Brief recollections of World War II–by the son of a Soviet military leader and Left Oppositionist murdered by Stalin: Part 2

Yuri Primakov
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This is the second installment of a two-part series consisting of the Yuri Primakov's recollections of the Nazi-Soviet war of 1941-45. The first part, which covers the period from the summer of 1941 through 1942, can be found here.

Primakov, who experienced the war as a teenager and is now 94 years old, was born in 1927 and lives in Moscow. He was born into a revolutionary family. His mother, Maria Dovzhik, fought in the civil war but left the Bolshevik Party in 1922. His father, Vitaly Primakov, joined the Bolshevik Party in 1914. At age 19, he became a member of the Military Revolutionary Committee, which, under the leadership of Leon Trotsky, organized the seizure of power in October 1917. He later became a leading commander in the Red Army during the civil war and a member of the Left Opposition. In 1937, Vitaly Primakov, along with virtually the entire leadership of the Red Army, was arrested and executed. The mass murder of Red Army leaders was part of the Great Terror, in which almost a million people were killed between 1937 and 1938, among them virtually the entire leadership of the Bolshevik Party of 1917 and the Soviet Left Opposition. Often, the family members of revolutionaries too were either killed or sent into camps. The Great Terror disarmed the Soviet and international working class in the face of the Nazi war threat.

The decapitation of the Red Army convinced Hitler and the Wehrmacht leadership that no serious resistance could be expected from the USSR. They were mistaken. Despite the crimes of Stalinism, the Soviet people rose up to defend the conquests of the October Revolution against the fascist counterrevolution but at a tremendous cost. At least 27 million Soviet citizens were killed in the war, among them an estimated 2 million Jews, 3 million Soviet POWs and millions of civilians.

The fact that Yuri Primakov survived the war was, in large measure, the product of chance: due to poor vision he could not join the army and instead worked at an army hospital. Among his generation, almost all men, many just boys, were drafted or fought with the partisans. The vast majority of them fell.

His recollections of the war are a unique document. They illustrate the horrific crimes of Nazism, but also the enormous disorientation, confusion and senseless deaths caused by the Stalinist bureaucracy. We have made some slight edits, for the sake of historical clarity, and added endnotes. Comments by the editor are in brackets.

In the winter of 1942-1943, the tide in the war turned. During the Battle of Stalingrad, which lasted from September 1942 through early February 1943, a whole army of the German Wehrmacht was for the first time in the entire war encircled and destroyed. After that, the Red Army was able to force the Wehrmacht into one retreat after another and eventually advanced into Europe, liberating Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltics, Poland, Hungary and Germany from fascism. In May 1945, the Second World War in Europe ended. After the war, Soviet society continued to be in a deep crisis. A famine in 1946 claimed the lives of about 1.5 million people, most of them workers. The Cold War began. Stalin initiated another wave of terror in 1948, this time targeting especially, but not exclusively, Jewish party members and intellectuals. Socialist youth groups that emerged in the early 1950s were also bloodily suppressed. Many of those who had survived the Great Terror of the 1930s were either arrested or rearrested, among them children of Left Oppositionists. This new wave of repression and executions only ended with Stalin's death on March 5, 1953.

1943

In 1943 they plowed the field at the hippodrome. My mother sometimes had time to run there, water the potatoes and work the soil around them. I helped as much as I could. When an air raid began, you had to get into a hole, otherwise you could get hit by fragments of anti-aircraft shells. By 1942, there were only few bombing raids on Moscow. We had one of the best anti-aircraft defenses in the world. When I got to know veterans of the Chervonnoe kazachestvo after my father's rehabilitation, I learned that Moscow in large part owed its survival to General Petr Petrovich Chesnykh, who had commanded the anti-aircraft defense of the capital.

In 1943, large numbers of wounded arrived. All the aisles in the emergency room were packed with stretchers. People had to lie in corridors for a long time. I remember partisans from the Bryansk forest. Their commander, "Batya," had swollen from hunger, as had his comrades. Our airplanes dropped weapons for the partisans but no food. People were starving.

One day, they brought a partisan from Kovpak's unit [a famous partisan unit under the leadership of Sidor Kovpak; they fought against the Wehrmacht from 1941-1944 in occupied Ukraine and Belarus]. I will remember this cheerful, resilient boy for the rest of my life. He told me that Chernigov had been burned to the ground, you could see from one end of the town to the other. They were fighting the Germans in their own way. They would attack German columns from an ambush, the columns would make a chain, as the rules suggest, and then the partisans would move to another place and suddenly attack them again.

