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An Analysis of the Current Historiography on the Soviet Home Front during WWII

Although the topic of the frontlines has been common among modern historians looking back on the Soviet Union during World War II, there is little discussion on how the war affected the home front. This omission is perplexing, since the home front of other Allied nations has been covered in great detail and is often used as a show of national unity. This can be seen in Western research such as *Mobilizing the Home Front: War Bonds and Domestic Propaganda*, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s*, and *Faith on the Home Front: Aspects of Church Life and Popular Religion in Birmingham, 1939-*1945, to name a few.[[1]](#footnote-1) During the course of this research, the term “home front” rarely appeared in works on the Soviet Union and had only one source in which it was placed in the title.[[2]](#footnote-2) Given that the USSR was desperate to showcase the unity and strength of its people, why then would the home front go under studied? While this question will not be answered in the course of this essay, it would be an excellent starting point for future research and should shape the field in the coming decades. Instead, this essay will focus on why the current overall historiography of this topic is poor, something that has been noticed by others researching in the field as well.[[3]](#footnote-3) While research into certain aspects of the home front has been accomplished, there is much room for improvement and a need to view the home front as a cohesive unit. In this paper, I will argue that the current literature on the historiography of the USSR’s home front is poor.

A burgeoning discussion on Soviet economics during the Second World War has been one of the most recent breakthroughs in historiography on the home front. By going through archival documentation, scholars examining the Soviet economy have just begun to write its history.[[4]](#footnote-4) Much archival data had been closed off to the world by the Soviets due to the fierce consumerism that occurred during the Second World War that officials were attempting to hide.[[5]](#footnote-5) Martin Kragh asserts that coercion formed the foundation of the entire economic system of the Soviet Union, serving as its driving force.[[6]](#footnote-6) Coercion came from an administrative fear of absenteeism hurting the productivity of factories during World War II, which Kragh brushes aside in favor of denoting illness as the main cause of factory slow-downs.[[7]](#footnote-7) These illnesses could likely be connected to the low food supply being handed out by the government, as is asserted in P. Charles Hachten’s dissertation “Property Relations and the Economic Organization of Soviet Russia, 1941-1948.” The food given out by the government was miniscule and led to people illegally hunting and planting their own gardens during the war.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Since access to important archives containing documents on economics has only recently been obtained, this piece of the Soviet home front has had little attention.[[9]](#footnote-9) While Kragh and Hachten grapple with many large topics and Peter Gatrell points to other researchers in the field, no broader picture has been fully painted and the use of the term ‘home front’ with regard to economics is nowhere to be found.[[10]](#footnote-10) The economic and industrial aspects of the Soviet home front have not been fully explored yet and need a more detailed analysis. Research in this field could look at the overall effects of the war on economics, on different industries, and on perceptions of factory workers – whether the war united them or made them feel bitter and cynical about their efforts for the front.

Evacuation, deportation, and general migration were major themes in the Soviet home front. Those that were powerful and influential – along with those who were simply working in the industrial sector – were moved to the east as the war began drawing ever nearer. As Hachten describes in his dissertation, these people were expected to simply drop everything and leave.[[11]](#footnote-11) In Rebecca Manley’s book *To the Tashkent Station Evacuation and Survival in the Soviet Union at War*, the series of evacuations that scattered the population of the USSR was framed as both voluntary and done out of concern for the general population.[[12]](#footnote-12) According to Manley, evacuation became similar to exile and held a distinct stigma as evacuees began returning home while the Red Army pushed westward.[[13]](#footnote-13) Hachten’s work concurs with these findings as many evacuees arrived from the rear to discover that their homes had been taken over by squatters and many of their possessions were stolen or missing.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Deportees, similar to evacuees, were expected to simply leave everything behind and be sent away from their homes.[[15]](#footnote-15) Unlike evacuees, however, deportees were not given the impression that this move was a temporary or voluntary situation.[[16]](#footnote-16) Manley found that those who were deported would be confined to “special settlements,” from which they would not be allowed to leave.[[17]](#footnote-17) Within these “special settlements” men and women of various nationalities would come together in their suffering and attempt to make a home away from home, according to researcher Dovile Budrytė.[[18]](#footnote-18) The same act of coming together and sharing in suffering could be seen in other areas of the home front. With little food and housing in once-booming urban centers, Hachten claims that many denizens of cities began to move in with their rural relatives.[[19]](#footnote-19)

While there is significant research on deportations regarding various nationalities, there has been little research into the lives of evacuees and smaller migrations occurring within the Soviet Union during the war. Evacuations were a harsh reality for many people living on the home front – including a few hundred thousand Leningraders who were able to escape the walls of the city before the consequences of the siege began to set in.[[20]](#footnote-20) The rest of the Soviet population faced a similar bleak reality, causing voluntary migrations and mass squatting in cities.[[21]](#footnote-21) Though there should be scores of accounts from these citizens and how they dealt with the war, few researchers have given these topics much attention, with fewer still linking them directly to the term ‘home front.’

