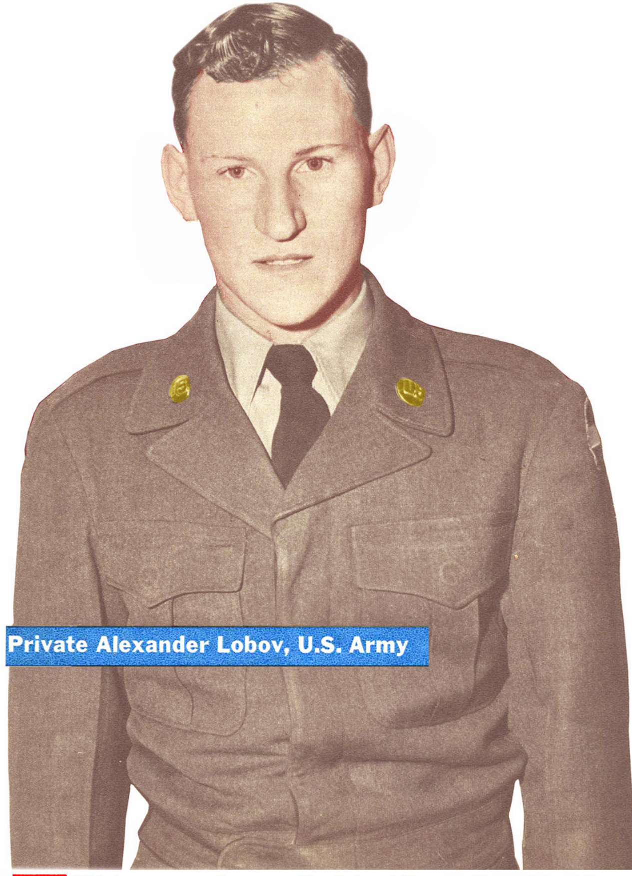
MY TWO YEARS IN THE RED ARMY



Private Alexander Lobov, U.S. Army

FOR two years I was a Soviet soldier stationed just behind the Iron Curtain. Today, at the age of 23, I am an American GI, the first former soldier of the Red Army to become one.

To you, my fellow Soviet Army soldiers and I probably looked like fanatical robots ready to sweep over Europe at the command of our masters. To my Soviet masters, my looks were also deceiving. I appeared to them to be a model Soviet soldier. I was in very good standing with my superiors. Within a year they made me a top sergeant.

My background was ideal. My parents had been small farmers, but the Communists confiscated their farm soon after I was born. Both my mother and father died when I was a small child. I was placed as an orphan on a collective farm near the Volga River in the very heart of Russia. There I was raised under full Soviet "thought control." I had no friends or relatives outside the Soviet Union who might infect me with dangerous thoughts.

Yet I did have dangerous thoughts, plenty of them. And most of the Russians I've ever known had them. But in modern Russia you learn to wear a mask. It is the price of survival. Even the genuine Communists I've known wear masks. They must profess more blind devotion than it would be human to feel in the face of what they see at every hand.

As a result of all this mask-wearing the Soviet rulers no longer know whom they can trust. This explains their fantastic suspiciousness.

I masked my own resentments as long as I could. But two years in the Soviet Army brought them to a seething boil. When the opportunity came that seemed to give me a fighting chance to escape (*Continued on page* 109)

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My American GI friends, like many other Americans, seem to assume that the Russians are all steamed up to sweep over Europe. I assure them that the ordinary soldiers, at least, don't want to fight anybody, least of all Americans. Instead, they only want relief from their pinched, suffocating life. Our Soviet Army camp was within shellfire of American heavy artillery, and we were most anxious that those guns not be provoked.

One day our Soviet Army political officer told us it might become necessary for us "to extend the hand of brotherly aid" to the unfortunate peoples of Western Europe. That night the wisecrack began making the rounds from buddy to buddy that if we extended our brotherly hand, the West Europeans would "extend their legs in the other direction" to get out of the way.

