Screenplay for the film "1943 — Marshal Alexander Vasilevsky. 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 Marshal Aleksandr Mikhailovich Vasilevsky's trajectory, placing him at the centre of the Red Army's key decisions in World War II and at the intersection of Stalin's military and political transformations. In February 1943, in the immediate aftermath of the Stalingrad victory, Vasilevsky unexpectedly receives the rank of Marshal of the Soviet Union, barely a month after being promoted to Army General. Stalin's move is also meant to balance his crucial "tandem" of commanders: Georgy Zhukov had become a marshal a month earlier. Together they form a brilliant and complementary duo — Zhukov forceful and relentless, Vasilevsky meticulous and cautious — which effectively becomes the main operational brain of the war's second half.

A large portion of the narrative is devoted to the Battle of Stalingrad, both as a military turning point and as a human catastrophe. Stalin's directive forbidding the evacuation of civilians turns the city's population — including children brought from blockaded Leningrad — into hostages of his "Not a step back" policy. The massive air raid of 23 August 1942 transforms Stalingrad into a blazing inferno, filling the cellars with the screams of children, collapsing buildings over their occupants and killing tens of thousands. On the front lines, the desperate defence along the Don and the retreat to the city are illustrated through Colonel Utvenko's testimony: his division is nearly destroyed as it fights encircled, starves, struggles for water and finally reaches the Don with only a fraction of its strength. Within the ruins of Stalingrad, General Vasily Chuikov's 62nd Army clings to a narrow strip of riverbank on the Volga, receiving reinforcements and supplies under continuous bombardment. It is this tenacity, combined with the secret preparation of a counter-offensive by Vasilevsky and Zhukov, that leads to the encirclement of Paulus's 6th Army in November 1942.

Vasilevsky appears as a lucid strategist, often in tension with Stalin. Before Stalingrad, he opposed the ill-prepared Kharkov offensive of 1942, predicting the disaster that indeed opened the road to Stalingrad for the Germans. During Manstein's attempt to relieve Stalingrad, Vasilevsky, unable to reach Stalin, orders the 2nd Guards Army into action on his own authority, risking a court-martial until Stalin belatedly approves the move. In his memoirs Vasilevsky defends his "calculating caution" as a virtue: a commander responsible for tens of thousands of lives must weigh his decisions carefully, and prudence is not cowardice but a professional obligation.

The text also emphasizes his ambivalent attitude toward Stalin. As a General Staff officer, he clearly sees how the 1937–38 purges crippled the Red Army: shattered high command, divisions led by captains, refusal to prepare an underground command post before 1941. He later acknowledges that Hitler's decision to attack in 1941 was encouraged by this visible destruction of Soviet military cadres. Yet emotionally he still tends to separate the repressions from Stalin personally, as if "repression" were some anonymous fate. An anecdote about his priest father, whom he had to disavow in order to keep his Party card and career, reveals both the system's cruelty and Stalin's curious personal respect for his clerical background.

After Stalingrad the narrative widens to the Battle of Kursk and the 1943 campaigns. Vasilevsky and Zhukov oppose a Soviet pre-emptive strike and eventually convince Stalin to let the Germans

attack first, which allows the Red Army to break the offensive and then launch a massive counter-attack. The liberation and re-occupation of Kharkov, the SS atrocities and the use of gas vans are described in raw detail, culminating in the first war-crimes trial of the conflict, reported by the writer Konstantin Simonov, who is struck by the executioners' cold, repetitive "I killed, I shot, I pressed the gas pedal."

Parallel to the fighting, the text portrays how Stalin uses the turn of the war to reshape the Soviet state into an empire. In 1943 he restores epaulettes and tsarist-style uniforms, creates new orders named after Russian heroes such as Suvorov and Kutuzov, and replaces the "Internationale" with a new national anthem he edits himself. In a spectacular about-face, he also normalises relations with the Orthodox Church: receiving metropolitans in the Kremlin, restoring the patriarchate, creating a state council to oversee church affairs and materially endowing the hierarchy.

On the international stage, the prestige of Stalingrad underpins Stalin's position at the Tehran Conference, where he and Roosevelt agree on opening the second front in northern France — a decision that ensures the Allied advance will move toward, rather than across, the Soviet armies. At the same time, Stalin secures favourable post-war borders for Poland, foreshadowing a pro-Soviet regime there and an expanded Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe.

In the post-war period, when Vasilevsky becomes Minister of Defence, his relationship with Stalin deteriorates. His son's marriage to Zhukov's daughter only increases Stalin's suspicion, as the dictator quietly forbids close personal ties between wartime commanders. Under Khrushchev, Vasilevsky is gently pushed into retirement by Zhukov himself, acting as messenger of bad news. Though formally well treated, he suffers a stroke and later returns only to a prestigious but marginal inspectors' group. The text ends on a somewhat tender note: despite being one of the USSR's greatest commanders, the former seminarian and reluctant politician sometimes introduced himself with a smile as "the father of the famous architect Vasilevsky."

