

VLADIMIR KANTOVSKI AND STALIN'S PENAL BATTALIONS

In early 1943 Vladimir Kantovski, a 19-year-old Red Army soldier serving in the 54th Penal Company, stared out from behind Soviet fortifications towards a wood occupied by an unknown number of German troops. He knew that in a matter of moments he would be ordered forward, along with others in his battalion, to take part in 'reconnaissance through combat'. They would walk towards the German line and attract their fire, so that watching Soviet officers could learn the position and nature of the guns ranged against them. Kantovski knew he faced almost certain death. For the vast majority of his comrades this was to be their first and last military action – and their final day on earth. And yet Kantovski had chosen to be in this position for his character had demanded it.

No human being can exist out of the time in which they are born and everyone is shaped by the events around them. But a rare few, like Vladimir Kantovski, use the harshness of their time to define themselves and to defy the injustice ranged against them.

Kantovski was born in 1923, and to be born into that generation in the Soviet Union was to be destined for a life of almost certain anguish. The Stalinist purges of the 1930s devastated not only the ruling elite but ordinary Soviet citizens as well. In 1938 both of Kantovski's parents were arrested and sent to a labour camp. His father was a Latvian and so, as a non-Russian, had been particularly vulnerable to arbitrary arrest. 'Somewhere at heart,' Kantovski said, 'we felt that sooner or later one would get arrested and that it was unavoidable – that we were doomed to be arrested at some point.' Despite the Stalinist rhetoric that this was a land of equality and

justice, the reality was that to grow up in the Soviet Union before World War II meant growing accustomed to fear, hunger and arbitrary suffering: 'We realized that Stalin's power was not the Communism in which we believed and which we wanted to achieve. We knew that Stalin's power was not proletarian dictatorship but it was dictating to the proletariat ... and it was a cruel dictatorship.' And then in June 1941, when Kantovski was 18, came the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. This was not just the biggest land invasion in the history of the world; it was conceived from the beginning by the Nazis as a war of 'annihilation'.

But as this massive invasion took place Kantovski was not fighting on the front line but in prison for criticizing the actions of the regime. Just weeks before the outbreak of war, Kantovski and his friends had protested at the arrest of their history teacher who had been heard making 'inappropriate' comments about Josef Stalin and who had been arrested and taken away by the NKVD – the secret police. The arrest drove Kantovski and his fellow students to action: just hours later they began to hand out leaflets condemning the authorities for taking their teacher away. 'We didn't take Stalin and his henchmen seriously,' Kantovski said, 'but at the same time we remained patriots and in essence Communist – although not Communists in the way Stalin understood it.' The NKVD went to Kantovski's flat and arrested him. He was sent to Omsk prison, where conditions were appalling. He was one of 60 people crammed into a cell intended for nine prisoners, and he was only allowed out of it twice a day to go to the toilet. Other than that there was no respite – no exercise, no fresh air, nothing but life in the gloom of his cell, and the fight to survive in its fetid, disease-ridden atmosphere. For the 'crime' of writing the pamphlet protesting at his teacher's arrest Kantovski was sentenced to 10 years in agulag, one of the Soviet labour camps that flourished

under Stalin. But then, destined as he thought to languish – probably die – in a gulag, Kantovski found that his fate was now affected by a factor entirely outside his control: the Soviet Union was losing the war.

In September 1941, at Kiev in the Ukraine, the Germans trapped 600,000 Red Army soldiers in the largest single encirclement action in modern times. A few weeks later, in October, at the twin battles of Vyasma and Bryansk, German Army Group Centre took another 600,000 prisoners and the road to Moscow lay open. Terrified by this appalling turn of events, Stalin ordered the toughest measures imaginable to keep the capital from collapsing in panic. Fresh troops were drafted in from Siberia, and special units were stationed behind the Red Army lines to shoot any soldier who retreated. But even these actions were not enough. Stalin knew that the Soviet Union faced a moment of crisis unlike any in its history, so he decided to tap an unlikely source for new recruits for the Red Army – the prison camps.

The Soviet authorities called for ‘volunteers’ from the gulags to fight the German invaders. But the prisoners who came forward were not to be sent to an ordinary prison unit – no, their destination was altogether more deadly. It was a ‘shtrafbaty’ – a penal battalion. Composed of people who had committed political or criminal offences, these units were given the most dangerous tasks in battle. They were often the first wave in any attack, and performed virtually suicidal tasks like clearing enemy minefields by marching over them. Around 440,000 Soviet citizens served in penal battalions during World War II, and only the merest handful survived.

