

REVIEW OF

Aleksei Iur'evich Bezugol'nyi, *Narody Kavkaza v Vooruzhennykh silakh SSSR v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny 1941-1945 gg.* (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2005). ISSN 1614-3515. 267 pages, 13 tables, appendices, index of names, and abstract.

Throughout the over seventy years of its existence, as crafted by its Bolshevik founders, the Soviet Union was a highly centralized state ruled by a thoroughly totalitarian Communist regime and dominated by a majority Slavic population. However, despite this veneer of unity, in reality, the Soviet Union was a multi-national state whose population consisted of tens if not hundreds of diverse ethnic and religious groupings. Although its ruling Communist Party strove to bind the Soviet Union's many peoples together into a unitary Socialist body-politic and society, inevitably, varying degrees of tension and distrust persisted between the state's dominant Slavic population and its many ethnic minorities. While apparent during peacetime, this tension and distrust was most pronounced during times of crises and war, in particular, during World War II, the Soviet Union's self-proclaimed "Great Patriotic War," during which Hitler's German Third Reich threatened the Soviet State with possible destruction.

Under the iron-fisted leadership of Josef Stalin, its ruthless Communist dictator, during the terrible first 18 months of the war, the Soviet Union and its Red Army barely escaped destruction at the hands of Hitler's vaunted Wehrmacht, Europe's most formidable military machine. Although the Soviet Union emerged victorious when its Red Army triumphed in the ruins of Hitler's Berlin in May 1945, it achieved this victory only after titanic exertions and at immense human and material cost. Among the many reasons why the Soviet Union was able to achieve victory in its "Great Patriotic War," none was more important than its ability to mobilize unprecedented numbers of its peoples, including many of its ethnic and religious minorities, in the military service of Stalin's Slavic motherland.

Numerous books, Western and Soviet alike, have touched upon the role played by the Soviet Union's ethnic minorities in the war. On the one hand, German and other Western accounts reflect the dread if not outright hatred German soldiers harbored for the Red Army's inhuman "Tatar" or "Asiatic" soldiers. On the other, Soviet books recount the role these minorities or their parent "republics" played in combat and the war overall, but often in superficial or anecdotal manner and without mentioning the frequent internal discord which alienated them from their Slavic counterparts.

In this superb new book, a new offering in the imposing series, *Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, edited by Dr. Andreus Umland and published by *ibidem*-Verlag, A. I. Bezugol'nyi begins the arduous process of remedying these faults and setting the record straight by describing the role the peoples of the Caucasus region played in the Red Army's achievement of victory over Hitler's Germany. By exploiting a wealth of newly released archival materials, Bezugol'nyi skillfully fashions an accurate and candid record of how and why the Soviet Union mobilized and employed the various ethnic groups in the Caucasus region in the Red Army's war effort. Organized topically, the book's chapters describe and analyze Soviet efforts to mobilize military manpower from the region, the performance of soldiers from various ethnic groups in the Caucasus region and their units during wartime, and Soviet propaganda efforts to ensure the loyalty

of these ethnic-minority soldiers. Employing numerous figures, charts, and extensive documentation, the author has fashioned a complete and candid appraisal of the many problems Soviet authorities encountered while struggling to integrate these minority soldiers into a Red Army dominated by Slavs.

Unlike previous Soviet accounts, while composing this imposing mosaic, the author also thoroughly analyzes and documents the many “warts and blemishes” marring Soviet attempts to shape a multi-ethnic Red Army by integrating the peoples of the Caucasus into the Red Army. These include a frank discussion of the general dissatisfaction on the part of these minorities with Soviet rule, which often took the form of “sabotage and open resistance to the authorities;” the aversion of these minorities to volunteerism and their passive and often active resistance toward conscription and integration into the Red Army; the many political, social, and linguistic obstacles to integration; and demographic and physical barriers to their service in the Red Army.

Based on his in-depth analysis, in the book’s final chapter, Bezugol’nyi provides the reader with credible yet pithy summary conclusions regarding the role these minorities played in the Soviet war effort. For example, he notes the close relationship between Soviet policies toward the various peoples of the Caucasus region and the “growth of an anti-Soviet and anti-Russian mood, which was expressed by sabotage and open resistance to the authorities” [page 223]. Acknowledging the sharp decline in the number of conscripts from the Trans-Caucasus region after the fall of 1943, he writes, “Mobilization and conscription was also suspended in the Trans-Caucasus in the fall of 1943, however, the reason for this was not complications of social-political conditions as in the North Caucasus, but rather the exhaustion of demographic resources of the Trans-Caucasus nations and the low cultural-educational and physical level of the remaining contingent of men liable for call up [reservists] and conscripts” [page 224].

After assessing the actual combat contributions soldiers from the Caucasus region and their units made to the Soviet war effort, despite the many problems the Soviet authorities encountered, the author concludes:

The Caucasus region became one of the most important sources for replacements in the ranks of the Red Army’s servicemen, especially during the initial period of the war [22 June 1941-18 November 1942]. Overall, during the entire war the Caucasus region provided the army with around 2 million men of all nationalities. Many soldiers from the Caucasus merited orders and medals, and the Caucasus national divisions –guards and honorific titles” [page 228].

Noticeably absent from this otherwise fine book is a detailed discussion of the wholesale repression conducted by Soviet internal security (NKVD) or counterintelligence (SMERSH) organs, agents, and forces aimed at identifying, punishing, and even deporting those elements of the population of the Caucasus region perceived as disloyal to the Soviet state. Although likely to become the focus of a future book by the same author, such subjects as these repressive programs, the forced deportation of Chechens, the activities of the NKVD’s Makhachkala, Groznyi Ordzhonikidze, Sukhumi, and Tbilisi Divisions of Internal Forces during 1943 and 1944, and other internal security operations in the Caucasus region indeed warrant detailed coverage in their own right.

Despite these omissions, this book performs the vital function of lifting the veil of secrecy from one of the most important and perhaps sordid chapters in the Soviet Union's history during World War II. At the same time, it also underscores the importance and relevance of Dr. Andreus Umland's new series on Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society. One can only hope this book and others in this series will be translated into English so they can reach a far wider readership.

David M. Glantz
Editor, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*