



Nazi Conspirator, Russian Patriot: Judging General Andrei Vlasov

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Abstract

Lieutenant General A.A. Vlasov was an infamous, high-ranking Soviet defector during the Second World War. After his capture by German soldiers in 1942, Vlasov featured heavily in anti-Soviet German propaganda and organized anti-Soviet resistance in German-occupied territories. He was recaptured by Soviet forces in May 1945 and executed as a traitor in August 1946. Vlasov's story challenged crucial Soviet narratives about the war and posed a threat to Soviet solidarity and stability in its aftermath. His case was rarely acknowledged among Soviet historians, only resurfacing after its collapse in a wave of nationalistic works that sympathized with Vlasov as a patriot and martyr of Stalinist repression. In the West, numerous political and practical factors since the 1950s have left scholars split on the truth of Vlasov's intentions, beliefs, and historical impact. His story remains controversial in Russian academia; attempts to rehabilitate Vlasov have been suppressed by the Putin regime. This paper utilizes German and Soviet primary sources from recently declassified Russian state archives, as well as Western, Soviet, and Russian historiographic works from the 1950s to today. This paper demonstrates that Vlasov was intensely preoccupied with how he would be perceived by history; in this pursuit, he actively curated a vague, inconclusive record of his wartime experience. It also assesses why Vlasov's case presents a unique challenge to historians and remains highly controversial in academic and political discourse under the Putin regime.

Keywords: World War II, USSR, Stalin, Nazi Germany, collaboration, historiography

Introduction

The people and political leaders of Russia have a complicated relationship to their own past. Two conflicting impulses have defined this relationship since the 1990s: the pursuit of historical truth, and the temptation to reinforce comforting myths. This conflict is particularly relevant today as the Putin regime tightens control of information and public discourse.

The declassification of Soviet historical documents presented an opportunity to rewrite Soviet history from a modern Russian perspective. World War II has long occupied a special place in Russian political discourse, and President Vladimir Putin has doubled down to glorify and politicize its memory. In his 2014 Victory Day speech, Putin proclaimed, "It was our native country that drove the fascists out of their den...We will always cherish this sacred and unfading

truth. And we will never allow the betrayal and oblivion of the heroes...who selflessly safeguarded peace on our planet.” (The Washington Post, 2014). In the same year, the government instituted a “memory law” ostensibly aimed at criminalizing Holocaust denial, but which also criminalized publicly disputing or condemning the wartime activities of the USSR (Edele, 2017). The shifting perception of WWII reflects the uncertain relationship between Russia’s academia, public, and authoritarian state.

The post-Soviet re-examination of the “Vlasov case” epitomizes the ongoing battle between political narrative and historical truth. Historians studying the infamous case must rely on a sparse, convoluted historical record to find answers without contesting state narratives. Despite the government’s attempts to subdue it, interest in the topic endures. Vlasov’s legacy uniquely encapsulates the struggle of the authoritarian regime to escape the demons of Soviet history while also harnessing its power.

Who Was Vlasov?

Lieutenant General A.A. Vlasov was one of the Soviet Union’s highest-ranking defectors during World War II. A decorated and skilled commander, he helped to orchestrate the Red Army’s defenses of Moscow, Kyiv, and Leningrad. In July 1942, after his army was destroyed, Vlasov refused evacuation to Moscow. He hid for several days in occupied territory and surrendered after being discovered by German soldiers. Vlasov’s influence and prestigious reputation impressed German military leaders, who brought him to Berlin to assist its propaganda strategy in the occupied East. His purpose was to legitimize German rule, undermine support for Stalin, sabotage the Soviet war effort, and recruit resistance soldiers. His mission included several declarations, committees, and organizations dedicated to overthrowing Bolshevism and establishing a new Russian state. This culminated in the Russian Liberation Army (ROA), an armed pro-German force of over 100,000 Soviet prisoners of war, defectors, and partisans under Vlasov’s command. Little more than a propaganda campaign for most of the war, Nazi leaders finally sent the ROA into combat in early 1945. During the Prague Uprising in May, Vlasov ordered all ROA soldiers to cross over to the Red Army in support of Czech partisans. Soviet agents captured him attempting to escape Prague and returned him to the Soviet Union. He was convicted of treason by a military court and executed by hanging on August 1, 1946.

