Masha Cerovic, *Les enfants de Staline*

La guerre des partisans soviétiques (1941-1944)

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Masha CEROVIC

Les enfants de Staline

La guerre des partisans soviétiques (1941-1944)

Paris : Seuil, 2018, 373 p.

The Soviet guerrilla movement was one of the strongest in history. Half a million fighters, who killed many tens of thousands of Germans, but also locals, derailed thousands of trains and demolished thousands of locomotives. Masha Cerovic provides a first-rate, up-to-date history of their struggle.

The strength of Cerovic's study lies in its sources. While she rarely refers to postwar published memoirs, her work draws mainly on archival records of the partisan movement, on interviews of a research group of the Soviet Academy of Sciences with participants of the war in and shortly after 1945, and on about 20 diaries written by partisans. This documentation allows for a fascinating reconstruction, including the dense description of certain operations and highlights the fate of specific persons.

Another advantage of this study is that it is neither driven by anti-communist furor nor by pro-communist heroization in a field where works usually lean toward one of these sides. In fact, the author makes relatively little use of the older Soviet and 'Western' research literature.

The structure of the book is half chronological, half thematic. After a short introduction, it starts out with the fairly improvised beginnings of the partisan movement in 1941, when much of it consisted of escaped prisoners of war and stragglers of the Red Army, side by side with communist functionaries. German suppression and the winter almost wiped them out. Demoralized, many gave up the fight. But in the first half of 1942, the armed resistance surged spectacularly, to a large degree fueled by an inflow of persecuted people. Larger units were formed and strongholds developed in Belarus and the area of Brjansk, while little of the initial strength remained in the Crimea. These initial chapters (p. 21-66) are later followed by one about intensifying German counterinsurgency in 1942-1943, which focused on large-scale operations including a systematic emptying of areas by murder, displacement, forced labor recruitment and resettlement of the civilian

population. Hundreds of thousands were shot or burned alive in the process. Unable to protect the civilians, the partisans were badly hit as well (p. 193-229). Cerovic's depiction of German anti-partisan warfare, or policies, is solid. Both civilians and partisans suffered even more when German retreats led to increasing numbers of troops entering regions with partisans, such as Belarus, in 1943-1944 (p. 263-300).

Other chapters deal with the complex relationships between the Soviet government – and the staff of the partisan movement on the Soviet side of the front – on the one hand and the guerrilla movement on the other hand. Cerovic argues that neither government nor communist party had much influence, even after the early months of half-anarchy and brigandism were over. Instead, she portrays the officers of the units, and the commanders in particular, as a new type of autonomously developing Soviet elite and the units as a substitute family for their members. She describes the hardships for the fighters, the lack of weapons and ammunition, alcoholism, hunger, diseases, the lack of medical care, the suffering of those wounded, and the vulnerability of female fighters who tended to need to establish a relationship with a male 'protector' to fend off molestation. She discusses the motivations for joining and fighting (often revenge for family members or friends lost through German violence, but increasingly, a sense of duty) and describes partisans' romantic self-styling. The relationships between guerrilla and rural civilians were contradictory and complex. Some units declared little Soviet republics, and many claimed to represent Soviet power in general, organizing agrarian structures and building militias, but there were cultural differences between both sides and no full mutual confidence. For the recruitment of men and the requisition of goods, partisans used various sorts of force (but the agricultural levies they imposed were lower than those by the Germans). Menaced by German violence and local treason, the Soviet guerrillas required little evidence to kill 'enemies of the people' and, occasionally, their families or entire village populations.

Cerovic argues that there was little communist about the partisan movement; their thinking and practice drew on the suffering of the people, and ideas about 'the people' in general, instead of Marxist analysis (esp. p. 89-93, 231-241). In the early months of the war, when the proportion of communists was highest, this may have been a bit different. Also, the author could have developed the idea of 'civil war,' removed from state control (see p. 231-262) as a two- or multi-sided affair, and could have shed more light on non-communist local actors and groups. One could go so far as to say that in the countryside this was a war between compatriots about moral hegemony and the future of the country. Such a struggle would have been about something more than the numbers of Germans killed or trains dynamited, and accordingly the author's conclusion could be challenged that the struggle of the partisans was in vain, since their operational successes remained limited, they could not found the new society they were aiming at and their memory was forged or marginalized (p. 296-306). In this sense, it would have been advantageous to expand further the passages of the book about the partisans' political, rather than military, struggle.

Of course, no scholarly work is without weaknesses. The short introduction (p. 15-20) provides little in the way of conceptualization. Cerovic states that her

book is not a survey, but which topic does she not touch upon? Little of the book's content is entirely new, yet it is considerably better founded than earlier studies, and the text goes in-depth in intriguing ways. To the author, it is important to explain who the partisans were, what they were fighting for and how the brutalization of the war came about. The brutalization thesis, too, is not highly original, but here it is more substantiated than in other works going down that line, as far as the partisans are concerned. In reconstructing the perspective of the partisans, their mental outlook, their culture, their aims, the book succeeds to give intense insights won from diaries in particular and the large underlying documentation in general. Some stretches of microhistory are among the strongest passages of the study (for example, see 33-38, 50-59), for these are not studies without proven representativity and without context.

The book contains few factual errors. But it takes on the officers' perspective and says less about the everyday life of rank-and-file and civilians. The focus is on Belarus and the area of Briansk (Western Russia), whereas Ukraine and northwestern Russia find comparatively little mentioning. Also, the study is about the rural sphere, while it pays little attention to cities and towns. Had it done so, the argument might look a bit different here and there. When Cerovic immerses into the operational history of battles, mostly as a consequence of German offensives, the description becomes sometimes a bit winded. And one wonders – especially given the argument that this was not so much of a Bolshevik movement – whether the title of this book was really inevitable.

Really bothersome is the author's way of citing. In a very large part of the cases where the endnotes refer to archival material, one finds just an archival call number and page, but (also in the main text) no information about author, date and the kind of document used. This Soviet-style, positivist way of citing functions implicitly under the assumption that, if it's in the archive, it must be true, and does not allow readers to assess the basis of the argument. This is not worthy of an author who, in other instances, persuasively demonstrates her critical reading of documents. Also, where specific information is taken from the secondary literature, sometimes the notes provide no specific page number(s).

Over such criticisms, let us not lose sight of the fact that this is an important, insightful book and a major achievement. In its field, there will be no way around Cerovic's study in the years to come. Hopefully it will be translated into other languages.

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