

Screenplay for the film "1940 — Marshal Semyon Timoshenko. Historical Chronicles with Nikolai Svanidze" written by Marina Zhukova, translated by AI, and preceded by a summary also written by AI.

Screenplay Summary:

The text follows the year 1940 through the career of Marshal Semyon Timoshenko and uses him as a thread to show how Stalin's USSR approached the German invasion: outwardly expansionist and aggressive, inwardly disorganized, repressed, and badly prepared for real war.

In May 1940, Stalin removes Kliment Voroshilov as People's Commissar of Defence after 15 years in charge. A commission reveals alarming facts: no mobilization plan, no accurate figures for Red Army strength, poorly covered borders, troops not trained in realistic conditions, and a huge shortage of officers after the purges. Voroshilov, one of the main executors of the terror in the army, is not shot but reassigned to head the Defence Committee, illustrating Stalin's selective use of his henchmen.

Timoshenko, a peasant by birth, decorated veteran of the First World War and the Civil War, close to Stalin since Tsaritsyn, becomes Defence Commissar and Marshal of the Soviet Union. The text goes back to 1939 and his role as commander of the Ukrainian Front in the invasion of Poland: close coordination with the Germans, joint parades, broken promises to the Polish garrison of Lviv (which is denied the promised passage to Romania and Hungary), and the dispatch of thousands of officers to NKVD camps (Starobelsk, Kozelsk, Ostashkov). This leads directly to the March 1940 decision signed by Beria to execute over 20,000 Polish prisoners and detainees, culminating in the Katyn massacre. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of Poles from the annexed territories are deported deep into the USSR.

The text notes the paradox of Timoshenko: his name appeared on an execution list submitted to Stalin by Yezhov, yet Stalin personally spared him, and later his daughter would marry Stalin's son Vasily. The two-week campaign in Poland, in which the USSR committed forces comparable to Germany's against an already crushed country, left Soviet leaders with a dangerous sense of effortless victory.

From Poland, the narrative turns to the Winter War against Finland. In theory Finland was a minor state in the Soviet "sphere of interest", as defined in the secret protocol of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. In practice, "little Finland" resists fiercely: the Mannerheim Line, highly motivated troops, a nationwide patriotic mobilization and effective partisan tactics. The Red Army, beginning the campaign in summer uniforms and worn-out boots in -40°C, badly supplied, short of automatic weapons due to Stalin's fear of "wasting ammunition", is exposed as unprepared.

Timoshenko is appointed to command on the Karelian Isthmus in January 1940. He improves soldiers' equipment (fur coats, skis, fur hats), but receives desperate messages from units encircled and starving. The war ends in March 1940 with a peace treaty that grants the USSR territorial gains (including Vyborg and a moved border), yet the world has seen the Soviet Union fail to crush a much smaller neighbour quickly.

Simultaneously the USSR moves decisively in the Baltic states. After establishing bases in 1939, Molotov summons the foreign ministers of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in June 1940, delivers ultimatums, and forces through government changes and the entry of additional Soviet divisions. Under the direction of figures like Vyshinsky, Zhdanov and Dekanozov, anti-Soviet parties are crushed overnight through mass arrests. July 1940 elections, with “Soviet-style” results of over 90–99% for single pro-Soviet lists, provide pseudo-legal cover for “requests” to join the USSR — though Timoshenko has already created the Baltic Military District and requested NKVD regiments for each republic before any vote.

Plans for the deportation of “anti-Soviet elements” in the Baltics were drawn up as early as 1939 and begin to be implemented from 1941, eventually affecting several percent of the populations of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

The campaigns in Poland, Finland and the Baltics aggravate an already fragile economy. The late-1930s Soviet wars do not create famine on their own, but they push a militarized, inefficient economic system into a tailspin. Partial mobilization fuels a buying panic: while Molotov assures radio listeners that the country has “everything it needs”, citizens empty shops of salt, matches and grain. By New Year 1940 bread and flour have vanished from stores; prices on the black market soar; milk is sold by the glass, flour by the saucer, potatoes piece by piece. In rural areas, the sale of bread is banned altogether, and peasants flee to the cities. Letters quoted from Stalingrad and Nizhny Tagil evoke queues at two in the morning, children dying after eating anything they can get, desperate mothers contemplating killing their own children rather than watch them starve.

In this climate of food crisis, improvised rationing and widespread discontent, the USSR will enter what it will later call the Great Patriotic War. The text suggests that the war will “devour” this discontent by redirecting it outward.

