

The Vlasov Phenomenon

Against Stalin and Hitler: Memoir of the Russian Liberation Movement, 1941-1945, by Wilfried Strik-Strikfeldt, translated from the German by David Footman, *New York: The John Day Company, 1973. 270 pp. \$8.95.*

WORLD WAR II confronted all the combatants with some exceedingly difficult choices, requiring the selection of the appropriate weapons, targets, and strategies for the greatest war in history. Over the last thirty years certain, rather narrow aspects of the war have evoked lively criticism. The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the fire-bombing of Dresden, the concessions to Stalin at Yalta, and the forcible repatriation of Soviet citizens during "Operation Keelhaul" have all become familiar topics of discussion. The very title of Strik-Strikfeldt's memoir raises an even more basic problem: Churchill's and Roosevelt's alliance with Stalin as an equal partner in the war. Allied strategy could best be summarized as "against Hitler and for Stalin." Hundreds of thousands of Stalin's own countrymen, who knew the policies of both dictators at first hand, decided otherwise. After capture by German forces, they volunteered to take up arms against Stalin. Rejecting the Nazi and Bolshevik varieties of totalitarianism with equal distaste, they earned Stalin's hatred without ever winning Hitler's trust. This story has been told before, but never with such grasp of its implications and such direct, personal insight into those who led the Vlasov army of anti-Stalinist Russians.

Captain Strik-Strikfeldt, a Baltic Russian who fought with the Tsarist army in the First World War and with the "White" forces in the Civil War, joined the Wehrmacht in 1941 as a translator and propagandist. He quickly saw the defects in Hitler's policy toward Russia. One early propaganda leaflet promised death to all com-

missars, Communist Party and Komsomol officials and members.

What, I wondered, could have been in the author's mind? Was he mad? This affront to the dictates of God and of humanity was, at the same time, sheer idiocy. Those thus condemned to death would fight to the very last and force their countrymen to fight with them.

Strik-Strikfeldt persuaded his superiors to alter the leaflet, ordering the execution of only the commissars. This incident provided his first clue to the fallibility of the German high command. "Was it possible that no one at the top could have taken into account the political aspects?"

Considering this absence of political sophistication, it may seem surprising that German efforts to demoralize the Red Army succeeded at all. Yet their success was enormous, for Stalin had already done more to weaken Russian morale than Hitler ever could have done. Remembering the millions of fatalities during Stalin's first five-year plan, Russian peasants often greeted the Germans effusively and then helped them resist Red Army counterattacks. Recalling Stalin's decimation of his own army and party during the Great Purges, many Soviet officers and soldiers were not content simply to surrender but even volunteered to join the fight against Bolshevism.

Since hordes of former Red Army personnel quickly passed into Wehrmacht service, Strik-Strikfeldt and two senior officers proposed the creation of a Russian Volunteer Army. The military advantages of such an army won the approval of Field-Marshal von Bock and the commander in-chief, Field-Marshal von Brauchitsch, but objections from Hitler and his closest associates overruled the proposal until long after the war was already lost.

If Strik-Strikfeldt told no more than this, his memoir would constitute a useful but minor addition to a large body of literature arguing generally that "Hitler could have won the war if . . ." What makes

this book uniquely important for Russian history, as well as the study of World War II, is the author's description of Red Army Lieutenant-General Andrey Andreyevich Vlasov. Decorated by Chiang Kai-shek for his service in China with a Soviet military mission in 1938-1939 and renowned for his resistance to the advancing Germans near Kiev and Moscow, Vlasov was finally beaten in 1942, while commanding the Second Shock Army. Rather than return to Moscow for the execution by firing squad which Stalin decreed for his defeated commanders, Vlasov fought to the last, soon falling into German hands. Strik-Strikfeldt persuaded him to join the Russian movement against Stalin, won his friendship by always telling him the truth about German policy, and worked closely with Vlasov until late in 1944.

Vlasov wanted nothing to do with an army of mercenaries. His army, he argued,

must take its orders from a National Russian Government. It is only an ideal that can justify the taking up of arms against one's own regime. The ideal here is that of freedom and human rights. I am thinking of the great American champions of freedom, of George Washington and Benjamin Franklin. In my case, only if I put human values before nationalist values would I be justified in accepting your aid in a fight against the Kremlin.

When explaining his views to German generals, Vlasov feigned no loyalty to Hitler:

I have never held your Government's stirrup. . . . Nor your Führer's. It was in the interests of my country and for the sake of my country's freedom that I worked with the Germans since I believed that the German people, as ourselves, were concerned with the overthrow of Stalin. I was taking the same line as Churchill and Roosevelt with regard to Stalin, or, if you prefer, as Stalin in his alliance with Churchill and Roosevelt.

Such opinions could only excite the wrath of the Gestapo, not just against Vlasov but against all the Germans and Russians who worked with him. Ironically, one of Vlasov's most valued subordinates was M. A. Zykov, a Jew, whom Vlasov refused to abandon to the concentration camps. Much to Vlasov's chagrin, Zykov was abducted by unknown persons in 1944 and presumably murdered. It may seem strange that an armed Jewish officer was walking the streets of Berlin during World War II, as an ally of Hitler. Yet stranger still is that fact that Strik-Strikfeldt was never quite sure whether the Gestapo or the NKVD had kidnapped Zykov, since both secret services wanted to weaken the Vlasov movement.

Few Americans or Englishmen knew the significance of the Vlasov movement during World War II, and not many want to discuss it now. Solzhenitsyn is less reticent. In *Gulag Archipelago*, the book which finally got him expelled from the socialist paradise, he castigates the "systematic shortsightedness and stupidity" of Churchill and Roosevelt. Like many Westerners, Solzhenitsyn condemns Allied leaders for the loss of Eastern Europe to Stalin, and for the delivery of the entire Vlasov army into Soviet hands for execution or imprisonment. Yet Solzhenitsyn does not stop there, for he argues that only a uniquely brutal system of power could have caused the Vlasov movement: "in all of world history this was a totally unheard-of phenomenon: that several hundred thousand young men aged from 20 to 30 took up arms against their own Fatherland in alliance with its most evil enemy." The existence of those men showed that the Soviet state was neither so powerful nor so popular with its own citizens as Allied leaders preferred to believe. The parallel between Vlasov's execution and Solzhenitsyn's exile holds many lessons for current American policy, but it remains to be seen whether Strik-Strikfeldt and others can arouse enough interest for those lessons to be implemented.

Reviewed by G. PAUL HOLMAN, JR.