Family units were another major component of the USSR that did not survive the war unscathed, as new researchers are discovering. According to Hachten, as many family members became separated either by conscription into the Red Army or due to evacuation to the rear of the country, the strain of separation was felt as old bonds withered and new ones took their place.[[22]](#footnote-22) Edward D. Cohn uncovered evidence to agree with this observation, noting that troubles with infidelity had begun ripping families apart. While the majority of Cohn’s article deals with the post-war period, he notes that the shift in thinking about preserving family units began during the war. This shift finds party members concerned with family abandonment and divorce rates in the USSR.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Although the aforementioned change came during the war, it did little to aid families of soldiers, as Beate Fiesler and Roger Markwick have shown. According to the researchers, the state attempted to provide aid to a few military wives but had very little to give as the war to the west worsened. The situation became increasingly dire to the point where families had to be turned away.[[24]](#footnote-24) Feeling the full effects of the war as a family unit was tough, but tougher still was when someone within a family unit attracted negative attention from the party.

Both before and during the war, many people in the Soviet Union were subjected to vicious purges that left family units in tatters. Golfo Alexopoulos describes how families were punished as collective units by the Communist Party. According to Alexopoulos, family units were seen as having “joint responsibility” – meaning that the rest of the family should be able to stop confrontational members before things get out of hand.[[25]](#footnote-25) During the war, Alexopoulos observes the focus shifted to “enemy nations,” where large swathes of ethnic minorities were punished just as a family would be.[[26]](#footnote-26) The term ‘family’ became more broadly defined during the war, according to both Alexopoulos and Hachten. As resources became tight, kin and non-kin alike banded together to make the most out of what little they had.[[27]](#footnote-27) Hachten notes the merge of traditional family with strangers fueled a sense of comradery during the war.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Though some good research has been done on family units and how they fared during the war, there is still room for improvement. While the sources and scholars mentioned here have made great strides in the field of the home front, they are among the few examining families during the war. Little research has been done focusing on the minutiae of family life, especially with a nation as vast as the USSR was. Perhaps in the future there will be more research looking into locations across the USSR and possibly looking into ethnic minority family units during the war. While the current research is a good start, there is much more that needs to be done to fill in the gaps on what was happening from day-to-day on the home front and, once again, actually referring to the home front as such.

The topic of children and the Soviet home front has been covered by researchers such as Corinna Kuhr, Margaret Stolee, Rebecca Manley, and Alexis Peri. According to these historians, the home front was just as unforgiving to children as it was to the adults who inhabited it. Kuhr illuminates the hardships faced by dependents of men and women considered to be ‘enemies of the people’. While her analysis on the psychological and physical aspects of the limbo these children found themselves thrust into is fascinating, Kurh’s research fails to mention what became of these children once the war began.[[29]](#footnote-29) Instead, she appears to focus on the children’s lives as being orphans before the advent of the Second World War, a topic that Stolee covers in great detail.[[30]](#footnote-30) Stolee examines how children went homeless in waves, even detailing one such wave that occurred at the beginning of World War II.[[31]](#footnote-31) Interestingly, Stolee points out that Soviet officials still referred to this wave of homeless children with derogatory names despite their circumstances for homelessness being different from those of pre-war waves.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Being without a family unit during the war was a lonely affair. If a child had lost their family, Peri asserts they took on fantasies in order to escape this harsh reality. In *The War Within: Diaries from the Siege of Leningrad*, Peri analyzes accounts from various people who began to seek hope through their imaginations. This is especially true for the younger people living through the blockade as loved ones died off and children were left to fend for themselves.[[33]](#footnote-33) With so many children being left abandoned by the war, Hachten found that adoptions became more commonplace during the war.[[34]](#footnote-34) According to Hachten, these adoptions were not always entirely altruistic, with many families adopting children for either their economic value or to simply feel good about themselves.[[35]](#footnote-35)

The topic of children – specifically orphans – has had fairly good coverage compared to other topics within the home front. While much of the current research still includes gaps that exclude the effects of the war on children, this topic has at least been broached by scholars. However, as with other sub-sections on the home front, there is still much work to do and still many more questions to be answered. How did children in stable families react to the chaos of the war? Did orphaned children band together outside of orphanages as they did within them?[[36]](#footnote-36) Is there a correlation between losing family members and journaling? These questions and more have yet to be answered by current research.

