

Yaacov Falkov, *Meragelei haye'arot: pe'ilutam hamodi'init shel hapartizanim hasovyetim 1941–1945* (Forest Spies: The Intelligence Activity of the Soviet Partisans 1941–1945). Jerusalem: Magnes Press and Yad Vashem Press, 2017. 496 pp.

Forest Spies: The Intelligence Activity of the Soviet Partisans 1941-1945 is a thoughtful, wide-ranging, and politically unbiased study, based on the author's analysis of archival documents, of an extremely important element of the Second World War: the Soviet partisan movement. Yaacov Falkov examines various aspects of the emergence, formation, and development of this movement, beginning with the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, and up to the last days of the war in Europe in the spring of 1945. Unlike previous studies written by Soviet, post-Soviet, and Western scholars, Falkov does not focus exclusively on the analysis of combat and sabotage activities on the part of partisans, though he does not neglect this important subject. He rather deals with the equally important issue of the partisan movement as a key source of intelligence on matters ranging from the mood of the population in the occupied territories of the USSR to operational details with regard to Nazi troops.

The first partisan groups emerged spontaneously as a result of the stunning defeat, and subsequent retreat, of the Red Army in the summer and autumn of 1941. They were created by the staff of the local party apparatus, and also by military and security officers who suddenly ended up behind the frontlines in the Nazi-occupied territory. It was only at the end of 1941 that organizational structures for the development of large-scale partisan resistance were established within the framework of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD). The Central Headquarters of the Partisan Movement (CHPM), which came into being in May 1942, was directly subordinated to the Supreme Command Headquarters and the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Joseph Stalin stood at the head of the two structures. The first head

of the CHPM (serving until March 1943) was the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Byelorussia, Panteleimon Ponomarenko—a high-ranking member of the Soviet leadership who also had close ties to Stalin.

As Falkov shows, the delay in setting up Soviet partisan units resulted in the loss of tens of thousands of lives. What caused this delay? The author presents a convincing and well-documented answer: the problem was not due to a lack of preparedness on the part of the Soviet military, but was rather the outcome of political processes in the Soviet Union in the period preceding the war. During the 1920s and early 1930s, the Soviets had developed modernized methods of intelligence and sabotage techniques, and these had been put to the test by Soviet intelligence specialists taking part in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). The main proponent of the “theory of deep operation”—distraction of the enemy’s rear and logistics network, and use of partisan detachments as a source of intelligence and reconnaissance—was Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, the first deputy of the People’s Commissar of Defense. In June 1937, in the course of Stalin’s “Great Terror” purge, Tukhachevsky was executed as an “enemy of the people.” Consequently, the theory he promoted was discredited, units of the special forces he had set up were disbanded, and the cadres of these units were purged. The dominant military doctrine shifted to exclusively offensive operations in enemy territory.

Over the course of 11 chapters, Falkov details the theoretical and practical difficulties faced by organizers of the partisan movement, especially during the first phase of the war. There was a lack of trained professional cadres, and little in the way of experience in collecting, processing, and juxtaposing items of intelligence. There was insufficient special equipment. There were no communication systems in place, leading to a lack of coordination between partisan detachments and battlefield headquarters. These and other severe logistical problems are fully documented and described by Falkov.

Chapter 12, the final chapter in the book, is devoted to the extremely interesting topic of the role of the partisan movement in providing information concerning the Holocaust to the Soviet leadership. Back in June 1941, while still serving as the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Byelorussia, Ponomarenko reported to Stalin about Nazi antisemitic propaganda. Archival material clearly shows that the Soviet Supreme Command Headquarters did not instruct partisan detachments to provide information concerning the specific situation of Jews under the Nazi occupation. Rather, they were ordered to collect information about acts of mass extermination and robbery of the general civilian population. Notwithstanding, this is how the first information about the mass extermination of Jews came to Ponomarenko’s attention by the end of 1941. By the summer of 1942, such material was being reported on a regular basis. However, by this time, the overwhelming majority of the Jews were already exterminated in the Nazi-occupied territory of the USSR.

Ponomarenko not only collected information about the Holocaust but also conveyed it in speeches he made at meetings of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Byelorussia, as well as in the course of numerous lengthy conversations with Georgy Malenkov (a member of both the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the State Defense Committee) and with Stalin himself. Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine the exact details provided by Ponomarenko; some of this material

is presumably to be found in the Presidential Archive of the Russian Federation, to which access is limited. From Falkov's research, we can conclude that, by early 1942, if not before, the highest levels of Soviet leadership knew about the mass annihilation of the Jews in occupied territories of the USSR, from the outskirts of Leningrad to the North Caucasus. It is unclear whether they deliberately chose to ignore it—certainly, no steps were taken to prevent it from continuing.

Forest Spies: The Intelligence Activity of the Soviet Partisans 1941–1945 is a work of broad-spectrum research based on primary and secondary sources drawn from 14 archives in Russia, Germany, Ukraine, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus, and Israel, accompanied by a well-thought-out analysis of the historical materials. Researchers specializing in the history of the USSR, the Second World War, the various partisan movements, intelligence services, and the Holocaust will undoubtedly find interest in the materials and conclusions of the book.

SAMUEL BARNAI
The Hebrew University