he was caught by the Germans upon returning from the forest carrying his axe. As Khorev recalled, “They seized him, asking: ‘Are you a partisan?’ But he, the poor thing, doesn’t know how to talk sensibly. He repeats the words of others: ‘Partisan.’” After forcibly driving the inhabitants into the village square before the church, the executioners locked the two men inside the church and set fire to it. “This act of meaningless cruelty,” Khorev recalled, “took place in full view of my mother Aleksandra Timofeevna, my future wife Tonia, her sister Shura, and most of the inhabitants of the village.” On that same day, a similar action was carried out in the neighboring village of Zharki. Having discovered a supply of felt boots stored in a barn, apparently a partisan depot, the Germans locked up three persons and burned them alive in front of the shocked villagers. Khorev, as he put it, “naturally joined the partisans.”

While on the one hand increasing popular support for the partisans, the German counterinsurgency on the other hand deepened the wedge

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134 Account of V. V. Khorev (b. 1925), in Ivanova, Za blokadnym koltom, 100–101.
between people and partisans by dramatically raising the cost of propartisan behavior. Some local inhabitants also faulted the partisans for provoking German reprisals and disregarding the interests of the population. German antipartisan measures, for all of their demonstrative violence, were essentially reactive, and Soviet authorities deliberately sought to provoke such reactions. The village teacher Vasilii Savelev was surely not the only one to understand this mechanism. As he noted in his diary upon witnessing the site of a burned-down village, “All this is because of the partisans, who terrorize the population . . . and take away their food. But the Germans have the least to lose from this, while the population has to endure enormous losses.” While the German forces and their auxiliaries remain responsible for their murderous acts, the partisan movement probably contributed to additional civilian suffering while playing only a minor military role.

Between Two Fires

Besides inviting engagement (be it in the form of support, subversion, or harnessing), German and Soviet power more often came across as threats people sought to evade. The instinct of self-preservation usually trumps political loyalties. For most inhabitants, accordingly, lying low was the default mode of behavior. As one of the more sensitive German observers rather precisely reported: “The Russian masses are not led in their mood and attitude (also toward us) by political or other such idealistic motives . . . Decisive for individual Russians as well as for the whole population are two factors: personal prosperity and a feeling of security.” However, simply minding one’s own business became difficult or even impossible in places and at times when both German forces and partisans violently demanded loyalty at the same time. Under such circumstances, remaining passive would not be enough to defend oneself,

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136 Diary of Vasilii Savelev, entry of October 10, 1941, in Ivanova, *Za blokadnym kolsom*, 249. See also the entries of October 14, 1941, January 19, 1942, February 7, 1942, and January 3, 1944, in ibid., 250, 261, 262, 280.


one’s family, and one’s community. Neutral evasionism gave way to a more activist stance of calculated pragmatism a Janus-faced tactic which shines through in German and Soviet reporting as well as in personal accounts of wartime inhabitants.

There is a striking discrepancy in how Soviet and German officials reported on the political attitudes and behavior of the northwest Russian population. Seen through the Soviet lens, the rural population appears pro-Soviet, partisan-friendly, and even pro-kolkhoz, with almost no exceptions. Very few partisan reports note any prevalence whatsoever of anti-Soviet or even anti-kolkhoz sentiment. Taken at face value, the reports suggest that the partisan struggle was an “all-people’s war” indeed, in which peasants everywhere and almost all of the time went to great lengths to undermine German power by supporting the partisan movement. Peasants in the Volot district were “eagerly waiting for the Red Army to liberate them.”

In the Oredzh district, inhabitants “selflessly aided the partisan detachments” and “as a rule risked their lives to inform the [partisans] about the movements and appearances of the Germans,” while in the Kingisepp–Luga–Slantsy area the local population was described as “patriotically attuned” and “burning with hatred for the enemy; when approached [by partisans asking for food], they give up their last [supplies].” In the Staraia Russa area, too, “broad strata of the population . . . as a rule, render all sorts of support to the partisans and Red Army units operating in the enemy rear. The population offers food, clothing, and information about the whereabouts of the enemy.”

Similar reports abound.

The face of the Russian peasantry shifts diametrically when viewed through the German lens. Reports by German units engaged in administering the occupied territories are full of statements to suggest that the rural population generally welcomed the German arrival, trusted the Wehrmacht, rejected the partisans, and feared most of all the return of the Bolsheviks and the resurrection of the despised kolkhozes. Peasants displayed a “trustful attitude” toward the Wehrmacht; what little backing the partisans enjoyed was the result of “the fiercest terror”; the civilian population was

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140 “Polozhenie v tylu/Iz otcheta o boevoi deiatelnosti partizanskikh otriadov Oredzhskogo raiona,” November 1941, TsGAIPD SPb, o–116/2/7, 88.
141 Report by the commissar of the 1st Partisan Regiment, July 29, 1941, in V tylu vraga 1941, 68.
142 Report on the military activities of partisan detachments in the Staraia Russa direction, October 16, 1941, in Dzeniskevich et al., V tylu vraga (1941), 141.
generally hostile vis-à-vis the partisan movement”; peasants “greet every appearance of German troops, because then they feel safe from partisans,” and so on.\footnote{See the introduction for a discussion of German and Soviet reporting on popular mood.}

The differing descriptions in German and Soviet reporting may partly be ascribed to a certain optimistic bias in the Soviet case,\footnote{This practice was widely applied. See EM 71, September 2, 1941, in Mallmann et al., Die Ereignismeldungen, 388; the accounts of L. I. Kosolova in Ivanova, Za blokadnym koltsom, 533, and M. V. Mikhailova in Vinogradov, Okkupatsiia, 104; Dzeniskevich et al., V tylu vraga (1942), 264; Dzeniskevich et al., V tylu vraga (1943), 114; Petrov, Partizanskoe dvizhenie, 218.} but they likely also reflect how people acted when confronted with the presence of the two powers. On the one hand, the presence of German commanding officers, armed troops, and their Russian auxiliaries inclined inhabitants to perform loyally in relation to the Germans. On the other hand, when peasants found themselves confronted by Soviet power in the guise of armed partisans, they adjusted their professed loyalties accordingly, expressing hope for the return of the Red Army, hatred for the occupiers, and support for the partisans. This balancing act became more dangerous and crucial whenever the intensity of German/partisan violence increased (and it became just about impossible wherever Germans used the dreadful tactic of deploying Russian antipartisan fighters dressed up and posing as partisans or Red Army soldiers).\footnote{Befehlshaber d. rückw. Heeres-Geb. Nord, Abt. Ic/A.O., "Betr.: Erfahrungen über Aufbau, Aufgaben, Auftreten und Bekämpfung der Partisanen-Abteilungen," December 12, 1942, BA-MA, RH 22/259, 146; Sicherungs-Division 285, Abt. VII, "Betr.: Lagebericht," August 2, 1942, BA-MA, RH 26–285/42, 2; 281. Sicherungs-Division, Abt. Ic, "Erfahrungsbericht," November 1, 1942, BA-MA, RH 26–281/14.}

Many German observers (but few Soviet ones) were frank about how people shifted their stance according to changing circumstances, acknowledging the fact that a pragmatic form of power realism guided popular behavior. In August 1941, German intelligence noted how local Russians hedged their bets. Those who voluntarily aided partisans would often be the very same people who had approached local Wehrmacht headquarters shortly before to express their gratitude for liberation from Bolshevism.\footnote{In early 1942, the Secret Field Police found that local inhabitants were often “working for both sides.” January 1, 1943 report by the Russian Sicherungs-Division, Abt. Ic, "Erfahrungsbericht," May 5, 1942, BA-MA, RH 26–281/14; Sicher.-Div. 281, Abt. Ia, "Betr.: Einsatz vom 30.11–8.12.41, Gruppe A," n.d., BA-MA, RH 26–281/4; Befehlshaber d. rückw. Heeres-Geb. Nord, Abt. Ic/A.O., "Betr.: Erfahrungen über Aufbau, Aufgaben, Auftreten und Bekämpfung der Partisanen-Abteilungen," February 17, 1942, BA-MA, RH 26–281/14.}

district head in Novorzhev, where partisan activity had been rife for months, vividly illustrates the conditions prevailing in places where the power balance remained unsettled:

[The partisans] murder members of the [auxiliary police] and their families, set fire to their houses, plunder their property, and threaten even more severe measures against anyone who continues to work [for the Germans]. Even ordinary peasants who carry out small tasks for the district administration such as courier services are persecuted and murdered by the partisans. Of twenty-six village elders thirteen have been murdered, wounded, or captured by the partisans.