Screenplay:

1943 – Aleksandr Vasilevsky

On 16 February 1943 the decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR was published awarding the title of Marshal of the Soviet Union to Aleksandr Mikhailovich Vasilevsky. For Vasilevsky this decree was extremely unexpected. Barely a month earlier he had been promoted only to the rank of Army General. Vasilevsky's elevation to marshal comes thirteen days after the liquidation near Stalingrad of Paulus's grouping and the completion of the Battle of Stalingrad. Zhukov had become a marshal a month earlier than Vasilevsky.

After the war, after Stalin's death, under Khrushchev already, two marshals are riding together in a car one evening — Zhukov and Vasilevsky. Zhukov is the Minister of Defence of the USSR. Vasilevsky is his first deputy. Zhukov says to Vasilevsky:
"Tell me, Sasha, don't you think you ought to take up the history of the war?"
Vasilevsky understood the question.
"What do you mean, Georgy? Am I to take that to mean I should resign? That it's time to go?"

Zhukov answered:
“Yes. The question has been discussed, and Khrushchev insists on your retirement.”

Vasilevsky submits his resignation. Everything is kept for him — full salary, an adjutant, a car. Soon he has his first stroke. By the time he recovers, Zhukov will already have been removed from the post of minister. Vasilevsky will return from retirement to service in the group of inspectors of the Ministry of Defence, the so-called “paradise group.” In the past, after the war, Vasilevsky had held the post of Minister of Defence. During the war, from 1942, he is Chief of the General Staff.
Vasilevsky writes in his memoirs:
“More than once Stalin turned to me, in the name of the Headquarters of the Supreme High Command, with proposals that I take upon myself the duties of Chief of the General Staff. Each time in such conversations I begged him not to do this. In spite of all my insistent and convincing requests, on 26 June 1942, by order of Headquarters, I was confirmed in the post of Chief of the General Staff.”

A month later, on 23 July 1942, Vasilevsky arrives at the Stalingrad Front.
On that day, 23 July, the defence on the right bank of the Don is being held by the commander of the 33rd Guards Division, Colonel Utvenko.

From the story of Colonel Utvenko, recorded by Konstantin Simonov shortly after the fighting:
“The Germans would have quickly eaten us alive if we hadn’t dug ourselves into the bare open field, down deeper than our heads. Ammunition and food were dwindling. At night we sent the wounded back on camels. The Germans were also taking heavy losses. We counterattacked. The Germans we killed remained deep inside our defensive lines. You could hardly breathe, the stench was terrible. We were fighting encircled. Then the order came to break out to the east. We broke out, with about three hundred men lost. But during the night the Germans slipped through even farther to the east and closed the ring again. They slashed us with their submachine guns. Several commanders shot themselves. Up to a thousand men were killed. I was firing the last gun. The Germans ran up to the piece. I jumped off the bank into the swamp. Then I found four more men. Then there were twenty of us. We fought over water. We threw grenades to knock a mess tin of water out of a German’s hands, and there was nothing at all to eat. Later there were a hundred and twenty of us with weapons. We swam across the Don. Eight men drowned. My adjutant had been a feldsher-midwife. But he killed more Germans than he healed of our own. He swam the Don without trousers, but with his submachine gun. After crossing, there were about six hundred of us together. Then we fought near Stalingrad. A hundred and sixty men remained of the division. Before those battles I didn’t know myself what kind of man I was.”

That is how, in such fighting, they withdrew to Stalingrad. And there they stood. Stalingrad was the limit of retreat.

Vasilevsky writes in his memoirs: “A significant part of the inhabitants refused to be evacuated.” It is hard to say whether Vasilevsky knew what the situation actually looked like.
On the night of 20 July, Stalin holds a conversation with the first secretary of the Stalingrad regional committee, Chuyanov. Stalin demands: first, to ensure high work rates in the city’s industry; second, to forbid the evacuation of the civilian population from the zone of the impending battles. Stalin’s directive of 20 July anticipates his famous Order No. 227 of 28 July, known as “Not a step back.” The trial run for this order is carried out on the civilian population of Stalingrad — on the old people, women and children. They have no right to leave the city that bears his, Stalin’s, name.

In the spring of 1942 children from Leningrad who had survived the first blockade winter were brought to Stalingrad. Now in Stalingrad they share the fate of everyone else, shut in by Stalin's order. In Stalingrad there will not even be the ration norms of a blockaded city. People are abandoned to their fate. The city has 500,000 inhabitants, not counting refugees from Ukraine, evacuees from the central regions, and the wounded in their countless hospitals. The Germans will occupy the whole city with the exception of the Kirovsky district and part of the Krasny Oktyabr district. From a report by the NKVD Administration of Stalingrad Region after the liberation of the city: "Excluding the Kirovsky district, 7,655 civilians have been registered." Out of more than 500,000. That is how many women and children remained in the city after Stalin personally forbade evacuation.