In September 1940, four months into his post as Defence Commissar, Timoshenko writes a top-secret memorandum (co-authored with Chief of the General Staff Meretskov) proposing preparations for a second war against Finland, to defeat its forces, occupy the country and reach the Norwegian border within 45 days. The plan is never carried out, as Molotov in November 1940 is in Berlin trying to secure recognition of Finland as part of the Soviet sphere of interest. Hitler, however, is already focused on something else — the Barbarossa plan, signed in December 1940.

On the same day he writes about Finland, Timoshenko sends Stalin another document, marked “Top Secret. Personal”. He identifies Germany as the most likely enemy on the western borders, predicts major thrusts toward Kiev, Kaunas–Vilnius–Minsk and Brest–Minsk, and insists that German troops must not be allowed to invade Soviet territory. Stalin, convinced there will be no war before 1942–43, ignores these warnings. Military counterintelligence, formally subordinate to Timoshenko, in fact spies on him and reports to Stalin.

The conclusion of the text underlines how, even on the eve of the German attack, the army remains traumatized by purges: a German Junkers-52 flies across Soviet territory to Moscow in May 1941 undetected, lands near the Kremlin, and soon afterwards the leadership of the Soviet Air Force is virtually wiped out — not as punishment for the incident, but as part of pre-planned repression. Timoshenko’s deputy Meretskov is arrested, as is long-serving armaments commissar Vannikov; the commander of the Baltic Special Military District is arrested in the night of 19–20 June 1941. Two days before the invasion, the military machine is still being terrorized from within, despite Timoshenko’s accurate appreciation of the German threat.

Screenplay:

1940 – Semyon Timoshenko

On 7 May 1940, a Tuesday, Stalin removed Kliment Voroshilov from the post of People's Commissar of Defence. Voroshilov had headed the Defence Commissariat for 15 years, since the autumn of 1925, after Frunze's death.

On the day of Voroshilov's dismissal, the Politburo decided to set up a commission to hand over and take over the affairs of the Defence Commissariat. The commission established that: the General Staff had no data on how the borders were covered; the Commissariat did not know the actual strength of the Red Army; there was no mobilization plan; the troops were not being trained in conditions close to combat; there was a shortage of commanders, especially junior ones; the military schools did not make up for this lack.

This was the real state of affairs after the powerful wave of repressions Stalin had inflicted on the army. The army was disorganized, discipline swept away; the surviving junior officers, without experience, had been promoted, and the necessary work with the troops at the lowest level simply wasn't being done.

Voroshilov had been an active executor of the Stalinist purges in the army. He signed off on the execution lists in his commissariat. He had not a single saved person on his conscience. By 1940, in the destruction of the army, he was the last in line after Stalin himself. According to Stalin's own logic, Voroshilov's dismissal should logically have ended in execution. Yet Stalin appoints Voroshilov to head the Defence Committee under the Council of People's Commissars.

Voroshilov's place at the head of the Defence Commissariat is taken by Semyon Timoshenko. The same day, he is made Marshal of the Soviet Union.

Shortly after his appointment, in the first days of July 1940, Timoshenko flies to his homeland, Bessarabia. Bessarabia had been annexed to the USSR under the secret protocol to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, signed on 23 August 1939. The secret protocol fixed the division of spheres of influence in Eastern Europe between the USSR and Germany. The future of Bessarabia is formulated in paragraph 3:

“As regards south-eastern Europe, the Soviet side stresses the interest of the USSR in Bessarabia. The German side declares its complete political disinterest in these areas.”

Before 1917, Bessarabia had belonged to the Russian Empire. From 1918 it formed part of Romania.

On 26 June 1940, the USSR delivers an ultimatum to the Romanian government: by the end of 27 June, Bessarabia must be handed over. Soviet troops are massed along the border. Hitler recommends to the Romanian king not to resist. Romania capitulates. At the same time the USSR also takes Northern Bukovina, which was not mentioned in any secret protocol with Germany.

Operations in Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina are conducted in 1940 by Army General Zhukov. He commands a specially created Southern Front.

Timoshenko does not personally take part in the operation in Bessarabia. He simply goes to the village of Furmanovka, where he was born. It was from this village that he was drafted into the army in 1915, in the midst of the First World War. On the Western Front he received three St George's Crosses. He joined the Reds, fighting against Denikin and Wrangel. He had known Stalin since the defence of Tsaritsyn. There Stalin was chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council of the front. In Stalin's presence, Budyonny recommended Timoshenko as commander of a cavalry division in the 1st Cavalry Army. Present there as well were Voroshilov and Egorov, a former lieutenant-colonel in the tsarist army, commander of the Southern anti-Denikin front in 1919, Marshal of the USSR in 1935, and shot in 1939. Back in 1919, Timoshenko had told Egorov that he came from a peasant family and was the seventeenth child.