Almost all village elders, assistants, clerks, accountants, and members of the [auxiliary police] spend the nights somewhere else, often in other villages in stables, bathhouses or beneath snow banks so as not to be captured by the bandits.

... There are also serious problems with the political attitude of the peasantry in general. The peasants, so to speak, are caught between two fires: We issue orders, demand compliance, and punish guilty ones; the bands travel from village to village and demand that the peasants and the village elders refuse to heed our orders, threaten with measures, and hold persons who do not submit to their instructions severely to account by murdering, plundering, and pillaging.  

Accounts by wartime inhabitants of northwest Russian villages shed light on how people experienced the predicament of facing two violent claims to power at once. As a wartime resident of Zhurebud recalled, the former kolkhoz chairman, now village elder, “was forced to work both for them and for us – in general, between two fires.” A sense of the inevitability as well as the acute danger of accommodating both Germans and partisans shines through in personal accounts such as Anna Krasavina’s: “The Germans came in the daytime and partisans during the night, and we were afraid of them both.”

One should not overestimate the extent to which people in northwest Russia were caught desperately between fires, however. After all, in large areas partisan activity remained more or less absent most of the time. In the

149 Account of A. G. Fedorov (b. 1930), in Vinogradov, Okkupatsiia, 135.
150 Anna Stepanovna Krasavina, “Moia zhiz,” 1984, 8, unpublished memoir (author’s private archive). See also the account of T. P. Tetiaeva (b. 1931), in Vinogradov, Okkupatsiia, 16.
course of 1942, a total of 102 village or district elders (among a total of 7,136) were killed or captured by partisans in the whole Army Group North area.\(^{151}\) The vast majority of them, in other words, stayed clear of partisan assaults. In 1943, partisan activity escalated and the number of victims rose, probably to 500–600.\(^{152}\) Even so, no more than 2–3 percent of those employed in the local government apparatus became victims of partisan attacks and abductions in 1942 and 1943.\(^{153}\) Yet the threat of violence still loomed over those not directly affected. Wherever mobile partisans appeared and attracted the attention of German security forces, inhabitants had to become political chameleons in order to guard against catastrophe.

**Conclusion**

Most inhabitants of northwest Russia appeared to align with the German regime during the first two years of the occupation. By early 1943, the estimated number of people serving in the local self-government or as auxiliary forces amounted to 32,000–33,000 – some 15 percent of the male working population (12,000–13,000 of them served in police and antipartisan formations).\(^{154}\) By contrast, in mid-1943 the partisan movement numbered some 4,500 fighters, of which perhaps 70 percent were locals to northwest Russia – a figure corresponding to 1.5 percent of the male working population.\(^{155}\)

Understanding political attitudes and behavior requires more, however, than just counting servants of the German regime and partisan joiners. Even though the former exceeded the latter by a factor of 10, we cannot proceed to postulate a pro-German to pro-Soviet “attitude ratio” of 10:1. First, people generally submit to armed authorities controlling a

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\(^{153}\) The calculation assumes 20,000 employees by spring 1943. See *Zwei Jahre Kriegswirtschaft*, table 2E.

\(^{154}\) For substantiation of these figures, see Enstad, “Soviet Citizens,” 234–237.

\(^{155}\) If we add to this figure a “partisan reserve” of 5,000 local inhabitants reportedly in place by March 1943, ready to join but lacking weapons and equipment, the percentage would increase to four. See *ibid.*, 287.
In other words, the plain fact that the Germans controlled most of northwest Russia most of the time explains much popular support and acquiescence. Second, local officials and auxiliary policemen were more than just tools in German hands. They often harnessed the power vested in them for purposes that had little or nothing to do with the larger Soviet–German struggle. Some sought material and physical security for themselves, their families, and their communities. Others used their power in ways detrimental to German interests, subverting the occupation regime. Engaging with German power was often a marriage of convenience rather than a matter of political identification and alignment.

When both German and partisan forces threatened, inhabitants went into “evasion mode,” trying to stay below German and partisan radars, protecting themselves, their families, and their communities. To the extent that the simultaneous pressures of German authorities and Soviet partisans rendered evasive neutrality impossible, people were forced to perform a dangerous balancing act. Faced with two violent claims to power at once, most acted according to what they perceived as the most promising, or least dangerous, prospects at any given time. They professed the appropriate loyalty and submitted to whichever authority they found present at the given moment. Here, political and patriotic sentiment gave way to pragmatism and power realism as the guide for popular behavior.

Even though evasionism and pragmatism often shaped how people interacted with authority, we should not lose sight of the fact that much pro-German support, which remained substantial well into 1943, was underpinned by a real political desire to defeat the Bolsheviks, abolish the kolkhozes, and bring about a new and better government, sustained by a lingering hope that the German army could make this happen. There was no shortage of enemies of Stalin’s regime in the occupied territories at the outset, and the experience of life under German rule – with decollectivization and church revival – preserved or reinforced the anti-Bolshevik commitment of many Russian peasants.

The number of dedicated enemies of the German regime certainly grew over time as popular grievances accumulated in the wake of its brutal and humiliating occupation policies. As the Germans made more enemies in 1942–1943, the partisan movement opened its ranks to the local

156 Evidence from the study of civil wars and similar conflicts worldwide suggests that an increased level of control exercised by a political actor leads to an increased rate of popular cooperation. See Stathis N. Kalyvas, The Logic of Violence in Civil War (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 132.
population, enabling thousands to seek revenge, fight for their country, prove their loyalty in view of an expected Soviet victory, or “atone for their sins” after having served the enemy. As we shall see in Chapter 8, in the course of 1943, grievances paired with increasing national sentiment to help set the stage for a popular rejection of German power. It was only in late autumn that year, however, expecting an imminent German retreat, that people severed their ties to the occupier on a massive scale.
In 1943, as Hitler’s war against the Soviet Union ground to a halt, the popular mood in northwest Russia was turning. True, stories of liberation from the Bolshevik yoke and enduring wartime burdens while hoping for a better future lived on among parts of the population even in 1943. Gradually, however, the cracks in these tales of hopeful endurance became more and more evident to an increasing number of people. Besides the accumulated effect of German atrocities and oppressive policies, the shift in attitudes was propelled by increased popular interest in the national question. Russians, in short, began to suspect, with good reason, that the Germans lacked a viable plan for the future of their homeland. But the decisive factor triggering the mass rejection of German authority, which occurred only in late 1943, was the changing military balance at the front.

As a new shift of power loomed on the horizon, inhabitants of northwest Russia hoped for an end to war, longed to reunite with their loved ones, and feared the vengeful Bolsheviks. Their political loyalties remained fragile. The abandonment of the German regime in late 1943 hardly implied a collective welcoming of the returning Bolsheviks. For many Russian peasants, the reestablishment of Soviet power brought not a sigh of relief, but the beginning of a new chapter in a long story of debilitating hardship. Across the entire country, people who had participated in the war effort felt the state owed them something in return for their sacrifices. Many hoped for reforms and moderation of the state’s oppressive policies after the war. As it turned out, they soon became disillusioned.¹ For residents of the occupied territories, too, the encounter with the returning Bolsheviks and the transition to peacetime proved troubling and ambiguous. If the experience of war and occupation had been an earthquake, its aftershocks were still to come in the shape of

political purges as well as renewed material destitution, leading some inhabitants to compare the postwar situation with lingering stories of a better life under German rule.