On 23 August the heaviest bombing of Stalingrad begins. On that day Vasilevsky is in Stalingrad. It is no longer a city but a gigantic blazing pyre. Air-raid warnings are no longer sounded. The bombing comes in three-minute intervals. Houses collapse, burying those who are hiding in the cellars. In the cellars there is a continuous chorus of children's screams. The cellars no longer give protection, and people climb up to the surface, into hell.
A former resident of Stalingrad, Olga Kozyreva, recalls: "Crowds of women with children ran towards the Volga, knocking people down and trampling them, losing their children. Everywhere you saw little kids alone; many of them were wounded."

The Germans bomb the embankment and the crossings especially ferociously — the places where the wounded are brought. The whole bank is in flames. The crossing continues under bombing. Boats loaded with people go down mid-Volga. During the bombing on 23 August, 42,000 people are killed. On 23 August the Germans reach the Volga.

At the height of this terrible German bombing, in the night of 23–24 August, Vasilevsky receives a directive from Headquarters:
"Mobilise the armoured trains and send them along the circular railway line round Stalingrad. Fight the enemy not only in the daytime but also at night. Use smoke screens in abundance to scare the enemy."
The directive shows that Stalin has no idea what is actually happening in Stalingrad. By this time both the city and the Volga are already in flames.

The German assault on the city begins on 13 September. This is the start of a struggle for the city, unprecedented in its stubbornness, which will last until 2 February 1943. Inside the city the defence is held by the 62nd Army of General Chuikov and the 64th Army of General Shumilov. Chuikov is appointed army commander on the eve of the German offensive, on 12 September. General Vasily Chuikov is the key figure in Stalingrad, confronting General Friedrich Paulus. Chuikov is a man who found himself in the right place at the right time, if one can speak that way at all about street fighting in a destroyed city. Chuikov is a tough, resolute, independent and personally fearless commander. He is a commander right in the thick of the battle. The battle that has fallen to his lot is for every house, for each factory shop, for a railway embankment, for a wall, finally simply for a heap of rubble. It is constant close-quarters combat. The Germans are already on the Mamayev Kurgan, they have already seized the tractor factory. In the night of 18 October Chuikov's command post is once again moved. Now it is out in the open, right on the bank of the Volga.

The remnants of the 62nd Army hold a narrow strip of riverbank on the western shore of the Volga. But this means that, despite the bombing, they can receive reinforcements, ammunition and food

from the other bank, and thus pose a threat of counter-attacks. The divisions crossing to help Chuikov are almost wiped out to a man. These are the divisions commanded by Rodimtsev, Lyudnikov, Batyuk, Zholudev, Sologub. Yet by clinging to the bank of the Volga, Chuikov wins the battle for the city. The Germans become bogged down in Stalingrad. The German command issues the order to switch to the defensive.

In his memoirs Vasilevsky scarcely mentions Chuikov. There is an explanation for this. Chuikov defends Stalingrad. Vasilevsky's thoughts — as strategist and later as memoirist — are occupied with something else. On 12 September, that is, on the eve of the day when the German assault on Stalingrad begins, Vasilevsky and Zhukov go to Stalin with a proposal to launch a counter-offensive. Vasilevsky writes: "This decision was taken in mid-September after an exchange of views between Stalin, Zhukov and myself. Stalin imposed the strictest secrecy on the entire preparation of the operation."
The preparations, with Vasilevsky and Zhukov constantly travelling to the Stalingrad area, continue until early November. Vasilevsky writes: "Headquarters entrusted me with coordinating all three fronts in the Stalingrad sector during the counter-offensive."

The Vasilevsky–Zhukov tandem took shape informally and quickly. It was a brilliant tandem which became, in essence, the leading centre in the second half of the war. Zhukov, who brooked no obstacles to the implementation of his plans and orders, and the meticulous, far-seeing Vasilevsky. Vasilevsky is courteous with subordinates. He is an untypical, almost old-fashioned officer. With those at fault he speaks in such formulas as: "I hope my remarks will not remain without consequence. Kindly endeavour to be more punctual in future." In 1942 and early 1943 Vasilevsky's rank is one step below Zhukov's. Vasilevsky is a colonel-general, Zhukov an army general. When, in January 1943, Zhukov becomes a marshal and Vasilevsky an army general, the situation is aggravated, and Zhukov's pressure on him increases. At this point Stalin gives Vasilevsky the marshal's rank virtually without any pause after his previous promotion. The Vasilevsky–Zhukov tandem is an incredible stroke of luck for Stalin. He needs it vitally. And he, distributing stars to the shoulder straps, cherishes and protects it.