By 1940, Semyon Timoshenko had not been back to his native village for a quarter of a century. He had ended the Civil War by taking part in the failed campaign against Poland in 1920. As part of the 1st Cavalry Army, Timoshenko's division almost reached Lviv. The assault on the city never happened; Timoshenko was awarded an honorary revolutionary weapon and a second Order of the Red Banner. The first Order of the Red Banner, in the same year 1920, cited "devotion to Soviet power".

In 1939, Timoshenko would enter Lviv.

The Soviet invasion of Poland in September 1939 was the implementation of the secret protocol to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. In accordance with it, Germany made its move and invaded Poland on 1 September 1939. The German attack on Poland marks the beginning of the Second World War. In turn, the Soviet Union launches military operations in Eastern Poland on 17 September.

This date is determined by the following circumstance. As political cover for sending Soviet troops into Poland, Stalin chose the thesis of "liberating" the Ukrainians and Belarusians living on Polish territory. To enter Poland, he needed the Germans to occupy Warsaw. The capture of the Polish capital and the removal of the Polish government was the signal for the USSR; only after that were military operations to begin.

The People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Molotov, asks the German ambassador Schulenburg to clarify the timeframe for the capture of Warsaw. Molotov asks him to pass on to Foreign Minister Ribbentrop that "the pretext of protecting Belarusians and Ukrainians is of course offensive to the Germans, but he asks that the complex situation of the Soviet government be taken into account. The Soviet government must somehow justify its intervention in the eyes of foreign countries, so as not to appear as an aggressor."

Two weeks after the Nazi invasion of Poland, Moscow receives word that Warsaw has fallen. In reality, despite bombing and lack of water, Warsaw holds out another ten days. For guidance of its aircraft when bombing Polish cities, Germany uses a Soviet military radio station in Minsk. Its special call-sign for Nazi aircraft is "Richard Wilhelm one point nought". Through the embassy, the Luftwaffe High Command had asked Molotov for permission to use the Soviet station on the eve of the attack on Poland. Molotov immediately agreed.

On the night of 17 September, Stalin meets in the Kremlin with German ambassador Schulenburg and military attaché Köstring. He says that at six in the morning the Red Army will cross the Polish

border. Without a declaration of war, Soviet troops invade Poland and strike in the rear of the Polish forces fighting the Germans. Two fronts are formed for the war with Poland: the Belorussian Front and the Ukrainian Front. The Belorussian Front is commanded by Army Commander Second Rank Mikhail Kovalyov. The Ukrainian Front is commanded by Army Commander First Rank, future Marshal and People's Commissar, Semyon Timoshenko.

Lviv is besieged jointly by Soviet and German troops from the east and west. Then, according to agreement with Moscow, the Germans withdraw to a line west of Lviv. They constantly coordinate their actions with the Soviet forces.

The commander of the Ukrainian Front, Timoshenko, informs the staffs of the subordinate formations:

“The German High Command has ordered its troops, in case of the approach of Soviet aircraft, to lay out white sheets, if possible in the form of a swastika. When units of both sides meet, one officer from each German battalion will step forward and declare: ‘The German army greets the army of the Soviet Union.’”

The Poles surrender Lviv to the troops of the Ukrainian Front. Timoshenko reports the capture of Lviv to Stalin. Under the terms of the surrender, Timoshenko guarantees that the Polish garrison may withdraw to Romania and Hungary. He does not keep this promise. Acting on orders received, he closes the border with Romania and Hungary. More than two thousand officers are sent to the camp at Starobelsk. Camps for Polish prisoners of war are also created at Kozelsk and Ostashkov. At the end of 1939, an NKVD investigative group is working in these camps. On 5 March 1940, the People's Commissar for Internal Affairs, Beria, sends Stalin a letter providing for the execution of 14,700 prisoners of war held in the camps and 11,000 prisoners in the jails of Western Belarus. Beria sums up: “They are all hardened enemies of Soviet power, filled with hatred for the Soviet system.”

At the end of March 1940 comes the order to “unload” the camps. “Unloading” means execution. The majority of the Polish prisoners of war are taken away and shot in the Katyn forest near Smolensk. They are shot in the back of the head from close range. Their hands are bound behind their backs with wire. The Katyn forest is on the territory of an NKVD rest home. Before the Polish prisoners, Soviet citizens had already been shot there in 1918, 1928, 1933–1934, 1937 and 1938.