The National Question

Based on the experiences made with the Germans in 1941 and 1942, people fear that, after having defeated Bolshevism, Germany will turn the Russian territories into a colony or split Russia up into several states and subject these to its economic control. (Report by Ivan Bozhenko, Wehrmacht propaganda officer in Pskov, September 1943)

Many German officials (and Russian émigrés engaged on the German side) stressed the importance of the national question for waging a successful war against the Soviet Union. The key to winning Russian hearts and minds, one high-ranking Wehrmacht commander insisted in a March 1942 memorandum, was to promise “the establishment of a national Russia free from Bolshevism, closely dependent on Germany, under a national government.” Even a “sham government” would be effective propagandawise, for “the Russian will not adjust to a Russia reduced to a German colony.” At about the same time, similar conclusions were reached by German officials on the ground in northwest Russia:

It is necessary to give [the Russians] some kind of goal. Of course, to either be driven away to the Urals or to be placed under foreign rule is no desirable goal for the Russian. The Russian people today are surely not the people of 1917 any longer, as Russian émigrés in the West have portrayed them. They have generally gained self-esteem; it is decidedly a dangerous mistake to assume that [the Russians] are a slave people by birth who will be satisfied with some economic rehabilitation measures.

It appeared to German observers that Russians, across all social divisions, “think nationally.” Even people who welcomed the arrival of the Germans, one report went, “think nationally in the end.” During the first

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3 Max von Schenkendorff quoted in Dallin, German Rule in Russia, 519.
year of the occupation, however, most people in northwest Russia found little occasion to engage in abstract questions of national independence, consumed as they were by more pressing matters – securing their basic existence, cultivating their fields, and orienting themselves in a new and dangerous environment. This changed toward 1943, and not only in northwest Russia. By late 1942, people all across the occupied territories of Soviet Russia were beginning to think more and more about the future of the country, a development catalyzed not only by slightly improved economic conditions and the establishment of local self-government organs, but surely also by the activities of the Pskov Orthodox Mission (see Chapter 6). The Russian-language occupation press, too, couched its denunciations of Bolshevism in a language of Russian patriotism.

Olimpiada Poliakova was among those who feared for Russia’s national future. As she noted in her diary in November 1942, “It has now become completely clear that the Germans are not here to help us fight our war against the Bolsheviks. And we can trust no one but ourselves.” Others from among Poliakova’s educated milieu reacted with particular disaffection to the news, in late 1942, that the German authorities had turned down a request to expand the four-class school system to a six-class system. “People see in this rejection a sign that the Germans want to keep the Russians at the lowest level of culture,” one German propaganda officer noted. Here, of course, inhabitants were correctly measuring Nazi intentions. A sense of national humiliation also arose from daily interactions with the occupiers. Oleg Anisimov noted that signs posted around the cities and towns of northwest Russia saying “Nur für Deutsche” [“For Germans only”] or “Für Einheimische” [“For natives”] caused “more
resentment than is generally realized.”11 In Gatchina, members of the intelligentsia were reported to be “reacting sensitively to the attitude displayed towards them by German soldiers and officers,” in which they saw signs and proof that the Germans “intend to subjugate and enslave the peoples of Russia,” to treat Russians “as a downright servant people,” and to “erect a political order that accords with this purpose.”12 Peasants, too, were beginning to express dissatisfaction with the lack of national prospects. Propaganda officials in Luga reported that local peasants “feel disenfranchised despite the New Agrarian Order; they fear that they will never again have their own Russian government.”13

In the first months of 1943, the question of Russia’s political future was being discussed with increasing intensity. Seeking information about German long-term intentions, people began to ask about Hitler’s Mein Kampf, complaining that no summaries or extracts from this book could be found in the Russian-language press. To publish Mein Kampf, with Hitler’s musings about Russia ceasing to exist as an independent state, would obviously not solve the problem. There seemed to be little German authorities could do to control the negative trend. As one intelligence officer despondently reported, “The Russian people, who expected liberation, have become disappointed.”14 If Russian people, thinking nationally, were rapidly losing their illusions of Hitler as liberator, they were not about to replace them with illusions of Stalin as savior. As the popular response to the Vlasov campaign would show, identifying as Russian did not entail identifying with the Bolshevik regime.

Andrei Vlasov was a Russian Red Army general who, after being captured by the Wehrmacht in July 1942, presented himself as open to leading an anti-Communist Russian liberation movement. Hitler, wary of the possibility that a man like Vlasov could potentially rally millions of

11 Anisimov, The German Occupation, 30.
Russians against Germany, never allowed the formation of a real Russian Liberation Army. Nevertheless, Vlasov was allowed to become the figurehead of a “Russian Committee” with the aim of uniting Russians in the struggle against Bolshevism and building a “New Russia” in which,
according to a thirteen-point program, collective farms would be abol-
ished, civil rights restored, and “the regime of terror and violence”
eliminated.15

News of Vlasov and his program spread quickly across the occupied
territories in late 1942 and early 1943 through leaflets, articles in the
German-controlled press, and word of mouth. The message found fertile
soil, especially as the former general appeared in person for public
speeches in parts of central and northwest Russia. Many inhabitants
approached their nearest German headquarters requesting to be taken
into Vlasov’s army; others wrote letters to the local press enthusiastically
proclaiming their support.16 While this army never materialized as an
independent force, Russian volunteer fighters in the German army did
begin to wear the insignia “ROA” (Russkaia Osvoboditelnaiia Armia,
or Russian Liberation Army). When one such Russian unit marched
through Pskov on June 22, 1943 to celebrate “liberation day,” led by
an officer carrying the Russian tricolor flag, local onlookers reacted
emotionally, creating “scenes of moving patriotism,” as one witness
described it.17 Enthusiasm about Vlasov soon faded and turned to disap-
pointment and resentment as people realized they were being fooled. Yet
the very stir caused by the campaign suggests that much Russian patriotic
sentiment in the occupied territories, kindled by German oppression,
remained inherently and strongly anti-Bolshevik. Increasing national
sentiment widened the distance between the population and the German
occupiers, but failed to bring people much further into the Soviet fold. It
was the changing military balance at the front, not political attitudes, that
drove the eventual shift of allegiance.

15 In general, see Dallin, German Rule in Russia, 553–586; Rolf-Dieter Müller, An der Seite der
Wehrmacht. Hitlers ausländische Helfer beim “Kreuzzug gegen den Bolschewismus” 1941–1945 (Berlin:
Ch. Links Verlag, 2007), 216–226.

16 “An der Vorsitzenden des russischen Komitees Generalleutnant Wlassow,” March 15, 1943, PA
AA, R 60726; V.A.A. beim AOK 16, “Betr.: Wirkung des Wlassow-Aufrufes nach Gefangenenvernehmungen,”
26–281/31; 126. Infanterie-Division, 1c, “Propaganda in die russ. Zivilbevölkerung,” April 27, 1943, BA-MA, RH
letters of support, see “Pisma, prodiktovannye serdtsem,” Za rodinu, 67 (March 21, 1943), 6. See also Rolf-Dieter Müller, The Unknown Eastern Front: The Wehrmacht and Hitler’s Foreign Soldiers
(London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 227; Cohen, Smolensk under the Nazis, 177; Karov, “Nemetskaia
okkupatsiia,” 367; Vilfrid K. Shtrik-Shtrikfeldt, Protiv Stalinia i Hitlera (Frankfurt am Main: Posev,
1975), 218.