Sometimes at night the buses came one after another, each carrying four stretchers with the wounded. It is more difficult during the winter, the equipment is very heavy and some partisans were in casts.

There were people of all nationalities among the soldiers and commanders of the Red Army. I had a wonderful opportunity to convince myself how powerful and beautiful the union of all the peoples of our multi-national country could be. People who had endured terrible suffering, who were hungry and exhausted, not only courageously held their ground, but also encouraged the tired anti-aircraft workers who had been carrying heavy stretchers all night. One night, mother was crying.

That was very rare. A soldier was dying from tetanus in the emergency room. It is a terrible death. Mother's brother, Naum Dovzhik, commissar of the 535th Infantry Regiment, had died the same way. He had been wounded in the battle with the White Poles [during the Soviet-Polish war] and died near the train station of Zhmerinka in 1920. He was also buried there in a mass grave.

Some soldiers spoke Russian poorly, but then they fought perfectly well. One day mother came into the room in which she lived in the hospital; she was all excited. They had brought some partisans from Belarus. Mother asked an elderly woman why she had joined the partisans. She responded: "How could I not join them, the Germans shot my entire family before my eyes. I myself barely made it."

They also brought in some people from besieged Leningrad [11]. We tried to fatten them up, but two of the women died from hunger. We found small pieces of bread hidden under their pillows. The horrific siege habit had won out.

The doctors were happy when they received American medication. American penicillin saved millions of lives. We didn't know how to produce it in the USSR at the time. Band-aids were also American.

I remember the first concert of the young Leningrad artist Arkady Raikin in Moscow [12]. He was making fun of bribe-takers and cowards in the rear and recalled that during the time of the blockade the starving population of Leningrad had given parts of their food rations to the front. The concert hall fell silent immediately.

I also remember the play *The Great Sovereign* (*Velikii gosudar'*). It was the first time that Ivan the Terrible and the oprichnina [a policy of mass repression of the Russian nobility, the boyars, under Ivan the Terrible] were being rehabilitated. It turned out that it had been they who had saved ancient Rus'. And Ivan Koltso, Yermak's envoy, was only doing the tsar's will. I had understood the reign of Ivan IV [the Terrible] very differently from my childhood years on. I knew that in my hometown, Veliky Novogorod, there was no picture of the tsar on the monument in honor of the millennium of Rus'. He had drenched the free city with blood and killed more of his own people than he had killed enemies. After his rule, the country had been bled so dry that it became easy prey to brigands and interventionists. And now this amazing transformation. It turned out that the barbarous deeds of the tsar and the lost wars were all for the better. It's just that not everybody understood it. Movies about military and patriotic themes increasingly emphasized the military might of Russia during the Tsarist period. The newspapers wrote about the heroic deeds of all defenders of the fatherland.

People remembered the names of the remarkable girl-sniper from near Sevastopol, Lyudmila Pavlichenko, rifleman Nikolai Pasar, and the heroic submariners Lunin and Fisanovich. The fortitude of soldiers from Kazakhstan and the mountainous people, who joined the militia and together with regular army soldiers, defended the Caucasus was emphasized. Everyone was reading poems by Konstantin Simonov and articles by Ilya Ehrenburg. Kiosks sold the magazine *The British Ally* and we learned how Britain lived and fought.

There were long lines for bread everywhere. In school, I was still above all interested in history and literature. In tenth grade I gave a presentation about the Franco-Prussian war [1870-71], I read articles by Friedrich Engels and the memoirs by Bismarck. Near the Red Square, there was the library of the Historical Museum. I sometimes went to the Pushkin Museum. I would stand for many hours in the empty hall in front of the portrait of a young man in a beret by Albrecht Dürer, and spoke with him. I tried to understand how it could be that the intelligent and kind Germans had come to believe in Hitler and had become such cruel barbarians. In the fall of 1943, I finished 10th grade. I turned 16. My short-sightedness had not become any better from carrying stretchers with the wounded. I was not fit for the army.

I wanted to enroll in the history department at Moscow State University [Russia's most prestigious university]. Mother said firmly:

— They might arrest you as soon as you are admitted. Try the technical institute.

I began attending the Moscow Automechanical Institute. My mother could not return to Mosfilm [the Soviet Union's main state-owned movie production firm], where she had worked as a doctor before the war. Sonya Sokolovskaya, the director of the film studio, who knew my mother from the Chernigov underground in the pre-revolutionary period, had already been arrested. We moved to a barrack on the outskirts of Moscow. In the first year, I wasn't a good student. I was not good in math or physics. Then, I gradually got the hang of it and improved. They didn't draft anyone from technical institutes into the army during the war. War veterans were admitted as a matter of course. The country was winning the war and began thinking about its future. In 1944, I was part of a student unit that restored a dam on the Moskva River in the Volokolamsk District. All the huts in the villages were new.