Together with Timoshenko, other future commanders of the Great Patriotic War take part in operations against Poland: Vatutin and Chuikov. In 1939, Vasily Chuikov, the future hero of Stalingrad, stands alongside German generals taking a joint victory parade in the captured city of Grodno. The parade in Brest-Litovsk in honour of the German–Soviet “brotherhood in arms” is reviewed by General Guderian, who in 1941 will lead a tank army to the approaches of Moscow, and by Brigade Commander Krivoshein, who will become a Hero of the Soviet Union in 1945 for the capture of Berlin.

In 1940–1941, several waves of deportation strike the Polish population of Eastern Poland annexed to the USSR. People are transported to Central Siberia, Kazakhstan, Yakutia. According to official figures cited by former Soviet Prosecutor Vyshinsky, 388,000 people are deported. The last wave of deportations takes place on 21 June 1941. The trains carrying the deportees are already being bombed by the Germans.

Semyon Timoshenko, like the other participants in the Polish campaign, belongs to the small minority who survived the most powerful wave of repression in the army. In fact, Timoshenko's name had appeared on an execution list submitted to Stalin by Yezhov. Like other high-ranking officers, he was reproached for trips abroad — he had travelled to Italy, which was enough to accuse him of espionage. In addition, Tukhachevsky had written him a service recommendation in 1929. Tukhachevsky having been shot, the recommendation he once signed was an obvious black mark. But Stalin personally spared Timoshenko's life in 1937. In 1944, one of Timoshenko's daughters, Ekaterina, would marry Stalin's son, Vasily.

Nikita Khrushchev — then First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party and a member of the Military Council of the Ukrainian Front under Timoshenko's command — later recalled: "Timoshenko was prominent, especially after the repression of the command staff of the Red Army. Against the background of those commanders who remained, Timoshenko stood out quite noticeably."

The two-week campaign in Poland left the feeling of an easy victory in a big war. Against Poland, already crushed by fascist Germany, the USSR threw 1.5 million men, 12,000 guns, 3,500 tanks, 4,000 aircraft. Soviet forces were in numbers no less than the German invasion army.

After the Ukrainian Front in Poland, Timoshenko's next assignment would be the North-Western Front against Finland.

For Stalin, Finland was part of the Soviet sphere of interest in the Baltic, as outlined in the secret protocol to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. In October 1939, Soviet military bases were placed in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. In November Stalin's hands reached Finland. His aim was to enter Finland, to begin with by pushing the border back a little from Leningrad. In fact, Stalin was claiming the territory where the famous Mannerheim Line of fortifications lay. By taking this fortified zone, he opened the road to Helsinki. In exchange he even offered part of Eastern Karelia, with its population. Finland refused the exchange.

Stalin's response was unambiguous: use military force. After the war begins, Soviet newspapers will write: "We are not at war with Finland. The Finnish question simply does not exist."

Timoshenko, as a member of the Main Military Council, believes that the USSR is underestimating "little Finland" and overestimating its own military capabilities. He expresses his tactical doubts to the author of the plan for operations in Finland, the commander of the Leningrad Military District, Meretskov. Timoshenko doubts both the possibility of using tanks in Finland's forests and marshes and the deadlines for the campaign. He thinks victory in 12–15 days is unrealistic.

Forty-five minutes after the Soviet troops cross the border, the bombing of Helsinki begins. In the midst of the Soviet air raid, the commander-in-chief of the Finnish army, Field Marshal Gustaf Mannerheim — a graduate of the Nikolaev Artillery School in St Petersburg and holder of all Russian orders with swords and bows for his service in the First World War — issues Order No. 1:

"Brave Finnish soldiers! We fight for our home, our faith and our fatherland. This war for us is a war of liberation."

In essence, for Finland this is a patriotic war.

The Soviet bombing of Helsinki leads to heavy civilian casualties. News of these losses shocks the world. In response to international protests, Molotov declares that Soviet planes were dropping sacks of bread for the starving population of Finland.

On the first day, Soviet troops advance only 4–5 kilometres. Only on the second day do they capture the burning town of Terijoki. From Moscow they bring the head of the Finnish Communist Party, Otto Wille Kuusinen, to Terijoki. Three days earlier he had been received by Stalin. Kuusinen was told that he would head a new pro-Soviet Finnish government. In Moscow, Molotov informs the German ambassador Schulenburg that the new Finnish government will be friendly not only to the USSR but also to Germany.

In Terijoki, Kuusinen calls on the Finnish people to meet the Red Army as liberators. Moscow declares that it recognizes only the new Kuusinen government, despite the fact that the legal government is still functioning in Finland. Moscow signs a Treaty of Friendship with Kuusinen, with a secret protocol. The protocol formalizes the territorial exchange desired by Moscow and the creation of a Soviet military base in Finland.