For Vasilevsky, writing his memoirs, Stalin is a difficult subject. During the war he is close to Stalin, he is the Stavka's representative, Chief of the General Staff, in constant contact with him. During the war he meets with him more than 200 times. Zhukov, 126 times.
But Vasilevsky is a General Staff officer; he values facts, and his professional sobriety outweighs his reverence for Stalin.

Vasilevsky first met Stalin during the Winter War with Finland. The then Chief of the General Staff, Shaposhnikov, had been summoned to discuss the war plan. Vasilevsky, by virtue of his position, came along with him.

Vasilevsky recounted this in conversations with Konstantin Simonov: "Shaposhnikov listed all the forces and means that were needed for a war with Finland. Stalin made fun of him. He said something along the lines of: you, to deal with this… Finland, are demanding such enormous forces. There is no need for such forces at all."
Then Stalin took the decision: "The General Staff is not to concern itself with Finland; let it deal with other matters."

That is, he switched off the General Staff. Moreover, he told Shaposhnikov he needed a rest, gave him a dacha in Sochi and sent him on vacation. The General Staff officers were likewise scattered, sent off in various inspection trips.

“What happened after that is well known,” says Vasilevsky. “The Finnish War was a great disgrace for us.” He assesses it, not politically, but as a military professional.

Vasilevsky goes on: “At the beginning of the Patriotic War the General Staff was torn apart. Everyone who formed the brain of the General Staff was sent to different fronts, which did not contribute to normal work. At the start of the war Stalin had in fact broken up the General Staff. And if you want to know, despite all our pre-war insistence, we were not even allowed to organise an underground command post. Only on the first day of the war did people start scratching at the earth in the courtyard of the 1st Building of the People’s Commissariat of Defence, digging a shelter. It’s laughable to say, but the operations department of the General Staff worked until August in a clothing storehouse. Only in August were premises outfitted at the Kirovskaya metro station and in the building next door, where the General Staff was then located during the war. That’s how things really were.”

Vasilevsky recalls May 1942, the tragic attempt to liberate Kharkov. The General Staff regarded the operation as unprepared, risky, and proposed refraining from it. Stalin did not listen. Stalin gave the go-ahead for the Kharkov operation but did not provide the necessary additional forces, ordering that they cope with those already available, and ordered the General Staff not to interfere. The offensive choked after five days. In the critical situation that emerged, Vasilevsky reported twice in one day, on 17 May, to Stalin about the need to stop the offensive. Vasilevsky immediately assessed the full measure of the danger that had arisen for our troops. But Stalin said: we will continue the offensive. And the next day, 18 May, he demanded that the offensive continue, making inevitable the encirclement of our troops. The Germans fulfilled the worst forecast of Vasilevsky. On 19 May, a catastrophic encirclement of our forces, by its scale, became a fact. That same day the commander of the Southwestern Front, Timoshenko, on his own responsibility, gave the order to stop the offensive. Stalin would ratify this decision against the backdrop of the accomplished encirclement.

Vasilevsky says: “As a result of the failure near Kharkov, both the situation and the balance of forces in the south changed in favour of the enemy. This gave him the opportunity to break through to Stalingrad and into the Caucasus.”

Vasilevsky’s stance over Kharkov, and then Stalingrad, Kursk, and subsequent operations, gave him a reputation as a calculating and even cautious man. To this Vasilevsky replies in his memoirs: “As for my calculativeness and caution, in my opinion there is nothing bad in them. A commander’s work is such that he bears responsibility for the lives of thousands and tens of thousands of soldiers, and it is his duty to weigh each of his decisions. Calculativeness and caution are not negative but positive qualities in a commander.”

The Stalingrad operation was not only the first of the entire war to be thoroughly thought out, but also carried out confidently and competently. The counter-offensive begins after a year-long retreat. The fear of failure is extremely strong, both in the troops and among those commanding them. Two days before the operation, the commander of the 4th Mechanised Corps, the main striking formation, Volsky, breaks down. He writes to Stalin that the offensive is doomed to failure, that the operation should be abandoned. The day before the offensive, Stalin summons Vasilevsky to

Moscow because of Volsky's letter. Vasilevsky declares that he sees no grounds for cancelling the operation. Stalin connects by telephone with Volsky. Volsky gives his word to carry out the mission.

Before the offensive, a serviceman, Kovalenko, writes to his mother: "I am alive. And in a second I may be killed. Because here life lasts a second. Even though you write 'don't think about death,' I don't think I'll stay alive. Because the fighting is very heavy. A lot of people have been killed. Corpses lie on the ground. Germans and ours lie there, poor fellows, rotting. If only they buried them instead of leaving them lying like sheaves. Tanks drive over people as if over logs."