History of a Betrayal

Soviet elites concealed the true scale of wartime collaboration, effectively prohibiting Soviet historians from invoking Vlasov in their work. Western historians produced a modest historiography on the Vlasov case, but the practical and ideological impact of the Cold War prevented the development of a historical consensus on Vlasov's motivations and intentions. Finally, after 1992, Russian historians were able to access some information and publish works about Vlasov for the first time; however, his legacy and place in post-Soviet discourse remained controversial. This controversy peaked in 2016 when the government intervened to prevent Kirill Aleksandrov, a historian who published a sympathetic doctoral thesis on Vlasov and the ROA, from receiving his doctorate. Civil society groups reacted strongly: nationalist groups accused Alexandrov of spreading anti-Russian propaganda, while liberals denounced the violation of academic freedom (Rezunkov, 2016).

The 2015 release of secret trial documents from the Vlasov case promised new revelations about Vlasov (Domańska & Rogoża, 2021, p. 59-60). State historians and archival researchers compiled an accompanying three-volume report, *The Vlasov Case: History of a Betrayal*, as an official guide to Vlasov's controversial legacy. It includes hundreds of pertinent German and Soviet intelligence reports, speeches, military/government memoranda, interrogation transcripts, and personal communications from 1942-1946, alongside an introduction and conclusion by the report's editors. The Kremlin-backed report is antagonistic towards Vlasov from the opening lines (59). as evidenced by the following line: "the figure of Vlasov, for all his flair, is nothing unique or extraordinary" (Artizov et al., 2020, p. 30).

Methodology

This research explores the problems that have plagued this historiography and addresses an under-discussed factor: Vlasov's intervention and curation of his own conflictual historical record. Vlasov's contradictory choices and beliefs, and the intense debate he has generated among academics after his death, illustrate unique challenges that arise while studying this historical period. How should historians assess morality in the context of totalitarianism? To what extent do contemporary political and cultural norms impact historians' perceptions? And most importantly, how does history shape identity and belief systems in the modern world? This paper uses Soviet primary source material and historiographic works as evidence that Vlasov

was concerned with his own portrayal in future histories of the war; in this pursuit, he actively curated his persona and his representation in primary sources during his life. Finally, this paper will assess how why Vlasov remains a controversial figure in Russian political discourse, and how his case challenges conventional approaches to history.

Issues in Historiography, 1950s-Today

This section identifies three major factors contributing to the problems within the international historiography on Vlasov, between its earliest iteration in the 1950s through 2022.

Unreliable & Inaccessible Sources

There are two obvious issues that prevented further development of historiography: the context of the Cold War and its implications for historians, and the inaccessibility or lack of verifiable, neutral sources. Researchers relied on seized Nazi materials, West German archives, and firsthand accounts by collaborators. German archives offered key information about Vlasov's capture and his activities during 1942-1945. However, these only illuminate the German perspective, leaving historians to either present these blanks in their originality to the reader, or use speculation to fill these gaps. Alexander Dallin, author of the 1957 book *German Rule in Russia*, employs a detached and analytical style to assess hundreds of German personal letters, official communications, informant testimony, and other unpublished materials (Dallin, 1957). These expose the negotiations between Nazi officials regarding how to best use Vlasov's unique talents and knowledge, while Vlasov himself is relegated to the sidelines. To Dallin's credit, however, few of these gaps are filled in by the Soviet archives.

Firsthand accounts of the movement given after the war are valuable but necessitate a critical and skeptical approach. Many former Vlasov followers sought permanent residence in the West as political refugees. To appeal to those governments, they stressed the anti-Communist nature of the movement in what historian Benjamin Tromly describes as "voluminous and nearly universally self-exculpatory writings" (Tromly, 2021, p. 295). Mark Edele's 2017 book *Stalin's Defectors* constituted the first systematic study on Soviet wartime defection and concludes that Soviet collaborators were driven by self-preservation and dissatisfaction with communism and Stalinism, rather than ideological support for Nazism. Ultimately, it is likely that individual ROA soldiers—including Vlasov himself—had complex personal motivations for their participation in

the movement, with the majority falling somewhere on the spectrum between self-serving opportunism and principled abhorrence of Stalinism.

German elites and academics hoped to win Western favor for their nation by broadcasting their involvement in establishing the anti-Communist Vlasov movement (Tromly, 2021). Such works were highly influential; due to Western scholarly distrust of what little information left the USSR and the general inaccessibility of Soviet archives, Nazi archives constituted most information on the movement. For instance, historian Joachim Hoffmann's 1984 book *The History of the Vlasov Army* uses mostly Nazi sources to claim that a number of German military officers disregarded official orders from Hitler in order to support the Vlasov army for moral reasons. Hoffman also accuses the American and British governments of failing to recognize the necessity of the Vlasov movement in fighting Soviet aggression (Fisher, 1987). Such works reinforced existing attitudes towards the USSR and Communism, and thus enabled German historians to shape narratives regarding the Vlasov movement in the West.