Figure 8.2 “General Vlasov in the Liberated Territories.” Article in the German-controlled periodical *Novyi Put* documenting Vlasov’s spring 1943 tour of northwest Russia.

*Source: Novyi Put, May 15, 1943*
Turning of the Tide

News from the front was eagerly sought out and discussed by people in the occupied territories. They knew that the military balance would ultimately determine the fate of their country. In the initial weeks and months, the Germans often claimed that Moscow and Leningrad were on the verge of collapse; rumors were sometimes heard that they had already fallen. When it became obvious that the opposite was true, doubts set in. So long as Moscow and Leningrad remained in Soviet hands, uncertainty lingered. That uncertainty was reinforced in late 1942 and in the first months of 1943. Soviet forces mounted an attack on Velikie Luki, reconquering that city by mid-January 1943. Smaller gains were made south of Lake Ladoga, where the Red Army forced open a land corridor to relieve the besieged Leningrad by January 18, while Demiansk was retaken by early March. At the same time, the more decisive Battle of Stalingrad ended in a devastating defeat for the Wehrmacht. Word of the German setbacks spread quickly – “with astounding speed,” according to one German report.\(^\text{18}\)

The “front behind the front” changed as well: After a lull during the early months of 1943, the partisan movement began to gain ground toward summer. The 281st Security Division reported in late June that not only the successes of the Soviet winter offensive but also “the obvious powerlessness” of the Germans in fighting the partisans were leading more and more people to count on and prepare for the eventual return of Bolshevik power. The Germans received fewer reports from the rural population on the appearance and actions of partisans; meanwhile, more observations were made of villagers openly welcoming and celebrating the arrival of partisans, singing songs to glorify them. The partisans intensified their own propaganda efforts, distributing large amounts of leaflets and newspapers. In many places, partisans arranged village gatherings to inform people about the Soviet victories at Stalingrad and elsewhere and to instruct them not to heed German orders.\(^\text{19}\)

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In certain areas, the partisans had wrested control from the Germans by October 1942. By that time, the Idritsa district was no longer governed by Germans. Of eighteen assigned district elders, only six were active in their offices; the rest had been executed or captured by partisans or had fled. In the neighboring Sebezh and Pustoshka districts, the situation was even worse from the German point of view. The summer of 1943 witnessed a further waning of German power in the southernmost districts. By late July, only one of the nine districts under the presumptive command of the 281st Security Division was not under substantial partisan influence. In the others, partisan activities were having a “more or less paralyzing effect on popular mood.”

Rising popular uncertainty following German setbacks at the front and increasing partisan activity in the rear gave way to a full-blown crisis in September and October as the Germans began preparations to withdraw from the northwest Russian territories. On August 12, Hitler ordered the establishment of a so-called “Eastern Wall,” a line of defense stretching from Pskov to Nevel, behind which the Wehrmacht was to concentrate its forces. The construction commenced on September 1, for which tens of thousands of civilians were forcibly mobilized, causing “a downright sense of panic” in many localities. At the same time, the Germans began to prepare for a new round of scorched-earth activity. Equipment and food supplies were to be carried off or destroyed, and the inhabitants were to be evacuated. On September 21, German authorities issued the order to forcibly transport an estimated 900,000 people out of the territories located between the front line and the “Eastern Wall.”

The evacuation order confirmed the assumptions, suspicions, and rumors that the Germans were on the verge of retreat. Combined with the extensive forced-labor mobilization, the order had a debilitating effect on popular mood. People quickly reacted by ceasing to make deliveries; escaping into the woods with their families, animals, and belongings; disregarding German orders and instructions; and generally aligning themselves with the partisans. Members of the self-government organs and


20 “Aktenvermerk über die Nebenstellenleiterbesprechung am 31.10.1942 beim WiKdo Opotschka (Anlage 1),” BA-MA, RW 31/903, 40–43.


23 Kilian, Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft, 460–462.
auxiliary police began deserting in large numbers, not least because the partisans issued promises of amnesty and the opportunity to “redeem one’s guilt” for those deemed to have betrayed the Motherland. Defections multiplied; even Russians who had been regarded as the most trustworthy and reliable servants of German power now joined the partisans. As German officials in Gdov lamented, “the behavior of the population is audacious and insubordinate.” Central occupation authorities also left little room for doubt: “Confidence and trust have given way to an even deeper disappointment, since the hope for a secure future, which appeared so justified, has disappeared. Distrustful reservedness, non-observance of instructions and stipulations, and partly open revolt and hostility are the dangerous signs of a total change in attitude.”

The September–October crisis marked a watershed in the relationship between the civilian population and the German authorities. For the first time since the occupation began, inhabitants massively subverted and evaded German power. People gathered their valuables and took to the forest as soon as they learned of the evacuation; some conducted their own scorched-earth policy against the Germans, driving their tractors into the swamp, killing off livestock, and setting fire to supplies of hay and straw. In the end, hundreds of thousands successfully avoided evacuation, having no desire to abandon their homes for an unknown fate, possibly permanent exile. For the most part against their will, about half a million inhabitants had been rounded up and transported westward, mostly to the Baltic countries and Germany, by April 1944. Meanwhile, thousands of inhabitants, many of whom had previously served as German auxiliaries, joined the partisan movement, which registered a massive increase in personnel. While 4,836 partisans were registered as of October 1, one month later the number had grown to 11,343. In January 1944, the figure passed 25,000. With the Germans on the verge of retreat, collective resistance became a viable choice.

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24 Report by the head of the political department of the 3rd Leningrad Partisan Brigade, July 9, 1943, in Dzeniskevich et al., V tylu vraga (1943), 123.
27 Wi In Nord, “KTB Nr. 10 (1.10.43–31.12.43),” BA-MA, RW 31/954, 17.
29 Kilian, Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft, 468.
30 Hill, The War, 165.
In mid-January 1944, the decisive Soviet offensive against German forces outside Leningrad commenced. The German divisions retreated behind the “Eastern Wall,” from where they were finally driven out of northwest Russia in summer 1944.\textsuperscript{31} Massive violence and destruction accompanied the retreat. Everything considered valuable – including 35,000 tons of grain, tens of thousands of farm animals, much agricultural and industrial equipment and machinery, seed grain, fruit trees, and bee colonies – had been loaded onto railway cars and transported out of northwest Russia by the end of 1943.\textsuperscript{32} The occupiers left behind them a trail of devastation, fire, and blood. Hundreds of villages were burned to the ground, and an unknown number of people who had resisted evacuation or been suspected of aiding partisans were shot or locked inside barns and burned to death.\textsuperscript{33}

**The Return of Soviet Power**

The return of the Red Army brought the population of northwest Russia back into the Soviet fold. Between two and a half and three years of life under German rule, or under the violent claims to power of both Germans and partisans, came to an end. Hardship and violence had become the stuff of everyday life for large parts of the population. Tens of thousands had been murdered or perished under the conditions brought about by war and German occupation policies; hundreds of thousands had lost family members and other loved ones. Most people were relieved to see the approaching end of a war that had caused so much suffering. At the same time, many feared what would come next.

The popular rejection of German power apparent by late 1943 did not mean that everyone was longing for the Bolshevik regime to return, even though many certainly did and had done since 1941. Younger inhabitants and those with loved ones fighting in the Red Army were most likely to be awaiting the return of “our own Red Army,” of “our people – the Russians.”\textsuperscript{34} The wartime diary of Mariia Germanova, a young (b. 1922)


village teacher and self-conscious Soviet patriotka, contains numerous passages reflecting a steadfast Soviet patriotism undoubtedly shared by many of her generation. Witness how she describes her first encounter with a returning Red Army soldier in late 1943: “Here he comes! Oh, dear, what happiness! And how handsome you are! With a bright star on your field cap, in a real Red Army greatcoat, in Russian boots, with a rifle. Oh, my true and dear fighter [nastroiaschii, rodnoi boets]? How good you are! How gently and warmly you embraced me!” Soviet official reports, while often overly optimistic, ring true when describing how many peasants greeted the Red Army with demonstrations of support, hugging the soldiers and crying with joy.