Among ourselves, we Soviet soldiers talked about the problems involved in fighting a war with the United States. Very few of the Soviet soldiers seemed to think that the Soviet Union could emerge the victor in such a war. Several of the soldiers brought up the fact that it was a long way to America and would be difficult to fly there, whereas America had many bases all around the Soviet Union.

My American GI friends keep asking me how the "Red Joes" will behave in a shooting war.

I knew Soviet soldiers who were dedicated to the Soviet regime for better or worse, but they were a small minority. Most of them seemed to be in the same frame of mind I was in. And I had come to loathe the Soviet way of life.

I'm convinced that the Soviet authorities cannot be sure in a crisis whether orders they give will be obeyed, except at gun point.

Few people realize it, but even in World War II hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers went over to the German side to fight. And millions might have gone if the Nazis had not been stupidly ruthless in their slaughter of Russian innocents and if they had represented a genuine liberating force.

In the event of a war between the Soviet Union and the West, the key to how Soviet soldiers would behave, I am convinced, is this: If America can immediately strike a hard, penetrating blow, so that the Soviet soldiers can see that Americans are willing and able to take effective military action, Russian troops will flock to the American side in droves. If, however, the forces of America and the West fall back and back, the possibilities for mass crossing of the line will be small. In any event, the Soviet Army will be a question mark to its masters.

My new GI friends, in addition to plying me with questions, seem to enjoy taking me into their homes, introducing me to their girl-friends, and showing off America to me. It is a beautiful, exciting

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land to show off.

One of the sights of America I was most anxious to see, and this may amuse you, was Wall Street. I had been hearing about it as a sinister, fabulous capital of the "enemy" world since I was a boy. Private Ray Greenwell of Kingsport, Tenn., took me on a trip to see it.

I expected to find a gleaming boulevard with doors of gold and fat men puffing big cigars. Ray was amused at my astonishment to find what a cramped, unimpressive little street it really is. And the folks on it were just ordinary-looking, friendly people.

A few hundred yards away is an even more famous symbol to Europeans of America, the Statue of Liberty. I climbed up into the crown of the statue, and I found, to my satisfaction, that she is not shedding hypocritical tears, as the Soviet cartoonists constantly depict.

One of my greatest thrills in America has been in standing before the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D. C. It was Lincoln who said your nation could not "endure permanently half slave and half free." I believe with all my heart that the same thing can be said for the divided world of today.

You Americans, I am sure, cannot know what a thrill it is just to be free. To talk without whispering. To walk without worrying.

I know that thrill. In America I have the freedom to be myself. I no longer need to wear a mask. That's why I say I'm the luckiest GI of all!

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alive I made the lunge for freedom.

Today I have changed my Soviet tunic and boots for the trim Eisenhower jacket and sharply pressed trousers of an American GI. It has meant changing worlds as well as changing uniforms.

Although I had the opportunity to stay in Europe as a civilian, I volunteered for the U. S. Army last spring because of my desire to do something to help combat Communist oppression. If I serve well for five years I will be eligible for American citizenship. For nearly a year I have been living as a typical American GI at three U. S. camps and have developed many fine GI buddies.

It has been amazing to me to find how sorry many American GI's feel for themselves because of the "tough" and "regimented" life they feel they lead in the American Army. To me the freedom and richness of their life is the kind of paradise I dreamed about while cooped up in my barracks in the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany.

Every day my American GI friends throw questions at me. Blunt, prying questions. They try to find out what impelled me to leave the reputed Soviet paradise. . . .

You too may be curious to know why I changed worlds. I assure you it is not a decision that can be made lightly. It is a huge step to leave your homeland—the only world you know. But perhaps I shall have the opportunity of returning some day when freedom has found its way there. I am sure that not one American GI in 100,000 would dream of it, even though the Soviets are constantly trying to kidnap or lure American GI's in Germany across the line.