Stalin then says: “Later we’ll have to resettle the Finns. Move the population of Finland to suitable climatic conditions, and move another population here. What’s the problem — the population of Finland is smaller than that of Leningrad alone! We can resettle them.”

In Moscow, there is no doubt about a quick victory for the Red Army. As in Poland. The superiority over the Finns in manpower and equipment is many times over. But the stroll across Finnish territory does not work out. Ferocious resistance by the Finnish army; the effect of the Mannerheim Line — a deep and long-prepared system of defensive works; plus the partisan war of the Finnish people. *Pravda* writes:

“The White Finns practice waging war by bandit methods. They learn to shoot from trees, to scatter in small groups, to lay mines. Our glorious Red warriors treat the Finns with flamethrowers and crush them with tanks.”

Before the eyes of the whole world, the USSR proves unable to defeat little Finland. Finland experiences a powerful patriotic upsurge, up to and including a popular levy en masse. The huge Soviet Union, which for an entire decade has been geared almost exclusively for war, reveals a catastrophic unpreparedness for real combat operations.

On 27 April 1940, the documentary film *The Mannerheim Line* premieres in eleven of Leningrad’s largest cinemas and at the GAZ House of Culture. After seeing it, playwright Vsevolod Vishnevsky writes in his diary: “They’ve cut out everything they could: no real deaths, no wounded, no frostbite, no tragedy.”

The Red Army begins the Winter War in summer uniforms, in low boots — not even in felt boots. Many have torn footwear. The temperature is minus forty. There are masses of frostbite cases. The supply services are unprepared. Soldiers receive frozen loaves of bread and chop them with an axe. Rusks begin to be prepared only after the war has already begun.

Stalin personally prohibits equipping the army with automatic weapons. The logic of his ban is as follows: in battle, the soldier will fire continuously, which will lead to heavy expenditure of ammunition. Voroshilov supports Stalin: “Where are we going to get so many bullets if we put automatic weapons in the troops?”

In the midst of the Finnish war, Stalin is forced to allow automatic weapons. The front demands them. Yet a third of the soldiers thrown into the Finnish campaign have not been trained. In peacetime, during their service, they had not been allowed to fire at all. Ammunition was being saved.

In retreat, units leave their severely wounded behind. The dead are not buried. The General Staff does not know the strength of the army throughout the war.

The High Command orders a switch to the defensive. The Main Military Council discusses who will command the troops on the Karelian Isthmus. It is then, on 7 January 1940, that Timoshenko is appointed. Marshal Vasilevsky recalls:

“Stalin asked, ‘So who is prepared to take command?’ There was silence. Eventually Timoshenko stood up: ‘If the strength of the troops is increased and the entire system of leadership is genuinely changed, I am ready to take command and I hope I won’t let you down.’ That is how Timoshenko was appointed.”

Timoshenko attempts to improve the supply of the troops. Short fur coats, skis, ear-flap hats instead of pointed budyonovka caps — all this can be credited to him. He sends figures for the number of mouths to feed that exceed by 200,000 the numbers used by the Red Army Supply Directorate. But the Supply Directorate sticks to its own figures. On 29 January 1940, Timoshenko receives a cipher telegram from the headquarters of the 18th Rifle Division:

“Surrounded for 16 days, 500 wounded. No ammunition, no rations. We are eating the last horse.”

The aims of this ill-prepared war are incomprehensible to the soldiers. Official propaganda endlessly mixes the declared tasks: “To push the border away from Leningrad and to liberate the Finnish workers and peasants from the yoke of capitalism.”

By February, Stalin has already lost interest in the government he himself created under Kuusinen. It is useless in Finland, which is waging a war of liberation. On 11 February, the offensive to break through the defensive belts of the Mannerheim Line begins under Timoshenko’s command. Stalin demands that the offensive be continued. Timoshenko, however, has information that peace negotiations have begun.

Finally, the peace treaty with Finland is signed. It comes into force at noon on 13 March 1940. The USSR has satisfied its territorial claims. Finland remains, uniquely among the Baltic countries, an independent state.

Immediately after the signing of the peace, Timoshenko receives an order to storm and bomb the city of Vyborg. He is bewildered. According to the peace treaty, Vyborg is already ceded to the USSR. He cannot understand the point of further casualties on both sides, but he carries out the order.

In June 1940, the editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Red Star*, Boltin, instructs Soviet writers: “We must educate people to understand that the Red Army is an instrument of war, not an instrument of peace. The future war with any capitalist state will be a just war, regardless of who starts it.”

For the Finnish war, Timoshenko is awarded the title Hero of the Soviet Union.