On 18 November Vasilevsky returns to the Stalingrad area.
At 7:30 in the morning on 19 November our counter-offensive at Stalingrad begins.
On 23 November the forces of the Southwestern and Stalingrad Fronts link up near the town of Kalach and complete the encirclement of Paulus's 6th Army.

A powerful force under the command of Manstein attempts to break the Soviet ring from outside. The threat is serious. There are no reserves.
Vasilevsky tries to contact Stalin. He cannot. Without waiting for communications, he independently proposes to the commander of the 2nd Guards Army, Malinovsky, that he move against Manstein. Malinovsky sets about the task. The troops go into motion. At last Vasilevsky gets through to Stalin. He addresses him with a request concerning the 2nd Guards Army, which is already on the move. Zhukov is categorically opposed. He has his own plans for the 2nd Guards Army. Stalin agrees with Zhukov. And sharply refuses Vasilevsky, saying that the question will be considered by the State Defence Committee. Vasilevsky waits for an answer for two days. A negative answer will mean a court-martial. In his memoirs, Vasilevsky dryly writes: "With great excitement I awaited Headquarters' decision." Only on 14 December at 22:30 does he receive Stalin's "go-ahead." Manstein is halted on the eve of the New Year 1943.

Up to Christmas 1942, in the encircled 6th Army of Paulus, the daily bread ration per man was 100 grams. After Christmas it is 50. In addition there is soup made from the bones of horses dug out of the ground. The temperature is 30–35 degrees below zero. German soldiers go down into the cellars of ruins. In these cold, dark rooms are crowded together the sick, the insane, the dying and the already dead. From a letter: "Soon we shall all die off." In German information bulletins Stalingrad is not mentioned by a single word.

Soviet ultimatums demanding surrender are delivered on 8, 17 and 25 January 1943. Paulus wires Berlin. Hitler replies: "Capitulation is unacceptable." On 30 January Paulus is promoted to field marshal. On the 31st our troops surround the department store building where the 6th Army headquarters is located. Field Marshal Paulus surrenders to a 22-year-old senior lieutenant-tankman, Fyodor Ilchenko. Ilchenko recalls: "On the bed sat a very old, unshaven fellow in a sweater of some indeterminate colour. His tunic hung on a chair. Next to him stood a first-class accordion. Paulus got up from the bed and forced out: 'This is the end!' 'So, it's the end,' I said. And the field marshal nodded his head to me, a mere senior lieutenant."

Then they drive to Beketovka, where Paulus is met by the commander of the 64th Army, Shumilov. Photographers are all around. In front of them is a buffet of exceptional abundance. Paulus insists that his men be fed. He is promised that. Everyone sits down at the table. General Shumilov raises his glass: "Your health." Formally, the command of the 6th Army has not announced capitulation. In 1943 Paulus refused to sign an order instructing his soldiers to lay down their arms, justifying this by saying that he was in the position of a prisoner of war.

In the mid-1970s, Vasilevsky reads a novella in which Paulus appears. His comment on it: “To be frank, the main thing is that Paulus is not portrayed as some sort of halfwit, but as a knowledgeable commander. In the encirclement he acts energetically, and his soul aches for his subordinates. For how do we show the enemy side? Hitler — a raving corporal, Manstein — a blockhead of blockheads. Then whom did we fight so hard against?”

In 1943 Paulus is brought to NKVD Operational Transit Camp No. 27 in Krasnogorsk. In July 1943 the National Committee “Free Germany” is created there. Later, the anti-fascist organisation “Union of German Officers,” mainly from among the Stalingrad prisoners of war. Paulus calls this high treason. He signs a protest. Paulus is moved from one general officers’ camp to another. In 1944 he signs an appeal addressed to German soldiers and the German people: “I consider it my duty to declare that Germany must remove Adolf Hitler and establish a new state leadership.” He speaks on the radio, signs leaflets. In Germany his son is arrested. His wife, who refuses to renounce her husband, his daughter, daughter-in-law and grandson are sent to the Dachau concentration camp. They will be freed in April 1945. After the war Paulus is taken to the Crimea for medical treatment. In 1946 Vasilevsky will meet him at a special facility in Tomilino. They will recall Stalingrad. Later the field marshal will ask Vasilevsky to help him return to Germany. Vasilevsky will pass Paulus’s request on to Stalin. Stalin will say: “It’s too early.” And add: “You, Vasilevsky, are not a politician.”

Vasilevsky never did aspire to politics. He finished the theological seminary in Kostroma. He dreamed of working for three years as a teacher in a village school and then, having saved enough money, studying agronomy or entering the Moscow Land Survey Institute. With the outbreak of the First World War his plans changed abruptly. Vasilevsky writes: “After the declaration of war I was seized by patriotic feelings. The slogans about defending the Fatherland carried me away.” In February 1915 he arrived in Moscow, at the Alekseyev Military School. He left the school as an ensign. In February 1917 he was a staff captain. In December 1917 he was demobilised. Until April 1919 he did not take part in the Civil War. He worked as a teacher in Tula Province. Then, in April 1919, he was called up into the Red Army. From then his career begins. In 1927 Vasilevsky is a regimental commander in Tver. From there he goes to the General Staff. Vasilevsky joins the Party in 1938, at the height of the Great Terror.