Yet I estimate that in my circle of acquaintances in the Soviet Army, 40 per cent of them would like to come across the line if they felt they could manage it without harm to themselves or their parents. There are many frightening deterrents, including the firing squad for those who are caught by the Communists. Yet a good many hundreds have tried to come through the Iron Curtain. I am one of the lucky ones who succeeded.

I think that when you see how the Soviet regime treats its soldiers you'll understand why I came across. And perhaps you will get new insight into how the Soviet Army might perform if its masters unleash it in war. . . .

On the day that I was drafted into the Soviet Army in 1949 at the age of 19, I was told to report at the local railroad station with the following equipment: one big spoon (which I was to carry in my boot); all the food I would need for three days; one metal cup; one change of underwear; one razor.

Three days after I was inducted I was loaded on a freight train at an assembly point east of Moscow and shipped off to Soviet-occupied East Germany for my basic training. Thousands of other recruits were shipped, much in the manner of cattle, with me, 30 to a boxcar. A sergeant with a submachine gun "protected" each carload. En route, a political instructor lectured us. He told us we were going abroad among all manner of evil people to be military representatives of "the most advanced society of the world."

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You may wonder, as we did, why the Soviets would throw completely raw recruits into an occupied zone. There appear to be two good reasons: First, it was cheaper for the Soviet government, by forcing Germany to feed us while we were being trained. Second, we would help give the U.S.S.R. a big show of strength in Eastern Europe. Foreign agents watching troop movements might assume we were seasoned troops.

During our basic training our Soviet leaders were forever lining us up to bawl us out or send us on all-night KP duty or give us political lectures. The Soviet officers surrounded us with so many rules that it was humanly impossible to obey all of them. And we soon found it was impossible to find any relief from our oppressive camp life.

My American buddies often ask me what the Soviet Army's attitude was toward mixing with the German people. I'd like to tell you, because it is typical of the way we were treated.

In my two years in the Soviet Army I never once had a date, and it was not because I am shy. (I've had dozens since joining the U. S. Army.) Soviet officials take a very dim view of romance, especially with German girls. The Soviets assume that most girls, even Russian girls, are probably spies. This certainly contrasts with the American policy in West Germany, which now encourages GI's to have wholesome relations with the local population. (There are hundreds of marriages there every month.)

Any Soviet soldier caught dating a German girl was grilled by counter-intelligence and sent back to the Soviet Union within 24 hours! The fear was that just by a date a Soviet soldier might be converted into a foreign agent or pawn.

A friend of mine was nabbed by Soviet secret police as he was waving good-by from the street to a German girl. Immediately he was subjected to severe questioning. He swore he had not had a date with the girl. Convincingly he claimed that she was a prostitute. He vowed that he had been with her only a few minutes and that while together they did not talk politics at all!

That fact saved him. The authorities let him off with twenty days in the guardhouse on bread and water.

I found that the Soviet Army's attitude on passes and leaves is as grim as it is on girls. The policy here prevented us from having any contact whatever with the local populace or from ever getting home. During my entire two years in the Soviet Army I never had a pass or leave. We were forbidden to go off base except on official duty.

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I've heard of many cases in the American Army of GI's being flown halfway around the world when there was a family emergency. This is called "compassionate leave." In the Soviet Army I knew of only one such case, and I helped arrange it.

A FELLOW from Stalingrad heard from neighbors that his mother was near death and that there was no one to take care of her. Since I was then the company clerk I helped make out his application for emergency leave. Eventually it was turned down, on the grounds of insufficient evidence that the mother was really dying.

The boy, frantic, wrote to his local Communist Party leader appealing for help. The leader appointed a medical commission which examined the mother. It reported she was truly dying. When we got the commission's report we filed a second application. It finally was granted six weeks after the first application was made. The boy was put on a homeward-bound train. When he reached Stalingrad his mother was dead. . . .

