

Soviet Wartime Poster Recalls Past Russian Glories

The Soviet Union was a latecomer to the fight against fascism. In 1939, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler. The agreement, however, was a trick Hitler used to keep the Russians out of the war until he had gained enough military strength to attack them.

After conquering Western Europe, Hitler felt able to defeat Russia. He began an invasion of that country on June 22, 1941. Though large, the Soviet army was unprepared to stop the invasion. Its leadership was weak and inexperienced. During the 1930s, Stalin, fearing a revolt from within, had imprisoned, killed, or fired thousands of army officers. Stunned by Hitler's unexpected move, Stalin could not at first respond. Finally, on July 3, he announced his alliance with England and France.

Russia remained at a disadvantage for months. During that time, the Germans advanced through western Russia on their way to Moscow. Bu the time they reached Moscow, however, the Soviets had rallied. The Red Army now had fighting experience. Russian civilians, intent on saving their country and outraged by the German slaughter of noncombatants, also pitched in.



This fierce resistance delayed the Germans and left them open to the bitter Russian winter. Expecting a rapid victory, they were not equipped for harsh weather. And the 1941 winter was unusually severe, even for Russia. The Soviets counterattacked in early December. Weakened, the Germans retreated. Unable to get supplies from the countryside, many soldiers perished as they fled. By February, the Germans had suffered over a million casualties.

The Russian people's determination to defend their homeland fired their courage. Soviet leaders encouraged this nationalistic spirit by exhibiting propaganda posters such as the one shown here. Notice in the background the heroic, sword carrying warrior from Russia's medieval past. This figure connects the modern soldier in the foreground with centuries of Russian military glory and spurs him onto victory.

Hitler launched a second invasion of Russia in 1942. This campaign also failed, and Hitler's offensive against Russia was over. The Soviet army began moving into Eastern Europe and finally drove the Germans out, thus

aiding the Allied victory.

Review Questions

1. How was Stalin fooled by Hitler?
2. Why does the Soviet poster show both a modern-day soldier and a medieval Russian warrior?