Soviet authorities also felt the need to organize demonstrations of loyalty, a tacit admission that people’s political attitudes left something to be desired. From late 1943 onward, inhabitants sent patriotic letters of support to Soviet authorities, often on behalf of village communities. The letters typically speak of the suffering and humiliation experienced under German rule and end with fiery affirmations of loyalty to the Soviet Union (and, sometimes, Stalin). While some of them probably came into being as spontaneous initiatives and thus testify to a grassroots Soviet patriotism, many others were obviously the result of an official propaganda campaign. Numerous handwritten letters addressed to Stalin or Zhdanov “from the partisans and workers” of various districts have identical wording, meaning that a standard text must have been issued. The letters carry thousands of signatures, a large number of which consist of crosses instead of names, scribbled down by illiterate peasants. This demonstrates one method by which Soviet authorities sought to affirm the “all-people” character of the struggle against the Germans, but it tells us little about attitudes among the signatories. We may reasonably assume that while many of them appreciated the opportunity to symbolically rally behind the country and its leadership in the struggle now raging to drive the hated Germans out of Soviet territory, others would feel compelled to sign for more pragmatic reasons.

35 Diary of Mariia Germanova, entry of October 3, 1943, author’s private archive. Germanova’s diary has also been published as Maria Guermanova, Le journal de Maria: Une institutrice soviétique dans la guerre, 1941–1943, ed. by Oleg Nikolaiev and Nicolas Werth (Paris: Editions Autrement, 2014).
37 See TsGAIPD SPb, 0–116/9/1111.
38 See, for instance, letters from the Demiansk, Volosovo, and Batetsk districts in TsGAIPD SPb, 0–116/9/1602; 0–116/9/1597; 0–116/9/1595.
Relief and terror spread across northwest Russia as the Red Army returned. People joyfully greeted Soviet troops, and people feared the Soviet state’s wrath. In late December 1943, German intelligence officers noted with bafflement that “the majority of the population does not wish for the reestablishment of Soviet rule,” an observation they found to be “remarkable, particularly considering the living conditions of the urban population.” Yet Soviet citizens who had lived through the 1930s were used to destitution. They were also familiar with mass repression, and as the Red Army approached, inhabitants naturally expected a new round of state violence against persons deemed to have served the enemy. One witness recalled the mood of the final days of the occupation, when the Germans were forcibly evacuating people and burning villages to the ground:

All around villages were burning. Maybe one could go hide in the woods, but people were afraid. They were afraid that the Germans would find them, but people were even more afraid of their own. We had already heard from the prisoners of war how Soviet authorities had no mercy on those who remained under the Germans and especially so on persons who had worked for the Germans.

Another witness, who visited Pskov in the winter of 1943–1944, found little evidence of joyful expectations:

Nearly all Soviet people took for granted that the entire population of the German-held areas would be subject to penalization . . . In those days, I was approached daily by scores of ordinary people who sought my advice as to what was best for them to do: go to Germany before the Red Army arrived and try to start a new life abroad, or stay where they were at the risk of being sent to Siberia. Both prospects were gloomy.

Rumors that Red Army men were committing atrocities against inhabitants of the occupied territories were already circulating by early 1943. They continued to do so throughout the year, probably helped by German propaganda efforts. The rumors were not unfounded. In early 1942, Soviet authorities in temporarily reconquered districts had in some cases executed all or most persons found to have been working for the Germans.
According to Dmitrii Karov, Red Army troops descended on the civilian population in Nevel immediately after taking back the town in autumn 1943, singling out everyone who had somehow cooperated with or worked for the German authorities. Reportedly, auxiliary policemen were shot or hanged first, together with their families. Afterward the same fate befell persons who had guarded roads, firemen, truck drivers, millers, and even cleaning ladies. Rumors of the executions spread quickly, making “an enormous impression” on partisans as well as civilians. As Karov reported, people were appalled at the hanging and shooting of people who had done small-scale, menial tasks for the Germans in order to feed their families. Many partisans operating in the vicinity around Nevel had relatives and friends who were among the victims; some approached their partisan commanders demanding that they contact Moscow for an official explanation. Partisan leaders responded to the protests with arrests and even executions, causing a large number of rank-and-file partisans to desert; some even defected to German antipartisan detachments.

The violence in Nevel may have been exceptional (I have found no mention of similar occurrences elsewhere in northwest Russia). Nevertheless, it was an extreme example of the general distrust that Soviet authorities displayed toward people in the reconquered territories. In the Stalinist view, having failed to retreat with the Red Army and to offer unending resistance to the occupiers was regarded as state treason. In massive purges of the party, a large number of communists were excluded for having taken an “insufficiently active” stance vis-à-vis the partisan movement. Many were arrested, tried, and sentenced. Some were executed; most were sent to the Gulag.

The state’s distrust of people who had lived in the occupied territories was hardly unfounded. Tens of thousands had indeed worked for the Germans in various capacities. Thousands had participated in the brutal antipartisan war and helped enforced German power in the occupied territories. Moreover, under German rule people had been exposed to a

46 In the Leningrad region, according to Nikita Lomagin, more than 15,000 former village elders and members of the auxiliary police received prison terms of 10–25 years. See the Russian TV documentary “Za blokadnym koltsem” (5-TV, 2009), https://perma.cc/3JIL-Z3KK.
new political climate and a potentially subversive body of information. The absence of the Soviet secret police, combined with the presence of German propaganda about the nature and extent of Soviet state terror (which could hardly fail to resonate with the personal experiences of large parts of the population), meant that people had been at liberty to think and talk about the Soviet regime among themselves with little or no restraint. The population had been exposed head-on to alternative interpretations of the Soviet political order. Food for new and potentially anti-Soviet thought had been provided by Russian-language propaganda distributed by the Germans,\textsuperscript{47} by the Orthodox clergy in their sermons and publications, and by inhabitants returning from guided tours to Germany, where they had seen that conditions of everyday life proved very different from the negative portrayals in Soviet propaganda.\textsuperscript{48} Moreover, for a significant part of the rural population in northwest Russia, decollectivization and the revival of church life had brought relief in the midst of war and occupation. In fact, peasant experiences during the occupation gave rise to stories of a better life under German rule that resurfaced amid the hardships of the immediate postwar years.