In his memoirs entitled *The Cause of My Whole Life*, Vasilevsky writes of Soviet commanders Uborevich, Yegorov, Yakir, Tukhachevsky. He characterises them, and his most complimentary portrait is of Uborevich. But he says not a word about the fact that they were shot. In his memoirs Vasilevsky does not mention repressions in the army at all. He was far more candid in conversations with Konstantin Simonov in 1967. “What can one say about the consequences for the army of the years 1937–38? Without 1937 there might not have been a war at all in 1941. In Hitler’s decision to start the war in 1941 a big role was played by his assessment of the degree to which our military cadres had been smashed. What is there to say, when in 1939 there were divisions commanded by captains, because everyone above them had been arrested to a man. In 1941 Stalin knew very well that the army was not ready for war and by all means sought to postpone it.”

In this conversation with Simonov Aleksandr Mikhailovich Vasilevsky is candid in two respects. First, he says that the repressions in our army and the nightmare beginning of the war are directly connected. Second, the clear-headed General Staff officer reveals in himself a certain irrational attitude towards Stalin. The repressions as some faceless doom, and Stalin as if having nothing to do with it: the repressions on one side, Stalin on the other.

In the winter of 1940 Vasilevsky was invited to a dinner with Stalin in the Kremlin. One of Stalin's toasts was for Vasilevsky's health. At that time Vasilevsky was only the deputy head of the Operations Directorate of the General Staff. Then Stalin publicly says: "Tell me, please, why is it that you, and your brothers too, give absolutely no material help to your father?"

Vasilevsky's father is a priest. Vasilevsky writes in his memoirs: "I replied that since 1926 I had broken off all ties with my parents. In all forms it is indicated that I have no relations with my parents. Otherwise I would not have been in the Party and hardly would have served in the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army, let alone in the General Staff system. And when I received a letter from my father, I immediately reported this to the Party cell secretary, and he demanded that I continue not to maintain relations with my parents. Stalin, in the presence of Politburo members sitting at the table, told me that I was to immediately restore relations with my parents and to give them systematic material assistance. I felt that Stalin regarded me with some inner respect. Perhaps this was linked to my clerical background. After all, Stalin too had finished a theological seminary."

Stalin is right: Vasilevsky is not a politician. And this is not the least of the reasons why Stalin valued him.

In 1943, on 15 February, our troops liberate Kharkov. Exactly one month later, after six days of extremely heavy fighting, the Germans under the leadership of that same Manstein take Kharkov for the second time. In the city people say: "The second Germans have come." These are SS units. They hang people right on balconies. The police collaborators rage. People are shot in the streets. In crowded places, at the Annunciation Market, there are roundups. People are encircled; the ring tightens. Then the Germans break the ring on one side and let the sheepdogs in. They drive the crazed people in the direction they need — towards the black gas vans. People are packed into the vehicles; the doors are shut, and exhaust gases are fed inside. By the time the vehicle has driven to the outskirts of the city, the people inside have suffocated.

Kharkov will be liberated for the second time on 23 August 1943. The liberation of Kharkov is the finale of the famous Kursk battle. The planners of the Kursk operation are Vasilevsky and Zhukov.

On 15 April 1943 Hitler says of the coming offensive near Kursk: "I have decided, as soon as weather conditions allow, to launch the offensive. The victory at Kursk must be a torch for the whole world."

We are waiting for the beginning of the German offensive. According to intelligence data, already in May the General Staff twice warns the fronts on the Kursk salient of a possible German offensive in the coming days. The Germans do not start their offensive. The General Staff names a new date — 26 May. On the German side there is no movement. The Military Council of the Voronezh Front asks Stalin for permission to deal the enemy a pre-emptive blow. Vasilevsky writes: "Stalin became very seriously interested in this proposal, and it cost Zhukov and me some effort to persuade him not to do it."

The Germans do not begin their offensive until mid-June. "But from all kinds of intelligence we already knew for certain that the fascists were ready for an offensive," Vasilevsky recalls. Impatience begins to show in the commander of the Voronezh Front, Vatutin. He tries to persuade Vasilevsky: "Aleksandr Mikhailovich, we'll oversleep this, we'll miss the moment. Let us be the first to start."

Vatutin calls Stalin, proposes attacking first. Stalin tells Vasilevsky that Vatutin's proposal deserves the most serious attention. Vasilevsky tells Stalin that it would be much more advantageous for us if the enemy were to start the offensive first. On 2 July Vasilevsky receives information that a German offensive is inevitable by 6 July. He reports this to Stalin, asks permission to warn the fronts and reads to him the draft directive prepared for them. Stalin approves the text.