It did not take us long to discover that the Soviet authorities were trying to plant informers in every barracks. Within a month after we arrived, a lad in our own barracks was put on extra garbage duty for a week for whispering to several of us that the camp was like a jail.

We found that whenever one of us was unusually quiet or did any griping in public some barracks mate would be called in and requested to spy on us. These informers were required to sign statements that they would never tell anyone, not even their own mothers, that they had served as informers. As company clerk, I knew where those pledges were kept under lock, and in fact managed to see two of them.

Even with good friends whom you trusted you had to be careful not to go too far in making specific anti-regime statements, because there was always the possibility they might be caught in a jam later on and be forced to turn informer.

Between good buddies, however, we did dare joke about our informers and try to decide who the current ones were. It wasn't too hard. You get so you almost smell an informer. We noticed that one private was called out of barracks two nights in one week. Sure enough, he soon started being very jovial. He flitted from man to man to widen his circle of confidants. It would be dangerous to cut him. We just closed ranks and were extra careful what we said in front of him.

TO MOST of us Soviet soldiers, however, the worst feature of army life was

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the endless political indoctrinating. We had to listen to many hours of lectures every week, even on Sundays. And every morning we got thirty minutes of "news interpretation." The books in our camp library were all selected by our political officer, and so were the two movies a week we were permitted to see. We were never allowed the luxury of laughing at a nonpolitical Donald Duck.

Here are some reasons why most of us were deeply skeptical of the official propaganda and other "mind-molding" explanations given to us:

—We were shown movies about the flowering of life and culture on Soviet collective farms. In the movies I saw gay native dancing and famous Soviet concert stars visiting collective farms where they discovered wonderful hidden talent in the farm hands. This was nauseating to those of us who had been raised on such farms and had never seen such gaiety or any interest on the part of the great.

—The movies always pictured Americans as slippery, heartless villains. Yet, right in our own camp, we had many sturdy, high-grade trucks that Americans had given the Soviet Union in World War II. And I, for one, will never forget the many items of food and clothing which came from America during World War II.

—When the Korean war broke out, we were told that the scheming South Korean aggressors had invaded little Red North Korea. We talked about this in our barracks among ourselves. To us soldiers the official version just didn't add up. We agreed that nobody starts a war without being assured of some immediate success. Yet the South Koreans were being thrown back from the first day!

—We were constantly told about the wonderful rich Soviet way of life as the world's best. Yet we could see, to our astonishment, that even the defeated Germans were enjoying a vastly richer life in the way of clothes, cars, stores, homes, and theaters than we had ever seen in the victorious Soviet Union.

To me it never seemed right to mock us with lies!

A big part of the mockery was the official hypocrisy about every Soviet citizen being equal and being a comrade. We found that in the Soviet Army the word "comrade" was to be used only in very formal address. If I reported to an officer I would address him as "Comrade Major," in the same way I now say "Sir" to an American officer.

As for real comradeship between officers and men, it doesn't exist any longer (it used to before World War II). I can remember only one time we socialized with officers. That was when we all went to an officers' club to hear a May Day speech. But immediately after the speech the officers went off to their festivities, and we were shepherded back to our barracks for ours.

(In the American Army several of my enlisted friends have been guests at the quarters or clubs of their officers. That would be unthinkable in the Soviet Army today!)

The food we got added to our depression. Let me tell you what the Soviet sol-

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dier eats. I ate it, day-in-day-out, with very little variation for two years:

Breakfast: 8½ ounces of dark bread, bowl of barley cereal, tea, 0.6 ounce of sugar.

Lunch: 11 ounces of dark bread, a thick cabbage and beet soup, plain boiled macaroni, 2 ounces of meat.

Supper: 8½ ounces of black bread, mashed potatoes, salt herring, tea, 0.6 ounce of sugar.

It was the salt herring that depressed us most. The German brand often had a funny smell. We frequently showed our distaste by hurling these herrings at one another the length of the dining hall instead of eating them. The Soviet authorities were unimpressed. Herring had calories, and the ration makers in Moscow were interested only in providing us with sufficient fodder to keep us healthy. . . .