Wartime conditions had been harsh in the unoccupied territories of the Soviet Union, and they did not improve much in the immediate postoccupation and postwar years. Peasants as well as other Soviet citizens expected peace to bring positive change, hoping the government would recognize the people’s sacrifices by moderating its repressive policies and even abolishing the kolkhoz. Peasant hopes were soon dashed, however, as the regime took measures to tighten kolkhoz discipline and raise delivery quotas to new heights.\textsuperscript{49} Those deemed by the Soviet government to have collaborated with the Germans were hit especially hard. In the Pskov region, hundreds of “families of collaborators” were deprived of 11,000 hectares of land in 1945 and thus “condemned to a life of near starvation.”\textsuperscript{50} At the same time, reeling from the destruction wrought by war and occupation, the country descended into its fourth (and last) major

\textsuperscript{47} By 1943, three Russian-language newspapers were published, with a combined weekly print run of 820,000 copies. Kilian, \textit{Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft}, 355.


famine in 1946–1947. Little wonder, then, that many peasants who had benefited from wartime decollectivization experienced the first postwar years as a plunge into total destitution. Aleksandra Savina (b. 1928), a wartime inhabitant of the village Merovo (Luga district), recalled her postwar experiences:

The Germans left. [The Bolsheviks] re-established the kolkhoz, gathered an assembly, and elected a chairman. And then the brigadier came and said that we need to work, to resurrect everything . . . Our legs were like this, swollen, from hunger. 1947 was especially terrible. There was nothing to plant . . . I do not particularly remember Victory Day. We were in the field – it was sowing season . . . I only heard: Victory. The youngsters were happy, and old women who received “pokhoronki” [official letters to inform of deceased soldiers] cried. That’s all. And back to work. Nothing good [came of it] . . . After the war, things didn’t get better for a long time. It was better with the Germans. They somehow helped you out . . . And now one works for nothing [za palochki] again. And no one helps you. And the hunger. The hunger was such that you cannot describe it. There weren’t even nettles or saltbush anywhere . . . While ploughing you gathered an armful of weeds [popyshi] that grew on the fields, stuffed your mouth full, and ate. And that’s it. Even though our farm was empty, you still had to deliver 40 kg of meat, 200 (if not 400) kg of potatoes, such-and-such amounts of milk, wool, and eggs. I had to work on the sly and steal hay. I bought meat and eggs in order to give it to the state. And then I got sick and tired of it, and I thought if they come to arrest me, I will hang myself. 

In the neighboring village of Zherebud, wartime inhabitants described similar scenes. As Aleksei Fedorov recalled:

When 1944 came we began to live in the kolkhoz again, we worked za palochki once more, and you could survive only by what you grew on your garden plot, for the state took everything else for the army . . . Starvation set in again: 200 grams of bread and 20 kopek per labor-day . . . I remember Victory Day well. We were on the field. Our postman at the time, Nikolai Petrovich, picked up the mail in Merevo and came straight to us on the field: “The war is over!” . . . And we were so happy, we unharnessed the horses: vacation! The weather that day was terrible – snow with rain. We approached the village, but in each village there was a “podgoniala” [overseer], as we called them, from the party raikom. As soon as we approached the village, he told us: “Victory, victory, there’s no victory – back to the field!” He turned us around immediately, and we went back to

51 Zubkova, Russia after the War.
52 Account of A. I. Savina (b. 1928), in Vinogradov, Okkupatsiia, 163.
ploughing. 1947, I remember, was such a hungry year that people swelled. That’s how life was back then.53

During and just after the war, people in Soviet-held districts close to the front began to compare their own conditions to those which they thought prevailed in neighboring German-occupied districts and in Germany proper. Rumors and stories about a better life on the other side of the front were circulating, stories that partly reflected wishful thinking and partly stemmed from real peasant experience. “I wish the Germans would come and divide all the hay and the land,” one peasant was recorded as saying while working in the field. “Just you wait a little,” said another, “and the Germans will come and dismantle all the kolkhozes. And about the Germans mistreating the civilian population, this is all a lie.”54 Soviet propaganda, of course, brimmed with depictions of German atrocities. But Soviet citizens were used to relating skeptically to information issued by the government and often had their own opinions about what went on in the occupied territories. As one storekeeper in the village of Poddube reportedly said, “The talk of Germans torturing the people is a lie. I have already asked many people about this and people who lived with the Germans respond unanimously that life with the Germans is good, and if only the Germans were here with us, I would gladly remain with them.”55 A resident of Malaia Vishera, a northwest Russian town briefly occupied by German troops in October–November 1941, made similar remarks: “When Malaia Vishera was occupied, I lived comfortably, but when the Red Army came I left town because our army is worse than the Germans. The Germans are very cultured, polite, and beautiful people.”56 Another wartime resident of the same town let slip the following “unhealthy and anti-Soviet” words in April and May 1943: “I wish this Soviet power would be replaced and that another order would come into being . . . No Germans lived in my apartment, but they came to me with

53 Account of A. G. Fedorov (b. 1930), in ibid., 141. For similar testimony from the Luga area, see the accounts of N. N. Antonova (b. 1932), A. I. Ivanov (b. 1931), E. I. Nikolaeva (b. 1932), and A. I. Petrova (b. 1914), in ibid., 65–66, 73, 83, 153; and that of R. P. Similnikov (b. 1929), in Vinogradov and Pleizher, Bitva za Leningrad, 305–306.
54 Report by the head of the Leningrad-region NKVD administration on political moods among the peasantry, November 14, 1942, in Dzeniskevich and Cherepenina, Iz raionov oblasti soobshchajuat, 223–225. Similar conversations were frequently recorded among Red Army soldiers. See Edele, “What Are We Fighting for?,” 255.
55 Report by the Malaia Vishera district NKVD on anti-Soviet incidents, August 30, 1943, in Voronina, Notgorodkaia zemlia (1941–1945), 76.
56 Report by the Malaia Vishera district NKVD on political moods among the population, February 17, 1943, in ibid., 68.
their laundry, and for this they gave me bread, rice, grain, and other food, and my children ate well under the Germans and we lived better than we do now.”

Numerous similar utterances were recorded in March and April 1944. Some referred to favorable material conditions in Germany, others to their own experience, and yet others to the stories of relatives and friends about life in the occupied territories. “If Soviet power remains,” one railway worker remarked on 20 March,

then they will torture the people, and we will not breathe freely, but, God willing, this government will be replaced. People who were with the Germans relate that they lived very well, there was as much food as you could want, but as soon as our people arrived then the oppression began again . . . and there was absolutely nothing to eat.

These conversations about how people had lived better under the Germans became widespread to the point that the authorities were worried. On July 29, 1944, a Novgorod party chief distributed a memorandum to his subordinates warning of “anti-Soviet and anti-kolkhoz moods among certain citizens” in the region, and particularly in districts that had been occupied by the Germans. Such moods were said to be manifested in “anti-Soviet conversations and provocative rumors intended to praise the life of individual farmers under the Germans.” Party officials in the Kalinin region similarly lamented that the occupiers “tried to poison our people with the venom of doubt and disbelief . . . They distributed the most vile slander about the system in the Soviet Union [and] tried to discredit the kolkhoz system . . . some backward people came close to accepting the bait . . . Among them the opinion arose that the Germans were not all that bloodthirsty.”

Such opinions could still be heard in late 1947 when German soldiers and officers stood trial for war crimes in Novgorod. A photojournalist present at one of the trials was overheard excusing the Germans for their misdeeds by saying: “The Germans committed such atrocities because the partisans attacked them – that is, it was war.” He went on to characterize

57 Report by the Malaia Vishera district NKVD on political moods among the population, May 24, 1943, in ibid., 70.
58 Report by the Malaia Vishera district NKGB on anti-Soviet incidents, April 6, 1944, in ibid., 97. For another example from the Leningrad suburb of Gatchina, see Dzeniskevich and Cherepenina, Iz raionov oblasti soobschaitit, 538–539.
60 Boterbloem, Life and Death under Stalin, 59.
the general relationship between the Germans and the civilian population: “I was in the Shimsk district across the river Shelon, and there I heard not one bad word about the Germans. On the contrary, people even praise the Germans for their good behavior. They didn’t touch the population . . . and they gave people land to till, and the taxes demanded were small.” While there can be little doubt that the story of German oppression and violence resonated most widely with what people had lived through, the other story of a better life under German rule tenaciously lived on as a subversive echo of the peasantry’s occupation experience.

**Conclusion**

The fragility of political loyalties enabled significant parts of the population in northwest Russia to actively support the Wehrmacht in its war against the Bolsheviks and to passively acquiesce to German rule. Likewise, it was not any solid form of loyalty but rather pragmatic power realism that triggered the collective acts of resistance against German authority in late 1943. To be sure, the Germans had given the population ample reason to despise their rule and to feel humiliated as Russians. But popular grievances resulting from German violence and oppression existed prior to this as well. It was only with German power critically weakened and the Wehrmacht verging on retreat that hundreds of thousands collectively refused to heed German orders and sabotaged their measures.