Cultural, Political, & Ideological Influences

In addition to sources, ideological preconceptions impacted the interpretation of Vlasov. On both sides, the Cold War and WWII carried immense political baggage that extended into academic study. Historians who deviated from the ideological mainstream could face social sanctions, professional condemnation, and political retribution, particularly when Cold War tensions were high. The American field of "Soviet Studies" was established and funded by the U.S. government with the express purpose of informing and shaping anti-Communist foreign policy goals—a mission in which anti-Soviet collaborators were allies, regardless of their Nazi sympathies (Engerman, 2011).

Soviet "dissident historians" took a significant personal risk when publishing works that contradicted state-sanctioned narratives about collaboration. If a particular historian posed a serious threat, the regime could disrupt their membership in the Communist Party, professional success, and personal reputation; some academics were publicly defamed, exiled, and arrested. Consequently, collaboration is one of many "dark zones" in Soviet history (Martin, 2019).

Many of the influential Western historians who took interest in Vlasov were personally affected by Stalinist repression; many were Soviet émigrés or descended from them. These subjectivities shape their analyses. Historian Catherine Andreyev's father immigrated to the UK to escape Soviet authorities and joined the anti-Communist activist group National Alliance of

Russian Solidarists. Andreyev's 1987 book *Vlasov and the Russian Liberation Movement* highlights the bravery of anti-Communist resistance, but glosses over documented Nazi sympathies and crimes of ROA soldiers (Raeff, 1988). Andreyev fills gaps in the sparse historical record and credits Vlasov with dubious moral integrity and ideological conviction.

Absent these personal connections, Anglo-American historians were shaped by sociopolitical milieu and individual beliefs. Amidst the intensely anti-Communist climate of the early Cold War, historians treated Soviet collaborators as heroic resisters, in contrast to the framing of Western European collaborators. However, the 1960s-1970s were "a period of growing sensitivity" to America's toleration and tacit complicity in Nazi Germany's crimes (Douglas, 2016, p. 33). This cultural reckoning is evident in the work of some Anglo-American historians, who condemned Vlasov and fellow ROA soldiers for their complicity (and in some cases, personal participation) in Nazi war crimes.

The most recent historiography on Vlasov favors empirical methods of historical analysis. *Stalin's Defectors* exemplifies this by investigating collaboration as a psychosocial phenomenon with complex moral implications. These works explore the logic that led individuals to collude with a barbaric regime without downplaying their complicity (Edele, 2017).

Controversy in Post-Soviet Russia

The political shift towards a conservative-nationalist doctrine during the 1990s in Russia led some to rediscover Vlasov as a post-Soviet, anti-Stalinist hero. In 2001, a monarchist group lobbied the military to legally rehabilitate Vlasov (Korchagina & Zolotov, Jr., 2001). Former Moscow mayor Gavril Popov characterizes Vlasov as a paragon of defiant Russian patriotism in his 2007 book *Summoning the Spirit of General Vlasov*. In 2009, historian Andrei Zubov introduced an anti-Soviet historical framework in *History of Twentieth-Century Russia*, which asserts that Stalin and Hitler were equal in barbarity, and thus collaboration was morally neutral. The Russian government, while ideologically antithetical to its predecessor, has reacted harshly to these anti-Soviet ideas. In 2014, Zubov was removed from his teaching position after comparing Putin's annexation of Crimea to Hitler's invasion of Austria. (Kolstø, 2019, p. 757-758). The regime rejects such alternative historical viewpoints and silences positive depictions of anti-Soviet resistance and foreign political collusion (Edele, 2017).

Can the Vlasov Case Finally be Settled?

Despite high hopes, the opening of Soviet archives has not led to widespread acceptance of any single interpretation of Vlasov. Nonetheless, some basic questions are answerable with the documents contained in the report. Vlasov could have avoided working with the Germans: in Soviet interrogation transcripts, Vlasov and fellow collaborators recall meeting several high-ranking Red Army captives who faced no punishment for refusing to cooperate. The conclusion that Vlasov collaborated of his own free will is crucial to interpreting his subsequent actions (Artizov et al., 2020). The documents also provide insight into Vlasov's motivations. A German victory seemed imminent at the time of his capture, and Vlasov lost most of his army only weeks earlier—a failure for which he feared he would be executed. Further, Soviet documents describe the exhaustion and deprivation of Vlasov and his associates after escaping the encirclement (82-87). The report also excerpts a 1943 speech by Heinrich Himmler, in which he recalls how flattery and promised material comfort were enough to solidify Vlasov's commitment to Germany (35-36). Altogether, this evidence suggests that his fundamental motivations were the safety, material security, and professional prospects that the Germans offered.