PERHAPS you can see by now why my morale, and that of most of the Soviet soldiers I knew, was extremely low. We were penned up in a grim, rule-ridden, all-male, spy-filled, monotonous camp. It has a terrible effect on you to have to hold everything inside yourself. You suffer almost a feeling of being suffocated.

In the Soviet Army in Germany there were frequent suicides. One sergeant managed to shoot himself on the firing range. A corporal I heard of became mysteriously sick and died. An investigation showed he had been stuffing himself with the only death-bringer he had at hand—common table salt.

We could see our Soviet bosses taking measures we knew were designed to cope with this problem of low morale in the ranks of the Soviet Army. For one thing, they cut off all our possible contact with the local populace, even to the extent, in 1951, of dismissing all German civilian employees at our camp and replacing them with people brought from the Soviet Union. They surrounded our camp with barbed wire, and stationed guards inside and out.

Whenever I reported for guard duty I had to sign a receipt for the five bullets and gun handed to me, and account for the bullets and gun afterward. I had to do the same on the firing range, the only other time we were allowed to have guns in our hands.

Also, they kept us so busy, seven days a week, that we were numb both physically and mentally by nightfall. And to keep us on edge they told us constantly that war might break out any minute. They kept springing practice alerts at night. The story around the camp was that they were using on us the training methods used to develop a savage watchdog. If you keep the dog on a leash, and keep irritating him, he will, when un-

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leashed, tear into the first person he sees. The hazard for the Soviet masters is that this first person might well be the political officer.

THE authorities also took extraordinary precautions to discourage us from trying to escape across the border.

Soon after I arrived at the East German camp the penalty of death by firing squad for any soldier attempting to desert was restored. An even more frightful deterrent was the Soviet law that parents of such a soldier will be sentenced to ten years of hard labor in "a distant place" (i.e., Siberia).

Then there was the border itself as a barrier. We were never permitted to see any maps showing its exact location. The border in our area ran through the Thuringian Forest. We knew that a swath of trees had been razed and the ground plowed and de-stumped. In 1950, we heard that the border guard had been increased from 2 to 7 patrols per mile and that German guards were being added to keep an eye on Russian guards who might, themselves, feel the urge to dash across the border. Also added were German police dogs.

A man in a neighboring unit, a sergeant, stole a gun and tried to escape a month before I did. A patrol closed in on him just as he was entering the forest. He shot himself. We heard of other Soviet soldiers being led away and shot, presumably for trying to escape.

As for my own decision to attempt an escape, one of the things that played a crucial role was the Voice of America broadcasts.

In the spring of 1951 I bought myself a little radio to listen to music. I used to turn on the radio while working as company clerk, an assignment that often permitted me to be alone.

One day, quite by accident, I tuned in a Voice of America broadcast in Russian. It startled me. I had never heard a foreign broadcast before and assumed you had to have some sort of special radio to hear one. We had been warned that it was a crime to repeat lies spread by the Americans, but I wasn't *sure* whether listening to a broadcast was a crime or not. (It's not officially a crime, but still it is dangerous to be caught listening to foreign broadcasts inside the Soviet Union.) Anyway, I listened. The man was talking about the Korean War. And he seemed to be giving a plain, factual account.

I became a regular listener whenever I was alone. I suspect many Soviet officers are regular listeners, too. Ordinary soldiers, however, have little chance to listen, because in the barracks there is no privacy.

One broadcast made a very deep impression on me. It was made by an escaped Russian soldier. He described the

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friendly reception he had gotten from the Americans in West Germany, what agencies had helped him, and the fine, free life he was leading.