They were built by sappers after the liberation of Volokolamsk. There were very few cows in the villages. The war was coming to an end. There were rumors that Tatars, Greeks, Bulgarians, and Karaites were taken out of Crimea—they were all traitors. And [the population of] some republics were deported from the Caucasus—also all traitors. And Kalmyks too. And the Vlasovites [an army of Soviet turncoats turned Nazi collaborators] were fighting against us.

Our troops began fighting on enemy territory. I had studied German in high school but at the Institute I switched to English. It was necessary. We had no [Russian] textbooks on many issues relating to blacksmithing and welding problems, but there were new American magazines.

We were practicing on a ZIS limousine. The image of the enemy was gradually changing. The newspapers constantly had coverage of German anti-fascist committees among soldiers and officers. These committees and alliances conducted propaganda at the front, constantly separating the Germans away from the fascists. This was also very important for the successful operations of the army as well as for lowering the level of hatred among the peoples of the country. We constantly heard reports about the horrific crimes committed by the Germans and their allies. As our troops were advancing on the Western front, new, horrible secrets came to light. The Kharkov war crimes trial in August 1943, for instance, revealed that the butchers of the Kerch ditch had shot children from the tuberculosis clinic because they needed room for German soldiers. Over 200 children were killed. The youngest girl was 4 years old. In Kharkov, the Russian [Vlasovite collaborators] and German butchers of these children were hanged together on the same gallows.

We learned about the fate of the Kiev football team "Dinamo." The football players had been taken prisoners in 1941. The Germans brought them together from the concentration camps and proposed that they play a match against the team of the German air force in Kiev. The Ukrainians were supposed to lose—they were from an inferior race, exhausted from hunger, and had not been able to train. In the case that they won the match, a death sentence awaited them. "Dinamo" won, and all players were shot at the Babi Yar mass grave, where executed Jews, Komsomol members, partisans, family members of Red Army soldiers and workers—in short, everyone whom caring neighbors had betrayed to the occupiers—already lay [13].

In 1943, the families of mother's brothers, Samuil and Grigory (Girsha), returned from evacuation. In the fall of 1941, Uncle Girsha had joined the Moscow defense militia. They were given no weapons or equipment, they were not given any maps and no one told their commander where the enemy was located. When the German tanks spotted this crowd of civilians with briefcases and bags, they didn't realize that this was a formidable Moscow military force. And when the militiamen saw the crosses on the tanks, they quickly withdrew into the forest. For a long time, they wandered through the forests near Moscow, eating whatever

they could find in the fields. By the time they reached our people, Uncle Girsha had developed an ulcer. He was no longer fit for the army.

In 1941, my father's brother, Vladimir Markovich Primakov, died as a militia member near Moscow. After his brother had been executed, he had been demoted from colonel to private. Before the war and the year 1937, Vladimir Markovich had been working on the development of jet engines for airplanes.

Father's other brother, Boris, a lecturer at Moscow State University, had been arrested in 1937. He volunteered for the front from the camps. He fell in 1943.

It was rare to see a man in civilian clothes on the streets. Most factories had been evacuated, but the Stalin factory (later called the Likhachev automobile factory) continued to operate in Moscow and produce for the front. We, the students at the Automechanical Institute, were undergoing training there and saw how they produced shells for Katyusha rockets, machine guns, and so on. People were getting used to the new way of life and new ways of thinking. They were getting used to the fact that we were the main force among the Allied armies and that our victories were decisive for the outcome of the war.

The end of the war

The war ended. The Allies liberated Paris, aided by an uprising of the French people. Our troops were fighting on Polish territory, then in Germany. Italy, Finland, Hungary, Bulgaria and then Romania withdrew from the war. There were fewer and fewer enemies left. On the streets of Moscow you could now see Canadian officers, American pilots, and Polish officers, all dressed in beautiful uniforms. Our soldiers and officers were getting used to epaulets. Initially, they had tried not to wear them. That was reminiscent of the times of the civil war, when epaulets were the sign of the enemy. The food we received for our ration cards became better. I had an overcoat, soldier's boots, and clothing. My grandfather had bought them all at the market. I could not have worn any other clothes during the war. Civilian clothes were not produced.