In the winter of 1940, Arkady Petrovich Stolypin, son of the famous Russian Prime Minister Pyotr Arkadyevich Stolypin, arrives in Finland from France. He negotiates with Mannerheim about easing

the lot of Soviet prisoners of war. In addition, Arkady Stolypin is among those who propose creating parachute units from volunteer POWs to be dropped into the northern Stalinist camps. Their aim: an anti-Stalin uprising.

Already at the beginning of the Soviet–Finnish war in 1939, the Finnish State Council considers the idea of forming a Russian government-in-exile. As possible leaders of this government, two diametrically opposed figures are discussed: Alexander Kerensky and Leon Trotsky. The idea is not implemented.

In August 1940, Leon Trotsky — Lenin’s co-architect of the October coup and the creator of the Red Army — is killed in exile in Mexico with an ice-axe blow. Through the hands of the Spanish communist and NKVD agent Ramón Mercader, Stalin finally reaches Trotsky. The murder of Trotsky in 1940 is evidence of Stalin’s lack of confidence in the stability of his own power in the event of war. Kerensky, by contrast, does not worry him.

After the end of hostilities, Timoshenko writes a report to the People’s Commissar of Defence. In it he gives the Soviet losses as: 50,000 killed, 16,000 missing, 11,000 frostbite cases, more than 170,000 wounded.

The real losses in the Soviet–Finnish war of 1939–1940 are: 126,875 killed and missing, 9,614 frostbite cases, 51,892 sick, 186,584 wounded.

Timoshenko lists the causes of the losses: underestimation of the enemy, simplistic assessment of the situation, miscalculations in planning, poor training of the troops, poor material and technical support.

There is just over a year left before the start of the Great Patriotic War.

At the end of April, Timoshenko goes to Kiev. He commands the Kiev Special Military District. He takes the leave he had not used over the previous year. After Poland and Finland, and before his appointment as People’s Commissar, he rests with his family and reads newspapers.

In the Baltic states, since October 1939, Soviet military bases have been stationed under bilateral treaties signed after the partition of Poland. By the summer of 1940, there are 25,000 Soviet soldiers each in Latvia and Estonia, and 20,000 in Lithuania. The conditions of their stationing are atrocious: they sleep on the floor; damp, cold, lice. The soldiers are in old, filthy greatcoats, unshaven.

The Soviet soldiers are deeply impressed by the standard of living of the Baltic populations. Not that it is high, simply normal. The decent diet and living conditions of the locals sharply contrast with what the soldiers are used to seeing at home and had come to regard as normal.

The Red Army’s entry into “free Europe”, which the Baltics still are in 1940, has unexpected consequences. Cases of desertion are recorded. Some soldiers try to settle and stay in the Baltic countries. Political officers try to minimize contact between soldiers and locals.

In October 1939, Stalin had said to Comintern secretary Georgi Dimitrov about the Baltic states: “We must hold out — strictly observe their internal regime and independence. We shall not seek to Sovietize them. The time will come and they will do it themselves!”

That time comes on 14 June 1940. By then Hitler has occupied six European countries. As the German army advances in Europe, Soviet Foreign Commissar Molotov sends congratulations to Berlin. In April 1940 he congratulates Ambassador Schulenburg on the occupation of Denmark and

Norway. In May — on the invasion of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. When fascist troops enter Paris, Soviet diplomats come out into the street to greet them. Soviet diplomats in Paris immediately establish contact with the German occupation forces.

Hitler's success in Western Europe allows Stalin to move in the Baltic states. German troops enter Paris on 14 June 1940. The same day, late in the evening, Molotov receives the Lithuanian Foreign Minister, Juozas Urbšys. Molotov presents him with an ultimatum demanding a change of government in Lithuania and the entry of a new large contingent of Soviet troops.

Urbšys says that, given the gravity of the moment for his country, he asks for time to reflect. Molotov replies that Lithuania does not understand the seriousness of the situation. Lithuania does understand it only too well.

Urbšys asks:

“Must the new cabinet be formed by tomorrow morning?”

“It is not necessary to hurry so much,” Molotov answers. “Later, the next day, for example. But on the condition that all our demands will be met on time.”

“Will Soviet troops interfere in Lithuania's internal affairs?” Urbšys asks.

“No,” Molotov replies instantly. “That is the prerogative of your government. The government of the Soviet Union is pro-Lithuanian. We want the Lithuanian government to become pro-Soviet.”

“Must the composition of the new cabinet be coordinated with the Soviet government?”

“It will have to be approved,” Molotov says.

“How many troops are expected to be brought in?”

“From nine to twelve divisions.”

“And into the capital, Kaunas as well?”