Due to the influence of Vlasov himself, many aspects of this case will remain unknowable. As a high-ranking Soviet official under Stalin, he understood the realities of surveillance and self-censorship. His words throughout the documents are therefore contrived for an audience. His views also changed over time, adding an additional layer of complexity. The intentional inconsistencies throughout these documents served an important function: they enabled Vlasov to balance competing, interdependent short and long-term interests. These interests were: (1) earning the favor of Nazi officials to maintain his station and well-being in Germany, (2) strengthening his position and support as the potential future leader of Russia, (3) maintaining plausible ideological distance from Nazism to position himself as a potential asset to Western governments, and (4) fostering a favorable historical legacy. Fundamentally, he sought an advantageous post-war life, regardless of the war's resolution. For instance, in his address to Army High Command, Vlasov paints a misleading picture of the political situation in the USSR: collapsing sociopolitical order, widespread disillusionment, and forced patriotism propped up by NKVD terror (Artizov et al., 2020). In reality, the Soviet regime clearly maintained greater support than Vlasov claimed (Carter, 2018). Regardless, Vlasov succeeded in signaling the

urgency of the fight against Bolshevism and his own centrality in it, securing his long-term position as Russia's leader.

One 1944 memorandum showcases Vlasov's masterful ability to rationalize his actions. The prospect of a German victory was by then dismal, but Nazi leaders still refused to galvanize the ROA, much to Vlasov's frustration. The memorandum showcases how he exploited the constant surveillance to portray himself favorably to a future audience. In one conversation, Vlasov disassociates himself from the sordid business of politics: "In this critical time I do not want to speak of any political treaties, promises, or the like" (279). In another excerpt, he personifies the compassionate, conscientious leader while simultaneously vindicating himself: "If the actions [of the Germans] in the east do not undergo fundamental changes, the outcome of the war is clear to me. My own life plays no role. But the fate of 15 million Russian people plagues my conscience" (278).

While they failed to protect him in life, Vlasov's efforts to guard his legacy have been somewhat fruitful. It is difficult to form a singular judgement of him, a problem with which many historians have grappled. His story is a fascinating case study on the psychological impact of totalitarianism, moral relativism, and historical self-consciousness. His intentionally murky beliefs make him a convenient straw man to suit cultural and political agendas. Based on the documents, he can be framed as an anti-Bolshevist crusader, Russian patriot, misunderstood democrat, martyred hero, and fascist puppet. Eighty years on, he still defies categorization.

Conclusion

The resurfacing of the Vlasov case reveals much about the history's place in the post-Cold War world, and Russia's political future. When the Soviet Union fell, it brought an end to the series of rigid ideological conflicts that defined the 20th century. A more complex, nuanced, and morally ambiguous world emerged. Coupled with the flood of new information released by the USSR's collapse and the rise of the Internet, these conditions have transformed how people and institutions interact with history.

Grappling with unpleasant historical truth on a national level is a politicized endeavor which often induces a re-examination of fundamental national values and principles. This is exemplified by the conflict between American values of liberty and equality and the reality that several of its Founding Fathers were lifelong slaveowners. However, this process can also trigger

the opposite response: outright rejection of historical truth in favor of whitewashed narratives to bolster patriotic myths and value systems. Russia's government favors this method. In the absence of democratic-electoral legitimacy, it evokes traditional legitimacy based on portraying the regime and its ideology as a continuation of Russia's long and proud history. In particular, the legacy of Russian valor and sacrifice during WWII is fundamental to Putin's regime, and it justifies many of his aggressive military policies. This was explicitly displayed in his justification for the invasion of Ukraine, framing it as a fight against fascism.

The government's reaction to Vlasov is a microcosm of how it exploits Russian history to consolidate power and justify its own actions. Contrary to these heroics, idealized historical narratives, Vlasov's story elicits uncomfortable and profound moral dilemmas and reveals the chaotic, calamitous reality of war. These nuances are at odds with the black-and-white logic of Putin's increasingly authoritarian rule.

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