That broadcast settled a big doubt in my mind. I had heard from our Soviet authorities that the Americans always forced back into Soviet lands any Soviet soldier who had risked his life to escape. It had made me shudder to think of myself being handed back. As a matter of fact, I knew that, although some might have been handed back in the last days of the war, the Americans had not permitted such a thing to happen for years. But Soviet authorities have kept this fact a big secret. After hearing the reassuring broadcast I began plotting my escape in earnest.

As a part of my official duties I had to accompany missions to supply depots every few weeks. On one of these trips I managed to find a map at a railroad newsstand which showed the border. I hid the map, and before every trip memorized the terrain we would cover.

My chance to escape finally came when I accompanied a party of officers to a depot at a village deep in the Thuringian Forest near the border. We went to a hotel restaurant so that the officers could eat a late supper. Since it would be improper for me, an enlisted man, to dine with them, I offered to wait for them on the porch. Thoughtlessly, they agreed, and went in. They must have forgotten that the regime had no hold over me in the form of hostage parents.

IMMEDIATELY I walked to the edge of the village. The border was five miles away through thick forest. I calculated, and decided that I probably could not make the border before the alarm would sound.

I hesitated a moment, looked back, then looked at the forest. It was just too tempting. I took my bearings on the moon, ducked into the forest, and began running south, *parallel* with the border. I decided to gamble on a flanking movement.

On I ran through the forest. It was a wonderful feeling. I was running toward freedom. Occasionally I would flop down and rest, spring up and run some more. After perhaps a half-hour I heard the sirens blowing. I kept on running. It was now either death or a new life.

After about two hours I veered west toward where the border should be. It was probably around midnight, after a wearying tramp through the Thuringian Mountains, when I came to the border strip. The strip was razed all right, for a width of about 400 feet. I could see searchlights circling farther north and could faintly hear dogs barking.

As I had hoped, some of the guards had apparently been rushed north to search for me. As a result, I would have to slip past only a thinned-out patrol

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guard. I finally spotted a pair of guards, and moved from tree to tree until I was a good quarter-mile away from them. Then, on my stomach, I wiggled across the strip, and came up on the other side a free man.

I walked the rest of the night, and soon after dawn came to a town where I turned myself over to the first GI I encountered. He led me to an office where I requested political asylum from oppression. The Americans gladly gave it to me.

SOON I was in Frankfurt learning English and adjusting myself to Western ways. The American Congress had just passed the Lodge Act permitting the U. S. Army to recruit qualified refugees from East European countries. The Army gave me a very thorough screening and nominated me as its first recruit from the Soviet Army. I was shipped off to the U.S.A.

First, I went to that great GI melting pot at Fort Dix, N. J., where, with thousands of other American young men of all national origins and colors, I was broken in to U. S. Army life. A trained tailor fitted me for my uniform. (In Russia a sergeant had simply looked at me and tossed me a bundle from one of five bins.) I began feasting on GI pie, ice cream, steak, fruit juice, and all the eggs I cared to eat for breakfast. I began being paid seven times as much as I had been paid as a Russian private. I found myself with weekend passes and 30-day leaves. And I found myself able to talk freely!

After Dix, I was sent to Camp Atterbury, Ind., where I helped to train brand-new recruits off Midwestern farms. And now I am on special assignment at a camp on the East Coast.

My new GI friends have plied me with questions about what could be expected of the Soviet forces in the event of a war. Many have asked me what I heard in the Soviet Army about the A-bomb.

I tell them that in our lectures we were often told that the Soviet Union had the atomic bomb and "something else" which was never defined. A great effort was made in the Soviet Army to belittle the atomic bomb. We were told—and were much inclined to doubt—that we wouldn't be hurt if we were down in a trench during an A-blast.

One of our fellows asked the lecturer about the H-bomb. The man hesitated, and then said that Americans had been able to find only one small river, the Colorado, that had water suitable for manufacturing a hydrogen bomb. Soviet scientists, in contrast, he said, had been able to find a process for extracting H-bomb material from any water. I've since learned, of course, that the remark about the Colorado was sheerest poppycock designed to reassure us.

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