

“LOVE AND TEARS”

Suffering and survival in wartime Russia

Anna Stepanova

This book is devoted to my father. I hardly remember him, but stories told to me by my mother and grandfather stir my imagination. In 1932 during a severe famine in Ukraine my mother moved from a remote village to Kiev and got a job as a scullery maid at the artillery college. Then she brought her younger sister Tiklushka to Kiev as well. Once Tiklushka and her friends went for a swim to the river Dnepr and she drowned. My father Dmitry saw how much Irina suffered and decided to take her to his parents in Anapa. My grandfather Dmitry Ivanovich wasn't very impressed with his future daughter-in-law. After all they were worlds apart. Dmitry was the only son, cherished and well-educated, he even played the violin. My mother, the tenth out of eleven children, was from a poor peasant family and didn't even know the alphabet. My father taught her to read and write and took a midwifery course with her to help her get a profession. He loved children both his own and other people's. I'm a well-educated and quite intellectual person, but I never had a caring, reliable man by my side. What I have is a sacred image of my father. He is a guiding star for me and my daughter Irina, who, I think, inherited his looks and character.

I've long dreamt about writing a book about my father and that time. In 1986 I wrote a poem "Mother's heart". But only here in England did I get an opportunity to plunge into the ocean of information – the Internet. I tried to research the period from before the revolution to the end of the war. Irina was my "spring-cleaner" – without her I would never have sorted out this mass of information. It was especially challenging to understand how our armaments compared with the German ones. When I read that the Soviet Union had an advantage over Germany in terms of quantity of tanks, planes and artillery, it was earth-shattering news for me. Digging deeper and deeper I came across the article by a Soviet war-time test-pilot V. Alexeyenko, where he states, that Germany and the Soviet Union had approximately the same number of planes, but the great shortcoming of our planes was absence of radio communication. This would have been a great impediment for Stalin if he decided to attack Germany. Why is this conclusion important? Because Victor Suvorov, a famous historian, insists in all his books that Stalin intended to attack Germany. Following similar logic last year the OSCE tried to equate Stalin and Hitler and called on Russia to admit it to the whole world. Why judge for something that hasn't been done? Stalin didn't attack Germany, and that's the end of it. However Stalin did a lot of unforgivable things.

I came to the conclusion that Stalin was mainly to blame for the fact that the Great Patriotic war lasted for so long and was so costly for the Soviet Union. I give a lot of evidence. Take for example the great army purge in 1937-1938 or clamping down on the Rocket Weapons Research Institute after the execution of Tukhachevsky, which delayed the launch of the legendary Katyushas by several years. Their mass production started only in the middle of the war and immediately made a big impact. Just before the beginning of the war Stalin ordered to blow to pieces the expensive, sophisticated and

well-built defence line from the Baltic to the Black seas. Stalin had 3 intelligence departments, all of which warned him that Hitler was concentrating a huge number of troops at the border. But he didn't believe these warnings. His commanders Zhukov and Timoshenko asked him to make the troops at the border fully operational, but he answered firmly: "Don't give in to provocation". Even on the first day of war when our territory was being bombed by the Germans the orders from the Kremlin said: "Don't shoot! Don't give in to provocation"! Isn't it complete madness?

Many of Stalin's actions make me shudder. My father didn't fall under the wheel of repressions. But he lived at that time and I tried to describe this shameful page of our history as well. I rewrote this part many times. At the end I decided to focus on the lives of 3 very different but outstanding people: world-famous scientist geneticist N.I. Vavilov, marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky and military commander C.C. Rokossovsky. Their stories touched me to tears. My father avoided repressions by volunteering to fight in the Spanish war. Researching this war led to some unexpected discoveries. But what really struck me was the information about the Finnish war. "The people's Father" showed incredible cruelty by sending "his sons" to fight in a Northern country in summer uniforms on the 30-th of November. Many froze to death. My father came back from the Finnish front. In 1941 our family was living at the border in a Polish town Ciechanowiec (then in the Soviet Union). In the first minutes of war my father left his family in the nightmare of the falling bombs, rumbling tanks and burning buildings and went to fulfil his duty. For him it was probably the hardest moment of his life. His parents received only one letter from him: "I'm safe and sound, but my family is dead". In 1943 we received a note, saying that he was lost in action. On 22 June 1941 my mother swam across the river with me on her back, we wandered through impassable forests. The whole story of our evacuation to Siberia is full of such adventures, which are hard even to imagine. When I watch war chronicles I have a lump in my throat. Like thousands of children of that time I was deprived of childhood.

There are a lot of Stalin's fans in Russia now. They want to bring back his methods of running the country. It's very dangerous. But I haven't heard persuasive evidence in this debate from anybody. That's why my book is relevant. I covered all periods of his rule and showed him from many sides. But I don't condemn the communist regime. Many countries have fulfilled some of the ideas declared by the October revolution leaders without calling themselves communist. I give an example of prudent governance in the USSR, when F.E. Dzerzhinsky was the head of government. He combined planned and market economy quite successfully. I blame Stalin's regime for devaluing human life and exterminating millions of people. Before the main story I put a prelude entitled "How wonderful the world is!" This part is illustrated with our paintings and photographs of our different occupations. It's a recipe of how to be happy in any circumstances.

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