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Stalin's Lieutenants: A Study of Command Under Duress

William J. Spahr

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War with Finland (1939-1940) exposed the hollowness of Red Army doctrine and strategy. The upper echelons of the military command hierarchy had been shattered by Stalin's purges of the late 1930's. Driven by his fear of his exiled rival Trotsky, war commissar under Lenin, Stalin had decimated the senior levels of the Soviet officer corps. Most of those who survived provided Stalin sycophantic advice and could not curb his penchant for meddling nor his monumental megalomania. As a result the Soviet Union was virtually brought to its knees when the Nazis invaded in 1941. Stalin began a frantic search for new leaders. It was not until the pivotal Battle of Stalingrad that Stalin began to accept the counsel of his general staff - notably Zhukov and Vasilevsky. After Stalingrad Stalin interfered only occasionally with military planning and operations; he seemed more concerned with encouraging personal disagreements between his successful commanders. Unlike Lee's lieutenants in the Civil War, Stalin's lieutenants functioned under the duress of continuous political and security surveillance. The story of how they handled their responsibilities in this brutally Byzantine environment makes fascinating reading and sheds light on a previously shadowed aspect of World War II.

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