And then the battle for Berlin began. The Allies crossed the Rhine River. The battles in Hungary and Yugoslavia ended. Finally, it was May. The war was over. On the Red Square, masses of people are celebrating. Everyone is hugging and kissing each other. People throw soldiers into the air. Not far away from the [Lenin] mausoleum, a hefty American in uniform is tossed into the air. Yugoslav partisans in green jumpsuits and with red star capes are walking the streets. In all Western countries, Communists or sympathetic parties come to power. Hitler is destroyed.

Above the Kremlin, a portrait of Stalin on balloons, is illuminated by spotlight. The usual fireworks. We have become accustomed to them since the liberation of Orel. It was then, in 1943, that the first fireworks in Moscow were launched. The war with the bloc of the fascist countries ended with Allied victory. We were still at the center of the international community.

In classes about Marxism-Leninism, we were lectured about the harm done by the Morgan-Weismanists. [Thomas Morgan and August Weisman were famous geneticists whose work, like all genetics, was slandered and rejected by the pseudo-scholar Lysenko, who was backed by Stalin from 1930 onwards.] Then we heard about comrade Stalin's contributions to the problems of linguistics. Gradually, the old, pre-war times returned. Some things had changed. The Russian Orthodox Church was now allowed, and we could sometimes see priests in their attire walking on the streets. No one was surprised by this. The railway militia was wearing the uniform of the old gendarmes, they wore braided cords and sabers. At some institutes, the students too received a uniform. With the victory came changes in the country. Sometimes you could hear soldiers speaking in German to each other on the streetcar.

After the victory parade, Stalin appeared on the radio. He was more precise about something in his speech. Now, we were no longer friends or brothers to him, but simple Soviet cogs in the machine. Films and the radio increasingly suggested that it was the Russian people [i.e., only Russians, not all the different ethnicities and nationalities that made up the Soviet Union] who played the central role in the victory. The other peoples had only assisted them. This was the prologue to the sowing of hatred between the people. The government claimed that the good people had not lived in the occupied territories, they had not been taken prisoners. Since this policy was being put forward by the greatest specialist on the national question, the general secretary of the Communist Party, comrade Stalin, it was beyond any doubt. Yet the Soviet emblem still carried ribbons with the words, "Proletarians of all countries, unite!" People were gradually becoming accustomed to the new way of life.

We became closer to Europe, we became used to European films and captured Germans. Ahead was the war with Japan and with insurrectionists in Ukraine and the Baltics [14]. Soviet prisoners of war were sent from German camps into our camps [15].

My comrade Sasha Orlov told me one such story. One day he and I went to the movies and watched the Italian film "Rome, Open City." Sasha, always strict and reserved, was transformed in the movie when it showed torture by the Gestapo. When we went outside, he looked around said:

— I was there. It is all true.

And he told me his story. He was good in German in school, he was an athlete and before the war he joined the paratrooper division of the NKVD. During our retreat in 1942, he and his battalions were near the Don River for partisan operations behind enemy lines. But the navigator had made a mistake and dropped them right into the trenches of the German troops. Most of them were killed immediately, but the surviving soldiers and commanders went into the reeds. For several days, they held out against the Germans, who had machine guns, artillery, and mortars. The paratroopers only had machine guns and knives. Eventually, they were captured. Sasha was wounded in the leg, and his comrades dragged him to the camp because those who couldn't walk were shot by the guards. When he regained consciousness and the leg began recovering, he escaped from the camp in Ukraine. Their camp was guarded by Hungarian soldiers. One night, the guard said in Russian: "I myself was captured in Russia during the last war [World War I]. Run, I won't shoot." Sasha and a few others escaped. After some time, the Ukrainian police captured them, brutally beat them (Even the Gestapo wouldn't beat me so bad, —said Sasha), and handed them over to the Germans.

On the train to Germany, he and his comrade broke through the wagon floor and descended on to the tracks. The train didn't hit them, and Sasha and his friend ended up in Germany. They killed a few policemen, put on their uniforms and began stealing food—luckily the Germans didn't use locks. When the roundups became too frequent, Sasha and his comrade went to the station to turn themselves in to the police. They were treated very well. Sasha and his comrade said that they had fallen behind the train, the policeman said that it was their business to run, and his business to catch them, and sent the fugitives to the camp. They ended up in a concentration camp, where they were forced to work at a cement factory. They were sabotaging the work as best as they could, they were punished, and then, in 1944, sent to France to reinforce the Atlantic Wall, the defense system of the Germans. The Allied landing liberated them from imprisonment. Sasha joined the American army. He had no problems with the language. The company was manned by natives of Russia. The company commander was from Minsk, and all commands were given in Russian. They advanced to Germany. The Americans fed and cared for their troops very well. When the Germans opened fire in one city, the Americans immediately pulled their troops back, called in the air force, and bombed the city to smithereens. Then the tanks led the advance, and the infantry followed on trucks. Sasha just smoked, looking over the side of the car at what had been a city.