Kantovski volunteered for one of these units even though he knew that his only real hope of survival was to be severely wounded in battle – for his ‘old sins to be pardoned’ through his ‘blood’, as the Soviet authorities put it. But he was a patriot, his country had been invaded and he wanted to fight. He ‘never regretted’ that he

chose to join the penal battalions: 'It's in my nature. I don't like to muse over decisions I've taken – I never do it, on principle. And in spite of everything some opportunities were opening up for me. There was a small chance of survival – even if ten people survived out of 250 it meant you had a chance.' He even found that his life improved: 'Although when you arrive at the penal battalion the routine is as strict as the camp, there is no barbed wire around you and the strict routine is not specific to the penal battalion but is similar to the routine in other army units. And it's less depressing because it's not prison. What you have at stake is either life or freedom ... For me, the little freedom I had in the penal battalion meant a lot. Can you imagine, understand, what freedom is? For that you have to spend half a year in Omsk prison being completely immobile in the cell, and you can only look into the sky through a slot in the window. Of course, you can't compare a penal battalion with it. And also we were patriots, in the best sense of the word.'

At the start of 1943 Kantovski found himself on the front line near the town of Demyansk, south of Leningrad, as a member of the 54th Penal Company. As he prepared to walk forward towards the German guns in his first military action as part of 'reconnaissance through combat', knowing that he was either about to die or to be seriously wounded, Kantovski felt 'fatalistic': 'I don't think you can feel any patriotism when you are participating in such an attack. I think the over-riding feeling is one of bluntness – your feelings are blunted ... You know what is happening is unavoidable, fatal and it's like a game of Russian roulette. Well, what's your lot going to be? ... As soon as we showed ourselves the enemy began firing ... our officers shouted, "Onwards! Onwards!" The Germans carried on the machine-gun fire. We got support from four or five tanks. Obviously our officers wanted to find out whether the Germans had any anti-tank weapons. The Germans were firing from the wood,

perhaps 400 metres away. The tanks only advanced 60 or so metres before they were destroyed. And the first victims were the officers who encouraged us to move forward.’

After advancing a couple of hundred metres, Kantovski discovered exactly what his own ‘lot’ was going to be. He felt machine-gun bullets smash into his shoulder and arm and he fell down in pain. But as he lay there, his blood flowing freely on to the ground, his immediate thought was not whether he would live or die. Rather, he was uncertain as to whether the wound was serious enough to save him from further punishment. Because if a member of a penal battalion was believed to have stopped advancing as a result of only a minor injury, he would be shot for cowardice. Kantovski was fortunate – after he returned to the Soviet lines he learnt that his wound was considered severe enough to save him from being executed by his own side. But while he survived, the vast majority of his unit died that day.

Kantovski was patched up, and then in 1944 sent back to the gulag to complete his sentence. He was not released until 1951. Even after his return from prison camp he had to endure persecution: he was held back in his career and was never paid as much as others who did similar work. ‘I didn’t query whether Stalin was just or unjust,’ said Kantovski. ‘He was simply a tyrant. All of it rested on fear, on cruelty, on informing – on sticks without any carrots.’

In the late 1990s, when I met him, Kantovski was living in a tiny flat in a concrete block in the outer suburbs of Moscow. There was little inside the flat – a threadbare carpet, some wooden chairs and a rickety table. On the walls were a couple of pictures torn from newspapers, and wafting through the whole building was the smell of stale cabbage. Rats lived in the lift-shaft and scurried up and down the communal stairs at night. Yet Kantovski told his extraordinary story in a calm, matter-of-fact way. Not once did he betray an ounce

of self-pity – not a second of bitterness at the injustice piled on injustice he had been forced to suffer.

I asked if he regretted protesting at the arrest of his teacher. What had he achieved? His teacher hadn't been saved and his own life had, in many ways, been destroyed by this one action.

He considered the question for a few seconds. Then he answered that he didn't regret having protested. 'Not everyone could say at the time that he had the liberty to express himself. My personality grew stronger.' Then he was silent for a moment, before adding, 'I don't regret it, because it gives me self-respect.'