The end of occupation brought relief and joy, but also fearful expectations of revenge and punishment. We may reasonably assume that the peasant population at large resented being forced back onto the collective farms, where material conditions remained harsh throughout the first postwar years. Experiences of life under German rule in northwest Russia gave rise to not only a story of destitution, oppression, and violence, but also one of relative material improvement amid hopes for a new and better political order. When the Germans retreated and the Soviet government returned, this second story persisted and continued to influence people in the form of echoes of past life. Some people – not only in the countryside, and many enough that Soviet authorities felt compelled to issue internal

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61 Report by the Novgorod region MGB administration on popular responses to the trials of German war criminals, December 16, 1947, in Petrov, Tainaia voina, 217. Soviet authorities in other parts of the country were also worried about the lack of awareness of German atrocities among parts of the population. See Niels Bo Poulsen, “The Soviet Extraordinary State Commission. An Analysis of the Commission’s Investigative Work in War and Post-War Stalinist Society” (PhD diss., University of Copenhagen, 2005), 306.
warnings against the spread of “anti-Soviet and anti-kolkhoz moods” – took to lamenting the prevailing conditions by comparing them unfavorably with life under the Germans (or what they imagined this life was like), which was perceived, rightly or wrongly, as better and more free. The period under German rule appeared to some of them as a breathing space between pre- and postwar Stalinism.
On the face of it, the war between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union appears extremely clearcut. Germany attacked the Soviet Union, intending to annihilate what the Nazis perceived as “Judeo-Bolshevism,” decimate and enslave the Slavic population, and populate the conquered lands with Germanic settlers. Behind the front lines, German forces murdered Jews and Roma indiscriminately, while directly or indirectly causing the deaths of millions of Soviet prisoners of war and ordinary civilians. Nazi Germany, in short, waged a terrible war of conquest and destruction. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, was engaged in a defensive struggle against this unprecedentedly murderous enemy. The Red Army ultimately stopped the Germans in their tracks, drove them back to Berlin, and contributed decisively to the Allied victory in World War II. These basic facts are not in question. Yet this overarching story of Soviet resistance and victory is not the only true story about the Soviet Union at war. Amplified by decades of official heroic memorialization, it is certainly the loudest. As such, it tends to drown out a dissonant chorus of voices from below, concealing a tangled web of deeply ambiguous experiences, a mosaic of individual and collective histories that demand our attention if we are to understand how Soviet society lived through its Great Patriotic War.

Historians have long regarded the Russians as a decisive bulwark of Soviet wartime loyalty. The case of northwest Russia suggests otherwise. The region’s mostly rural inhabitants were certainly less inclined to support the Soviet government in the war against Nazi Germany than accepted wisdom would have us believe. Collectivization and Stalinist terror had virtually primed the population for support of an invading force seeking to defeat the Bolsheviks. Stalin’s rule, in other words, failed to produce robust bonds of loyalty that would reliably pull citizens into the regime’s orbit. While Stalinism certainly provided opportunities for upward social mobility and captivating ideals of progress and justice, leading part of the population to identify with the regime’s values and
visions, for most Soviet people Stalin’s regime did not rest on popular consent and participation so much as it relied on policies of extremely pervasive coercion and repression. As one historian succinctly summarized, “Nowhere did the regime succeed in stabilizing its presence in such a way as to make the exemplary application of punitive violence unnecessary.”

For religious peasants during collectivization and after, the Stalinist order was even held to be beyond the realm of worldly legitimacy altogether, perceived instead as a satanic force. When the Germans arrived in 1941, many peasants welcomed them.

Here, one might raise the following objection: If most people, and particularly most peasants, in northwest Russia were so disaffected with the Stalinist political order, why did they not collectively resist Soviet evacuation efforts in July–August 1941? Why did they not rise as one against the Bolsheviks as the Germans invaded? The answer is that widespread disaffection with Stalinist rule did not necessarily translate into open resistance against it, particularly not in such a chaotic and unpredictable time as that of the first days and weeks of a military invasion. Importantly, there was hardly any space for concerted political action. For a collective movement of resistance to happen at this decisive moment, a determined, coordinated, and coordinating anti-Bolshevik leadership would have had to exist – and there was no such thing. The only really capable force in Stalinist society was the party-state, which made sure to mobilize most able-bodied men of military age for its needs as soon as the war began.

Why, then, did not more people resist Soviet mobilization in the summer of 1941? Why did mobilization proceed in an orderly fashion in most places, with no mass refusal among the tens of thousands of recruits? Does this not mean that people were willing to fight and die for the Soviet system after all? I would suggest three answers: First, many were certainly willing to fight and die, but usually not for Stalin’s regime as such. Stalin and the Bolsheviks knew this well, which is why they portrayed the war in terms of a ground-level patriotism rather than Communist ideology. A second answer is that call-ups were not eager to fight, but feared the consequences of refusal. They knew how fiercely the Soviet regime responded to signs of insubordination in peacetime. Now, with the country under attack, those deemed to be traitors would have to expect punishment of the most severe sort. Third, many recruits expected the Red Army to strike back and quickly drive out the invaders. To refuse

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1 Baberowski, Verbrannte Erde, 171.
participation in an expected victory would be foolish, whatever one’s opinion of the Bolsheviks. People had perfectly valid reasons to heed the state’s call for mobilization, and loyalty to Stalin’s regime was not prominent among them.²

To certain groups of people in the occupied territories, it soon became clear that the German order represented the extreme opposite of a viable alternative to Stalinism. Jews, Roma, and mental patients were murdered indiscriminately. Prisoners of war perished in their tens of thousands from starvation, exposure, and mistreatment, mainly between October 1941 and April 1942. Beginning in fall 1941 and carrying on into the first months of 1942, starvation threatened, burdened, and took the lives of thousands of civilians, primarily in the suburbs south of Leningrad but also in other districts close to the front line. The fate of the prisoners became widely known and caused much consternation among the surrounding population. Overall, however, there is little to indicate that German mass killings and the starvation induced by German food policy had a decisive impact on popular attitudes and behavior. The atrocities remained unknown, or a matter of hearsay, to most people. Geography played its part, as many rural localities were isolated from the outside world by near-impassable swamps and deep forests. Moreover, much information about German misdeeds blended with Soviet and partisan propaganda, which people had learned to distrust. Many saw the lack of food as unhappy side effects of a terrible war. They could not know that German planners and decision makers were expecting a catastrophic famine in the Soviet Union, envisaging the death of millions as an inevitable and convenient result of the economic exploitation of the occupied territories.

While thousands were being murdered by German killing units or were dying from starvation, disease, and exposure under conditions brought about directly or indirectly by German policies, an altogether different story was unfolding in parts of the northwest Russian countryside. The de facto dissolution of the collective farms in the fall of 1941 and the institutionalization of semiprivate farming under the New Agrarian Order of 1942 restored a measure of freedom to the lives of untold thousands of peasants. Many of them experienced real improvement in the midst of war and occupation, some even attaining a level of material wellbeing that compared favorably to 1930s kolkhoz life, which reinforced hopes of a better future without the Bolsheviks. While the German policy of

² Reese, “Motivations to Serve”; Reese, Why Stalin’s Soldiers Fought; Edele, “What Are We Fighting for?”
decollectivization played a role here, so too did the occupiers’ lack of ability to supervise and control, which resulted in many opportunities to hold back grain and conceal cultivated plots, as well as to make fortunes on the black market at the expense of the urban population.