Just as women in the West were seen as defenders of the home front and family, so too were Soviet women.[[37]](#footnote-37) One could assume as conscriptions to the Red Army began, these women had to step up and take the places of the men who had left the industry to fight on the front, though this would be no easy task. Women before the war were heavily discriminated against, a phenomenon that is heavily documented in Wendy Goldman’s book, *Women at the Gates: Gender and Industry in Stalin’s Russia.* Despite attempts from the party and the “All-Union Meeting for Work Among Women” to quell the discrimination and promote solidarity, women still only accounted for 6-10% of the total industrial workforce in 1935.[[38]](#footnote-38) But what exactly happened once the war began? Did managers of industrial factories or quarries suddenly forget their disdain for women and begin hiring them? Did the male workers who remained at home begin feeling a sense of unity with their female co-workers once the German invasion began? Or were women still being harassed and handed support positions?[[39]](#footnote-39)

This is one of the issues with Goldman’s work – and the work of other historians who have just as noticeably ignored this substantial piece of Soviet history. Clearly, World War II must have had a significant impact on the industry given its movement to the rear, along with women’s involvement in it. One would expect the Communist Party to have eagerly documented an uptick in the number of women involved in the industrial sector of the Soviet economy as it would provide proof of the USSR approaching equality between genders.[[40]](#footnote-40) This is exactly what happens in Peri’s book as women began to take on jobs formerly gendered as male. Yet, instead of being seen as strong women, Peri explicitly uses an excerpt from the press that describes these women as possessing “unwomanly strength,” suggesting these women were manly.[[41]](#footnote-41) Just as in Goldman’s book, Peri’s book also shows that women essentially had to be men in order to be perceived as strong and fully capable of handling certain positions in factories.

Women were not simply a cog in the overall machine of the USSR’s war effort, however. They also felt the impact of the war and sought out information on the war front. With relatives and spouses fighting on the frontlines, these women looked for hope in seemingly odd places. In Geoffrey Hosking’s book *Rulers and Victims: The Russians in the Soviet Union*, he discovered that women looked to poetry on the war front for hope. Through this poetry, they imagined their loved ones fighting for the motherland, inspiring the women to continue working on the home front.[[42]](#footnote-42) Despite the desire for a happy reunion with family members fighting on the war front, the reality was often much bleaker. Women who were left behind by their spouses often fell into crushing poverty that occasionally led to them having to sell themselves in order to get by.[[43]](#footnote-43) Even if a woman was a spouse of a man serving at the frontlines, she and her family were not guaranteed aid from the Soviet government and would generally be provided with the bare minimum needed to survive.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Life for women on the home front was difficult, usually involving crushing poverty, loneliness, and back-breaking work just to make ends meet. Unfortunately, the current historiography has wide gaps that ignore women in industry and what happened to widows of Red Army soldiers. Although there has been good research on pre-war women working in industry, what happened during the war has been brushed over. While there has been research on how women comforted themselves in the absence of their partners, there has been little discussion on what happened when a woman’s spouse on the frontlines died – or worse yet, when he went ‘missing in action.’ There are many avenues for historians to take on this topic in the coming decades, and hopefully more will be uncovered over time.

Overall, the current historiography on the USSR’s home front during World War II is poor. While some researchers have briefly discussed certain themes pertaining to this topic, the home front itself has yet to be properly examined. Although many works have been written on events occurring before and after the war, researchers have been overlooking what happened during the war. Most historians working in the field on the USSR during the war look exclusively at what was occurring on the frontlines, which is undoubtedly an important topic to inspect, but it is leading to the problem of no one asking about the home front – an equally important subject matter.[[45]](#footnote-45) Those who do focus on the home front consistently fail to bridge the gap between pre-war and war-time, or war-time and post-war.[[46]](#footnote-46) Researchers seem to be examining almost every time period but the war – a strange phenomenon.

While Alexis Peri’s book, *The War Within*, delves into the home front by concentrating on Leningraders, her main focus is on examining the personal accounts of common people on how the siege was affecting the city specifically through starvation.[[47]](#footnote-47) Her research and findings are impressive, and the way she sections her book touches on many aspects of the home front. Peri examines family, orphaned children, factory workers, and more, which captures the essence of how the war was affecting the home front from Leningrad’s perspective.[[48]](#footnote-48) So, despite her primary argument being directed toward the realities from within ‘the ring,’ she stumbles upon important factors dealing with life away from the war’s frontlines.