“That is a matter for the military,” says Molotov, “but clearly, as for Kaunas — undoubtedly.”

Molotov's conversation with the Lithuanian minister lasts 32 minutes. The future of Latvia is decided in 23 minutes. The conversation with the Estonian envoy takes 11 minutes.

The Lithuanian government resigns on the morning of 15 June, the day after the meeting with Molotov; that same day Soviet troops are already in the capital, Kaunas.

The Red Army enters Latvia on 17 June. At the same time, former Soviet Prosecutor Vyshinsky, now Deputy Foreign Commissar, arrives in Riga. He is the special plenipotentiary of the Soviet government for Latvia. To Soviet-occupied Estonia goes the boss of Leningrad, Zhdanov. To Lithuania goes Deputy Foreign Commissar Dekanozov, previously head of the 3rd Department of the Main Directorate of State Security of the NKVD. In 1953, Dekanozov will be shot together with Beria.

Before leaving for Lithuania, on the night of 15–16 June, Dekanozov meets Vyshinsky at the Lubyanka. Among other things, they discuss a plan for eliminating the parties hostile to Soviet actions in the Baltic states. The problem is that the incorporation of these states into the USSR as republics must be formalized by a decision of their legislative bodies. For the vote to come out right, these bodies must first be re-elected as needed. Only the complete liquidation of all opposition parties can guarantee the desired result.

Dekanozov will personally direct this operation in Lithuania from the Soviet embassy building in Kaunas. All the arrests will be carried out in one night, from 11 to 12 July 1940.

On 14 July, in elections to the Lithuanian Seimas, 99.19% of the votes, according to the official count, go to the candidates of the single list of “working people’s parties”. In Latvia and Estonia the figures also exceed 90%. In July 1940, this has several explanations. The experience of Poland, destroyed by Hitler and Stalin, forces people to think about sheer survival and not commit political suicide. The Baltic armies, unlike the Finnish one, are unable to offer real resistance. The Communist parties are frenetically pro-Soviet. Lithuania, as a carrot, receives the Vilnius region and its old capital Vilnius.

Above all, in 1940 collective farms have not yet been universally introduced; land and cattle are not yet being taken away everywhere. The population of these countries in 1940 hopes for protection from Nazism in the person of the USSR and does not yet know, and cannot even imagine, what Stalinist repressions are like.

Meanwhile, an NKVD instruction on the deportation — the “removal of anti-Soviet elements” from the Baltic states — had been drafted in October 1939, immediately after the treaties of friendship and mutual assistance had been signed with these countries. The instruction lies unused for a year and a half.

In May 1941, NKVD chief Beria agrees with Stalin on a draft resolution of the Council of People’s Commissars and the Central Committee of the VKP(b) “On measures to cleanse the Lithuanian SSR of anti-Soviet, criminal and socially dangerous elements”. It is with such wording that the year 1937 had begun in the USSR. At the stage of approval, the Latvian and Estonian SSRs are added to the Lithuanian SSR.

Those subject to repression are arrested. Their property is confiscated. Camp terms range from 5 to 8 years, followed by 20 years of “settlement” in remote areas of the USSR.

From 1940 to 1953, 118,599 people are deported from Lithuania — 4% of the population. From Latvia, more than 2.5%; from Estonia, more than 3%.

Among other things, repression is the most dangerous, shortsighted and incompetent policy imaginable in borderlands on the eve of war.

On 21 July 1940, the newly elected parliaments of the Baltic states ask the Supreme Soviet of the USSR to admit them into the Soviet Union. Their requests are granted. The populations of these countries do not know that a month earlier, on 17 June, Defence Commissar Semyon Timoshenko had submitted to Stalin a memorandum proposing: “On the territory of the occupied republics, form the Baltic Military District.” Timoshenko creates this new military district on 11 July — before any elections, any voting results, any petitions for admission to the USSR. In that same memorandum, No. 39 CC, Timoshenko also demands the introduction of one regiment of NKVD troops into each occupied republic. To begin with.

The story of the Baltics — more precisely, of Lithuania — will have a sequel in the winter of 1941. Under the secret protocol to the German–Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Border of 28 September 1939, Germany had retained a small part of Lithuania — the so-called Suwalki salient.

On 10 January 1941, amendments are made to the secret protocol. Hitler renounces his part of Lithuania and sells it to Stalin. Stalin buys this territory for 7.5 million gold dollars, equal to 31.5 million German marks, as the new secret protocol states.

The Polish, Finnish and Baltic campaigns push the food crisis in the country to the limit. The Soviet wars of the late 1930s do not, by themselves, create famine; they simply send into a tailspin an inefficient militarized economy which, even in peacetime, could not properly provide for the population and did not see that as its task.