On 4 July a soldier of the German 168th Infantry Division is captured. He reports that the troops have been issued dry rations and portions of vodka and that the offensive will begin on the 5th. On 5 July the German offensive begins. It lasts less than a week and ends in failure. The failure is their defeat in the tank battle near Prokhorovka. Vasilevsky will dryly write in his memoirs: "I had the opportunity to witness this titanic duel of two steel armadas." He then gives the text of the written report to Stalin on the course of the tank battle. This document ends with the words: "I delayed sending this report because of my late return from the front. 2 hours 47 minutes. 14.07.43. From the 5th Guards Tank Army."

Afterwards will come the first victory salutes for Orel and Belgorod. And to Moscow children, who still kept their terror of bombing, it would be explained at home that this was "just a salute," and they would not believe this for a long time.

In December, in Kharkov, liberated as a result of the Kursk operation, a trial begins of three SS men and one Russian who had participated in killing people by means of a specially equipped vehicle. It would seem that those on trial are merely small fry in the vast system of extermination. The main accused is a certain Captain Wilhelm Langheld; the others have still lower ranks. The Russian is not the chief of police, but the driver of the gas van. Yet this is the first trial of the war. Those on trial try to answer the questions conscientiously. But they cannot remember how many people were killed on their orders. Two hundred, three hundred, or several thousand. The Russian accused displays a certain respect for the gas technology; he says: "I considered this execution humane." They tell how they shot 450 mentally ill people and that from within the crowd of those being shot a cry was heard: "Madmen, what are you doing?" Konstantin Simonov, who was at the trial, writes: "They calmly talk about themselves: 'I killed,' 'I shot,' 'I shoved them in and locked up,' 'I pressed the gas pedal.' And in this 'I,' 'I,' 'I,' repeated day after day in the courtroom, there was something unbelievable even after all I had seen in the war."

All four are sentenced to public hanging. Simonov goes to the square. He writes: "The Germans strove until the last second to keep control of themselves. The gas-van driver Bulanov kept collapsing to the ground, slipping out of the hands of those holding him, and was hanged like a shapeless sack of filth. The crowd on the square, while the execution went on, stood in concentrated silence. Neither then nor afterwards did I regret going there, to the square. I speak only for myself, because such things each man decides for himself."

On 1 December 1943 Stalin flies from Tehran to Baku after his meeting with Churchill and Roosevelt. In Baku he boards a train. The train bound for Moscow will stop at Stalingrad Station. Stalin will tour the city, or more precisely what is left of it. In December 1943 Stalingrad, for Stalin, is not a city razed to the ground. Stalingrad is a turning point, a sharp turn after which that conversation in Tehran between him, Stalin, and Roosevelt and Churchill became possible. Of course, above all with Roosevelt. Both of them are attracted by a system of post-war regulation of international relations in which the USA and the USSR are assigned the leading role. Churchill does not much believe in post-war cooperation with the USSR. When the prospect of opening a second

front is discussed, Churchill argues for a landing of Allied forces in the Balkans. He is counting on blocking the way of the Soviet armies into south-eastern Europe and thus preventing the spread of Soviet influence. But Roosevelt and Stalin insist that the second front must be opened in northern France. That is, the Allied forces will not go across the path of the Soviet army but towards it. This agreement is reached in Tehran: the second front is to be opened in northern France in May 1944. Roosevelt's support of Stalin is understandable. Stalin promises Roosevelt that after Germany's capitulation he will enter the war against Japan. Although this will be a violation of the neutrality pact with Japan which the USSR signed in April 1941 and which saved the USSR from an attack in the Far East. The brilliant operation against the million-strong Japanese Kwantung Army in 1945 will be planned and conducted by Vasilevsky.

Stalin is already finishing his tour of Stalingrad. All around are fragments of walls, empty shells of buildings, heaps of rubble in which solitary black figures of people are moving. So, in Tehran an agreement has been reached on Poland. Poland's eastern border will remain where it was drawn in agreement with Hitler in 1939. The western Polish border is moved to the Oder, now by agreement with Britain and the USA. Already in 1943 the USSR has broken off relations with the Polish government in exile and is creating on Soviet territory the Union of Polish Patriots, forming a Polish division. This is the beginning of the path leading to the establishment in Poland of a new pro-Soviet regime. The agreement in Tehran with the Allies on the enlargement of Polish territory in the west means an expansion of the future zone of Soviet influence in Europe.

There has as yet been no agreement on the division of Germany. Stalin boards the train in Stalingrad station and travels to Moscow. In Stalingrad he wore a simple greatcoat and a cap without insignia. In Tehran he appeared in a mustard-coloured military uniform which glittered thanks to the epaulettes that had just been introduced into the Red Army.

