

Excerpt from *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945* by Catherine Merridale (NY: Henry Holt and Company, 2006): 2-4

In June 1941, when the conflict began, about six million soldiers, German and Soviet, prepared to fight along a front that wove more than a thousand miles through marsh and forest, coastal dune and steppe. The Soviets had another two million troops already under arms in territories far off to the east. They would need them within weeks. As the conflict deepened in the next two years, both sides would raise more troops to pour into land-based campaigns hungry for human flesh and bone. It was not unusual, by 1943, for the total number of men and women engaged in fighting at any time on the eastern front to exceed 11 million.

The rates of loss were similarly extravagant. By December 1941, six months into the conflict, the Red Army had lost four and a half million men. The carnage was beyond imagination. Eyewitnesses described the battlefields as landscapes of charred steel and ash. The round shapes of lifeless heads caught the light like potatoes turned up from new-broken soil. The prisoners were marched off in their multitudes. Even the Germans did not have the guards, let alone enough barbed wire, to contain the two and a half million Red Army troops they captured in the first five months. One single campaign, the defense of Kiev, cost the Soviets nearly 700,000 killed or missing in a matter of weeks. Almost the entire army of the prewar years, the troops that shared the panic of those first nights back in June, was dead or captured by the end of 1941. And this process would be repeated as another generation was called up, crammed into uniform, and killed, captured, or wounded beyond recovery. In all, the Red Army was destroyed and renewed at least twice in the course of this war. Officers – whose losses ran at 35 percent, or roughly fourteen times the rate in the tsarist army of the First World War – had to be found almost as rapidly as men. American lend-lease was supplying the Soviets with razor blades by 1945, but large numbers of the Red Army's latest reserve of teenagers would hardly have needed them.

Surrender never was an option. Though British and American bombers continued to attack the Germans from the air, Red Army soldiers were bitterly aware, from 1941, that they were the last major force left fighting Hitler's armies on the ground. They yearned for news that their allies had opened a second front in France, but they fought on, knowing that there was no other choice. This was not a war over trade or territory. Its guiding principle was ideology, its aim the annihilation of a way of life. Defeat would have meant the end of Soviet power, the genocide of Slavs and Jews. Tenacity came at a terrible price: the total number of Soviet lives that the war claimed exceeded twenty-seven million. Most of these were civilians, unlucky victims of deportation, hunger, disease, or direct violence. But Red Army losses – deaths – exceeded eight million of the gruesome total. This figure easily surpasses the number of military deaths on all sides, Allied and German, in the First World War and stands in stark contrast to the losses among the British and American armed forces between 1939 and 1945, which amounted to fewer than a quarter of a million for each. The Red Army, as one recruit put it, was a "meat-grinder." "They called us, they trained us, they killed us," another man recalled. The Germans likened the process, dismissively, to mass production, but the regiments kept marching, even when a

third of Soviet territory was in enemy hands. By 1945, the total number of people who had been mobilized into the Soviet armed forces since 1939 exceeded thirty million.