Currently, the single most comprehensive piece of literature on the home front is P. Charles Hachten’s dissertation, “Property Organizations and the Economic Organization of Soviet Russia, 1941-1948.” Though the dissertation is framed around the economics of the Soviet Union, Hachten’s work hits key points of the home front that are often ignored. Hachten made contributions to the scholarship on women, families, evacuated peoples, and orphans – all topics that have been discussed by other scholars, but never in a way that connects them all to the bigger picture of the home front.[[49]](#footnote-49) The author stands out in the historiography as a shining example of where the future of this field should go.

In this essay, I have argued that the historiography on the home front of the USSR is poor. Though some researchers have looked into the smaller sub-sections of the home front, most are not discussing the home front overall and making important connections on how the war shifted the lives of those away from the frontlines. This is especially bizarre given the massive amounts of literature written on the home fronts of places such as the UK and the US. Despite the research that has been accomplished in the field, the term ‘home front’ is barely seen in research on the Soviet era – something that will hopefully change in the future. With time and effort, researchers may begin prompting the same questions I have included in this analysis.

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2. John Barber and Mark Harrison, *The Soviet Home Front, 1941-1945: A Social and Economic History of the USSR in World War II* (New York: Longman, 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Elizabeth White, review of *To the Tashkent Station. Evacuation and Survival in the Soviet Union at War*, by Rebecca Manley, *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, 2011, 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Martin Kragh, “Stalinist Labour Coercion during World War II: An Economic Approach,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 7 (2011): 1253. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Peter Gatrell, “Feet of Clay? The Soviet Economic Giant in Recent Historiography,” *The Historical Journal* 49, no. 1 (2006): 307-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Martin Kragh, “Stalinist Labour Coercion,” 1253. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 1258. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. P. Charles Hachten, "Property Relations and the Economic Organization of Soviet Russia, 1941–1948" (PhD diss., The University of Chicago, 2005), 152, 155, 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Peter Gatrell, “Feet of Clay,” 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 300. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hachten, "Property Relations,” 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Rebecca Manley, *To the Tashkent Station Evacuation and Survival in the Soviet Union at War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Manley, *To the Tashkent Station*, 238-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Hachten, “Property Relations,” 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Dalia Leinarte, “Victims and Collective Trauma: Surviving mass repression and living through the Soviet period,” in *Women’s Experiences of Repression in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Rebecca Manley, *To the Tashkent Station*, 14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Dalia Budrytė, “’We Didn’t Keep Diaries, You Know’: Memories of Trauma and Violence in the Narratives of Two Former Women Resistance Fighters,” *Lithuanian Quarterly Journal of Arts and Sciences* 57, no. 2 (2011): http://www.lituanus.org/2011/11\_2\_05Budryte.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Hachten, “Property Relations,” 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Alexis Peri, *The War Within: Diaries from the Siege of Leningrad* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Hachten, “Property Relations,” 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., 140-141. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Edward D. Cohn, “Sex and the Married Communist: Family Troubles, Marital Infidelity, and Party Discipline in the Postwar USSR, 1945-1964,” *The Russian Review* 68, no. 3 (2009): 430-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Beate Fiesler and Roger Markwick, “The Rear Area in the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945): Red Army Men’s Wives and Families Struggles for Survival in Yaroslavl,” *Bylyle Gody* 28, no. 2 (2013): 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Golfo Alexopoulos, “Stalin and the Politics of Kinship: Practices of Collective Punishment, 1920s-1940s,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50, no. 1 (2008): 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
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27. Hachten, “Property Relations,” 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Corinna Kuhr, “Children of ‘Enemies of the People’ as Victims of the Great Purges,” *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* 39, no. 1-2 (1998): 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Margaret K. Stolee, “Homeless Children in the USSR, 1917-1957,” *Soviet Studies* 40, no. 1 (1988): 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Peri, *The War Within*, 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Hachten, “Property Relations,” 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Geoffrey Hosking, *Rulers and Victims: The Russians in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press at Harvard University Press, 2006): 196. ; Maurine Weiner Greenwald, review of *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s*, by Susan M. Hartmann, *The Journal of American History*, 1983, 720. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women at the Gates: Gender and Industry in Stalin’s Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid., 215, 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Peri, *The War Within*, 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid., 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Hosking, *Rulers and Victims*, 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Hachten, “Property Relations,” 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
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45. White, review of *To the Tashkent Station*, 93. ; Catherine Merridale, *Ivan’s War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945* (New York: Picador, 2006). ; David M. Glantz, “The Failures of Historiography: Forgotten Battles of the German-Soviet War (1941-1945),” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 8, no. 4 (1995): 768-809. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Goldman, *Women at the Gates*. ; Cohn, “Sex and the Married.” [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Peri, *The War Within*, 3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Peri, *The War Within*, 89, 111, 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Hachten, "Property Relations,” 150, 140, 155, 143-144. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)