Then, toward the end of 1944, the German resistance intensified and the offensive stopped. Representatives of our commanders came to them and

suggested that the former Soviet soldiers return home. The Americans warned them that former prisoners of war were put in camps in the USSR. Sasha returned, he was imprisoned, but one of the camp guards was a former commissar of his old paratrooper division. He vouched for Sasha, and Sasha ended up again in the Soviet army. He finished the war in Germany. He was demobilized and admitted to our Institute. In late 1947, Sasha disappeared. What happened with him later, I don't know.

The war ended. Ahead were conflicts between our leadership and the Allies—with England, the United States. First, the hero of France, General de Gaulle, became a bloody executioner, then Tito, the hero of the partisan war, became the executioner. The political isolation of the USSR was quickly restored. Ahead were campaigns in the struggle against "worshipping" everything that was foreign. Reading in foreign languages was forbidden, and so was any praise for the achievements of non-Russian science and technology. Everything that was good could only be Soviet—Russian.

There was the smooth transition to the campaign against the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and the execution of its leaders, including Doctor Shimeliovich and the campaign against doctors who were accused of poisoning Stalin was continued [16]. The famous actor Solomon Mikhoels was murdered. A struggle broke out against those who could possibly compare with Stalin as war heroes. Marshall Zhukov was sent to the Odessa district, and Marshall Rokossovsky was sent to Poland. They were too well loved and respected in the army. The old Stalinist methods of solving problems according to pre-war recipes was revived. The list of enemies was renewed. The old unpredictability of Stalinist policy was restored and there were expectations of new repressions. But the most important thing had been achieved. The bloc of fascist powers had been destroyed.

Concluded

Endnotes

[11] Leningrad (formerly Petrograd and today St. Petersburg) was under siege from September 1941 through late January 1944. It was the longest siege of a city in modern history. The home of the 1917 October Revolution, Hitler was particularly determined to destroy it. As part of the Nazis' "Hunger Plan," which aimed to kill 30 million Slavs by hunger, the city was systematically starved. Over 1 million people died from lack of food; many more were killed in bombardments and the battles to defend the city. [back]

[12] Arkady Raikin (1911-1987) was an immensely popular Soviet stand-up comedian, actor and director who was seen as a "Soviet Charlie Chaplin." He began his career in 1939 in Leningrad, shortly before the war, and was one of many Soviet artists who performed for the Red Army during the war. [back]

[13] On September 29-30, 1941, the Nazis perpetrated one of the largest anti-Jewish massacres that occurred during the occupation of the Soviet Union. It took place at the ravine Babi Yar, where 33,771 people were killed. In later massacres at this execution site, Communist Party members and resistance fighters, Soviet prisoners of war, as well as Sinti and Roma were murdered here. It is estimated that a total of between 100,000 and 150,000 people were buried at Babi Yar during the Nazi occupation. [back]

[14] In Ukraine and the Baltics, nationalist partisans and the Ukrainian Insurrection Army (UPA), which collaborated with the Nazis during the war, engaged in uprisings and guerrilla warfare against the Red Army after the war. During the Cold War, both were backed by the imperialist powers. In Ukraine, the UPA was crushed in 1953; in the Baltics, the Red Army did not completely suppress the insurgency until 1956. [back]

[15] The Nazis captured over 6 million Soviet soldiers during the war. An estimated 3 to 3.5 million of them were starved and worked to death. Two million of them perished from hunger between the late summer of 1941 and spring 1942, as part of the Nazis' "Hunger plan," which aimed to exterminate 30 million Slavs. Those who survived were eventually forced to work for the Nazi war effort. After the war, Soviet prisoners of war who returned to the Soviet Union were treated as "traitors" by the Stalinist bureaucracy. Many of them were imprisoned. They were never recognized as war veterans and, because of their poor treatment, suffered a much higher mortality than other World War II veterans. [back]

[16] Starting in 1948, the Stalinist bureaucracy engaged in another round of purges with a marked anti-Semitic character. Jewish party members and intellectuals were expelled from their positions. Many were imprisoned. In 1952, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee was dissolved, many of its leaders were arrested and some executed. The Doctors' Plot, in which the main doctors that had treated Stalin and other Kremlin leaders were accused of having sought to poison Stalin, was part of this renewed wave of terror. Its victims were spared execution and released only because of Stalin's death on March 5, 1953. [back]