The Second World War, partial mobilization in the USSR for the Polish and Finnish campaigns, triggered a wild buying panic. On 17 September 1939, Molotov announced on the radio that “the country is provided with all necessities”, while people were already sweeping salt, matches and cereals off the shelves.

By New Year 1940, there is no bread or flour on sale. Prices at the markets soar. Milk is no longer bought by the litre but by the glass; flour is sold by the saucer; potatoes are sold one by one. In the countryside, the government forbids the sale of bread at all. Peasants flee hunger and run to the cities.

From citizens' letters:

“I want to tell you about the difficult situation that has arisen in Stalingrad in recent months. We no longer have time to sleep. At two in the morning people are already queuing for bread. Mothers with children in their arms, old men — six or seven thousand people. It is terrible to see those crazed, frenzied faces grabbing for anything in the store. Before everyone's eyes a boy died after eating the packet of tea he had managed to get. And everywhere people say one thing: ‘So here we are, in the 22nd year of the revolution, we've reached the good life, rejoice now.’” (Stalingrad, winter 1940.)

“Many mothers say they want to destroy the children. They say: I'll light the stove, close the chimney, let them fall asleep and not wake up. There is simply nothing to feed them. I too am already thinking of this.” (Nizhny Tagil, February 1940.)

In this state of large-scale food crisis, chaotic introduction of ration cards and mass discontent, the country will enter the Great Patriotic War. The war will devour this discontent.

In September 1940, Timoshenko, four months already in the post of Defence Commissar, writes a memorandum on preparations for a second war against Finland. Co-author is Meretskov, participant in the first campaign and now Chief of the General Staff. The memorandum is numbered 103203/ov. “ov” means “of special importance”.

As the objective, Defence Commissar Timoshenko formulates: the defeat of the Finnish armed forces, the seizure of Finnish territory and a march to the Norwegian border. Everything is to be completed in 45 days.

Timoshenko's plan will not be carried out. There will be no second Finnish war.

In November 1940, Molotov visits Germany. In his talks with Hitler he devotes exceptional attention to the Finnish question. Finland is the only territory that the USSR has not yet “worked through” in accordance with the secret protocol to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact.

But when Molotov demands that Finland be recognized as a Soviet sphere of interest, Hitler no longer promises neutrality. He has other plans. A month after Molotov's visit, on 18 December 1940, Hitler signs Directive No. 21 to the German Armed Forces High Command — the famous Barbarossa Plan, the plan for the invasion of the USSR.

The very same day that Timoshenko writes to Stalin his memorandum on the second Finnish war, he submits another document to Stalin. Written in a single copy and marked "Top Secret. Personal only", Timoshenko writes:

"On our western borders, the most likely enemy will be Germany. The main blow will be in the south, toward Kiev. In the west, a blow will be struck toward Kaunas–Vilnius and then Minsk. Another blow Brest–Minsk."

He writes the truth to Stalin — a truth close to heresy — because Stalin is categorically convinced there will be no war before 1942, or even 1943.

Stalin sets his conviction above reality. Of that reality Marshal Konev later says: "That the Germans were preparing for war, many knew, and all were expecting war."

Timoshenko writes to Stalin: "Under no circumstances must we allow the Germans to invade our territory."

Military counterintelligence keeps covert watch on Timoshenko. Formally it has been removed from the NKVD and subordinated to the Defence Commissar — that is, to Timoshenko — but it spies on him and reports directly to Stalin.

On 15 May 1941, a German Junkers-52 appears in the sky near Moscow. It has flown a great distance over Soviet territory without being detected by the air defence forces.

Vadim, son of playwright Vladimir Bill-Belotserkovsky, recalls:

"While I was at the Dynamo stadium, I saw a German plane for the first time in my life. It was flying very low, it flew right over the stadium. On the fuselage and wings, the crosses and swastikas stood out thick and black. The stadium fell silent. Everyone in the stands forgot the football and watched the plane."

The Junkers lands at Moscow's Central Airfield, on the famous Khodynka field, five minutes' drive from the Kremlin.

Immediately after this, the leadership of the Soviet Air Force is almost entirely shot. But this execution is not Stalin's reaction to the German plane incident; it is repression planned much earlier.

On the very eve of the war, Stalin continues to terrorize the army. Timoshenko's deputy, former Chief of the General Staff Meretskov, is arrested. The long-serving People's Commissar for Armaments, Vannikov, is arrested. The commander of the Baltic Special Military District, Colonel General Lyakhtyonov, is arrested during the night of 19–20 June 1941.

There are two days left before the war.