Another factor that influenced popular attitudes was the religious revival that took place as hundreds of churches were opened, repaired, and rebuilt under the auspices of the Pskov Orthodox Mission. An intimate connection between religion and anti-Bolshevik sentiment had been forged during the antireligious onslaughts of the 1930s. This became strikingly evident in the occupied territories as people carried portraits of Soviet leaders out of recently reopened churches that had previously functioned as atheist museums and set fire to them, or as priests held sermons praising the German “liberators” and denouncing “Satanic Bolshevism.”

Yet there were tensions present in the new life in the countryside as well as in the revived church. While both fields were potential rallying points for the continued support of German power, they also gave rise to conditions facilitating its subversion. In the countryside, the burdens of forced labor deportations, excessive delivery quotas, and coercive requisitioning methods were major causes of embitterment. In particular, one should not underestimate the impact of the deportation to Germany of some 50,000 persons – about 4 percent of the entire population – during the first half of 1942. Most of them left parents, siblings, and other relatives at home, which means that hundreds of thousands of people were left behind worrying about the fate of their loved ones. Rumors of their poor treatment spread quickly and contributed to much resentment, despite German propaganda efforts. The church, too, while supportive of German power, was politically ambivalent. On the one hand, the priests encouraged believers to support the German war effort. But at the same time, the clergy reminded believers that they were Russians with a long national tradition. Some of the priests, countering German orders, imbued their sermons with a national message. Theirs was an anti-Soviet form of Russian patriotism that was only tactically and pragmatically pro-German.

The population of northwest Russia did not rise against the invader during the initial phase, nor in 1942, and not for most of 1943. On the contrary, most people continued to passively tolerate or actively support the German occupation. As late as mid-1943, when a German victory was increasingly in doubt, an estimated 32,000–33,000 persons – by no means a small amount, representing 15 percent of the male working population – were still working directly under German orders in the various institutions of the local self-government or serving in the police and antipartisan units.
The Soviet partisan movement in northwest Russia, on the other hand, remained relatively small, numbering between 2,500 and 5,000 members until September–October 1943 and the following months, when the Germans began preparing their retreat. At this point the partisan ranks swelled to more than 20,000 due to the influx of inhabitants escaping German evacuation measures, and defectors from among the police and antipartisan forces.

While partisan joiners were relatively few until late 1943, their sympathizers were much more numerous, especially among the tens of thousands of inhabitants who had relatives fighting in the Red Army. These people, emotionally bound up with the fates of their loved ones, were often hostile or at least much more reserved vis-à-vis the German authorities, and they were more liable to support the partisan movement. More important, the Germans’ forced labor deportations, brutal and condescending behavior toward Russian civilians and workers in general, and atrocities visited upon unarmed civilians and prisoners of war in particular resulted in popular grievances that moved many toward an anti-German stance as time went by.

In other words, different people, with their various reservoirs of experience of prewar life and life under the Germans, had good reasons to side with either regime. Yet ultimately, few supported this or that power wholeheartedly and unconditionally. There were “true believers” and passionate loyalists on both sides, willing to fight and die in order to defeat their enemy, but they made up a minority. Among those who took up positions of authority in the local self-government apparatus or joined the auxiliary police forces, many tried to harness German power in pursuit of more mundane and short-term aims, such as securing material and physical safety. Some used their power to subvert the German regime, secretly helping the partisans. The crucial insight here is that what on first sight looks like “collaboration” often turns out to be something entirely different. Just as everywhere else, people in German-occupied northwest Russia were “switch points of power” — they often did things with the power vested in them that ran counter to the intentions and interests of their superiors.

Hundreds of thousands of people in occupied northwest Russia, the great majority, were not vested with any power, did not participate in governance, and did not serve in armed units. Most of them wanted as little as possible to do with either regime, preferring to keep out of harm’s way by lying low, securing their daily bread by working where they could or by tilling their land. Their default mode of behavior was evasionism,
manifested in tactics of (outward) submission and adaptation, or what I have termed *calculated pragmatism*.

Calculated pragmatism meant being inclined to heed the stronger power, being prepared to shift one’s professed loyalties in accordance with expected changes in the balance of power, and having a foot in each camp. This chameleon tactic was a sensible response to the pervasive threat of violence from both German and Soviet partisan forces. It was also a sensible response to the military and political undecidedness prevailing until late 1943. Up to this time, few felt sure about the outcome of the war. The Germans were still in control of enormous Soviet territories, yet they had not conquered Moscow or Leningrad. People were mostly under some degree of German control, but they also faced Soviet power in the shape of partisans and other Soviet agents, as well as through the potentiality of a future German defeat and the consequent reestablishment of the Soviet regime. For the time being, it remained unclear to people whether the ongoing war would put an end to the Bolshevik regime.

The behavior of northwest Russian inhabitants under German occupation mirrors what other historians have found when studying Ukraine and Belarus. Indeed, evasionism and pragmatism reflects how people generally position themselves during upheaval and conflict. Only a militant fringe actively supports or subverts either side, while the great majority tries to lie low, drifting along with the tide of the war; when neutrality becomes inadequate, people turn to the stronger power, working the system to their least disadvantage. While there is nothing particularly Russian about this, it is worth recalling that Russians were used to defending their habitat from the encroachments of outside powers. As Geoffrey Hosking notes with regard to their attitude during the Civil War: “For most of the time, most of the population retreated into a besieged localism, praying that governments of all political persuasions might leave them alone. This was an attitude for which history had prepared them well.” The Stalinist assaults of the 1930s certainly hardened this attitude among the peasantry, while also producing willingness to support a foreign invader against the regime.

Just how patriotic, then, was the Great Patriotic War in northwest Russia? Sheila Fitzpatrick argued in *Everyday Stalinism* that the Soviet state

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3 See Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair*; Penter, *Kohle für Hitler und Stalin*, 273; Baranova, “Nationalism, Anti-Bolshevism or the Will to Survive?”


had become the main “repository of [Russian] national sentiment and patriotism” in the 1930s, thereby gaining much support. Other historians, too, have emphasized the linkage between Russian and Soviet identity in the 1930s. If this linkage were indeed strong, one would expect to see the population of northwest Russia turning to a pro-Soviet form of Russian patriotism as soon as the Germans invaded, and even more so in 1942 and 1943, when the German occupation regime largely revealed its brutal, repressive, and imperialist nature. Yet the sources reflect a different picture. The most important manifestation of Russian national sentiment was the revival of the Orthodox Church, which hardly symbolized pro-Bolshevik loyalism. Moreover, the national rallying potential of the anti-Soviet Vlasov movement appeared significant, indeed to the point of making Hitler extremely cautious about losing control over it. The intonation of partisan propaganda also testifies to the lack of a pro-Soviet kind of Russian patriotism: In 1943, partisans in northwest Russia increasingly spread a rumor saying they would “not fight for Bolshevism anymore, but rather aim to liberate the Russian rural population from the Germans, who want to take away all their grain and cattle.” The imminent return of Soviet power did not spark a general patriotic upsurge, either. While many certainly welcomed the return of the Red Army, many others feared reprisals, new rounds of political repression, and being forced back onto the despised collective farms.

If the northwest Russian experience is any guide, Russian and Soviet identity had not fused in any stable, loyalty-producing way in the course of the 1930s. Moreover, war and occupation did not sovietize the mostly peasant population of these core Russian lands, and there is little to indicate that they felt “integrated . . . into a Soviet triumphant epic,” as Amir Weiner argues with regard to the wartime experience of Vinnytsia peasants. If anything, the years under German rule strengthened their sense of Russian identity. Most of all, their wartime attitudes and behavior highlight the ambiguous patriotism of the Great Patriotic War and the fragile nature of Soviet loyalty and identity among the Russians even at this crucial moment in their history.

6 Fitzpatrick, Everyday Stalinism, 225.
7 Brandenberger, National Bolshevism; Kotkin, Magnetic Mountain, 230.
9 Weiner, Making Sense of War, 365.
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