Epaulettes, which the Red Army had renounced after the revolution, were re-introduced in January 1943. On 17 January 1943 the newspaper *Izvestiya* publishes Order No. 25 of the People's Commissar of Defence, I. V. Stalin, "On the Introduction of New Insignia and Changes in the Dress of the Red Army." Almost the entire second page of the paper is taken up by photographs of the new overcoats, tunics, uniforms and caps. Vasilevsky writes: "When the decision was being taken to introduce epaulettes, Stalin asked the head of logistics, General Khrulyov, to show him epaulettes of the old Russian army. Looking them over, Stalin turned to me: 'Comrade Vasilevsky, show us what epaulettes you wore in the old days.'"

Epaulettes and tsarist uniforms are rehabilitated in 1943. True, troops in uniforms with stand-up collars, for the first time since the revolution, had been drawn up in front of Churchill when he arrived in Moscow in August 1942. But before the Battle of Stalingrad that was a one-off. In 1943 the epaulettes and uniforms brought back to light are, for Stalin, attributes of a reborn empire — his empire. And not the only attributes. Vasilevsky writes: "I should note, incidentally, that the Orders of Suvorov, Kutuzov, Aleksandr Nevsky and Nakhimov were also established on Stalin's proposal. In his office during the war there hung portraits of Suvorov and Kutuzov." In 1943 Stalin renounces the old anthem, "The Internationale." "The Internationale" was written in 1888 as the international revolutionary anthem of the proletariat. Later it became the anthem of the USSR. In the summer of 1943 Stalin orders a new national anthem. He edits the text personally.

It is also in 1943 that Stalin executes a turn in his attitude toward the Orthodox Church.
On the evening of 4 September Stalin exchanges views with Beria and Malenkov on whether he

should receive Metropolitans Sergius, Alexis and Nikolai. All agree that he should. They phone to the Patriarchal Locum Tenens, Metropolitan Sergius. After twenty-five years of Bolshevik terror against the Church, the metropolitans come to the Kremlin for the first time, where they are received by Stalin in the presence of Molotov. Stalin thanks the Church for its patriotic work during the war.

Stalin inquires what the main problems facing the Church are. Metropolitan Sergius answers: “The main problem is the election of a Patriarch, but in wartime it is difficult to convene a local council; time will be needed.”
Stalin asks: “And can’t you apply Bolshevik tempos?” And he orders that aviation be used to transport the participants in the local council.

Metropolitan Alexis raises the question of the release of some bishops held in camps and prisons. Stalin says: “Submit a list; we’ll review it.” When the list is reviewed, it turns out that only two of them are still alive.

Stalin says that the Church can count on comprehensive support from the government. Then he turns to the metropolitans: “I have been told that you live very poorly: your flat is cramped, you buy your food on the market, you have no transport. The government would like to know what your needs are.” Stalin continues: “It is inconvenient and expensive for you to shop at the market. So the state will provide you with food at state prices. And one more thing. We will provide you with two or three cars with fuel.” Stalin escorts the metropolitans to the door.

He then gives instructions to create the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church. It will be headed by Georgy Karpov, head of the 4th Section of the 3rd Directorate of the NKVD, who had previously organised surveillance of church hierarchs. Stalin tells Karpov: “In your work you should emphasise the Church’s independence.” Then Stalin turns to Molotov: “We must inform the population about the meeting with the metropolitans.”

The local council, despite Stalin’s directive about Bolshevik tempos, cannot be convened. On 8 September the Bishops’ Council is opened. If translated into party language, compared with a local council, a Bishops’ Council is like a Central Committee plenum compared with a Party congress. Metropolitan Sergius is elected Patriarch. Patriarch Sergius, and after his death Patriarch Alexis, call Stalin “the God-given leader.”

Even before the meeting with the church hierarchs, Stalin decides to dissolve the Comintern — the international communist organisation created to propagate and export world revolution. World revolution no longer interests Stalin. He is beginning to build a Bolshevik empire with a strong great-power accent and a corresponding foreign policy. A war in which the turn towards victory is already obvious is an excellent time for this. Stalin senses it unfailingly.

After the war, when Vasilevsky becomes Minister of Defence, his relations with Stalin become very difficult. Vasilevsky’s elder son, Yuri, recalls: “Father called me and said: ‘If something happens to me, you’ll be the eldest. Don’t let us down.’” The situation is aggravated by the fact that Vasilevsky’s son marries Zhukov’s daughter Era. After the war Stalin strongly opposes friendly relations between the main commanders of the past war. Family ties are in effect forbidden.

The marshal’s younger son becomes an architect.
Marshal Vasilevsky would sometimes, when introducing himself, say: “I am the father of the well-known architect Vasilevsky.”