Screenplay for the film "1941 — Konstantin Simonov, part I and II. Historical Chronicles with Nikolai Svanidze" written by Marina Zhukova, translated by AI, and preceded by a summary also written by AI.

Screenplay Summary:

On June 22, 1941, the day Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union, writer and war correspondent Konstantin Simonov spent the morning writing poetry, unaware of the catastrophe unfolding. In Moscow, Molotov received a diplomatic note from the German ambassador effectively declaring war. For months Soviet intelligence had warned Stalin that Germany was preparing an attack, but Stalin refused to believe it, convinced Hitler would not break the non-aggression pact. This disbelief left the Red Army disastrously unprepared: troops were massed offensively near the border, supply depots were dangerously exposed, and communication systems were fragile.

From the first hours, the Soviet army suffered devastating losses: thousands of aircraft destroyed on the ground, entire armies encircled, command structures collapsing, and civilians fleeing east. Simonov, sent to the Western Front, traveled through scenes of chaos—bombed roads, scattered units, refugees, and mass panic. He witnessed the huge encirclements near Minsk and Smolensk, where hundreds of thousands of soldiers were captured. Official Soviet reports concealed the scale of the disaster, offering only vague references to fighting "on certain directions." Stalin's radio speech of July 3 finally acknowledged the scale of the danger and the need for a nationwide, existential struggle.

By autumn 1941, the German advance reached the approaches to Moscow, sparking panic in the city. Poorly trained workers' militia divisions were rushed to the front to delay the Germans. Simonov describes scenes of disorder, looting, rumors, and desperate evacuations. Even Stalin experienced a moment of deep uncertainty—fearful, after so many failures, that he might be judged a traitor himself. His earlier response to defeat had been to blame commanders, issuing Order No. 270 which labeled captured officers as cowards and traitors, a decree that would haunt thousands.

After the war, Simonov added critical commentary to his wartime diaries, condemning Stalin's blindness, the toxic atmosphere of terror that prevented officers from speaking truth, and the unjust executions of capable commanders. He reflects on his own youthful beliefs and compromises within the Soviet system, while expressing unwavering admiration for the soldiers and officers who stood and died in the catastrophic summer of 1941.

The Soviet counter-offensive near Moscow in December 1941—the first major victory of the Red Army—marked a fundamental turning point, shattering the myth of German invincibility. For Simonov, it was also the moment when he read his poem "Wait for Me" on the radio, a piece that would become emblematic for millions. Overall, the text is a deeply human, literary, and political testimony to the opening months of the Great Patriotic War, blending personal memory, historical analysis, and moral reflection.

Screenplay:

1941 – Konstantin Simonov, Part I and II

All morning on 22 June 1941, Konstantin Simonov had been writing poems. Until two o'clock in the afternoon he did not know that the war had begun. He did not go to the telephone and did not switch on the radio. He did not hear – and could not have heard – Molotov's address, which went out over the air at 12:15 p.m.

At 5:30 in the morning on 22 June, Molotov met with the German ambassador Schulenburg. Schulenburg reported that the German government had instructed him to deliver the following note: "In view of the intolerable threat which has arisen to Germany's eastern frontier as a result of the massive concentration of the armed forces of the Red Army, the German government considers itself compelled to immediately take military counter-measures."

Molotov asks what this note means. Schulenburg answers that, in his opinion, it means the beginning of war. Molotov says that near the border there have been the usual maneuvers. If the maneuvers were undesirable, the question could have been discussed. Schulenburg says that he cannot express how depressed he is by the unjustified and unexpected actions of his own government.
Until Molotov's return from his meeting with Schulenburg, Stalin believes that the German actions are a provocation. Stalin says that Hitler is surely not aware of what is happening.

From September 1940 onwards, reports from agents about Germany's preparations for war against the USSR have been arriving on Stalin's desk. Soviet intelligence, however, faces extreme, irrational distrust in Moscow. Stalin refuses to perceive adequately the information about the approaching war. The directions of the main future German blows are indicated. Reports describe the planned administrative structure for the future occupation of Soviet territory. A likely date of the attack appears. Beria's deputy, Merkulov, reports to Stalin information received from an agent of the Berlin residency under the code name "Starshina" ("Sergeant Major"): "All military measures of Germany for the preparation of an offensive against the USSR are entirely completed. A strike may be expected at any time."
Stalin writes a resolution in the margin: "To Comr. Merkulov. You can send your source to hell. I. Stalin."
When Molotov reports on June 22 about the note delivered by the German ambassador Schulenburg, Stalin asks: "What does this note mean?" Molotov answers: "The German government has declared war on us."
Molotov recalls: "That day, in the heat of conversations and telephone calls, someone said that there should be a radio address, that we should tell the people what had occurred and call them to resist the enemy." Stalin says that it is too early for him to speak personally. Let Molotov speak.
After Molotov's radio address Stalin tells him: "It was right that you spoke today. I have just phoned the front commanders, they do not even know the exact situation. It is simply astonishing that such senior commanders should suddenly be at a loss. They ought to repel the enemy themselves without waiting for our orders – that is what an army is for."

On 22 June it was useless to wait for orders. At the moment of Germany's attack, the plan collapses which Stalin had been nursing and cherishing, and for which he had sacrificed, not less than that, the defense of the borders of the USSR. On 22 June the Stalinist plan of a preventive, pre-emptive

blow against Germany – a plan consisting solely of offensive operations on enemy territory – collapses.
By the spring of 1941, the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact on the partition of Eastern Europe between the USSR and Germany has exhausted itself. A clash of interests between the USSR and Germany becomes obvious in the Balkans, in Finland, in the Middle East, and in the question of the straits from the Black Sea into the Mediterranean. The balance is more and more in Germany's favour, reinforced by her success in Europe in 1940. German aggression against the USSR is inevitable. Under these new conditions, Stalin's goal is to retain and expand the territorial gains made in Europe in 1939–1940. Offensive operations are planned in the best case for 1942, in the worst case for 1943.
For Stalin, this is the continuation of an imperial policy. At the same time, an offensive against the capitalist world fits into the official communist ideology. And besides, it is an offensive against an aggressor – Hitler's Germany. It is much easier to explain this to the population than the necessity of a treaty of friendship with Hitler at the very moment when Hitler is confidently occupying Europe.
Konstantin Simonov, in his comments to his wartime diaries, writes:
"The further the fascists marched through Europe, the more our loyal relations with these people who had conquered Europe produced in me a feeling of inner constriction.
A fleeting TASS report in the newspaper about London's air defence, in which a note of sympathy for the English defending their capital could be heard, was perceived with sharpened joy. I speak not only of myself. I remember clearly that it was a common feeling."
For Stalin, these feelings of the population are the guarantee of support for his ambitious campaign to the West.

On 5 May 1941, Stalin speaks before the graduates of the military academies, before the party and military elite. At the banquet which follows, in response to a toast by one of the generals "To Stalin's peace-loving foreign policy", Stalin remarks: "We must pass from defence to a military policy of offensive action. The Red Army is a modern army, and a modern army is an offensive army."
Immediately after this speech by Stalin, the Zhukov–Timoshenko–Vasilevsky plan appears. Marshal Zhukov would later say in 1965: "The idea of forestalling Hitler came to Timoshenko and me in connection with Stalin's speech of 5 May 1941. The concrete task was given to Vasilevsky. On 15 May he reported the draft directive to the Defence Commissar Timoshenko and to me."
The main pre-emptive blow is to be delivered in the south-west. German forces are to be cut off from the Balkans and, first of all, from the Romanian oilfields. The next task is to seize the territory of former Poland and East Prussia. Finally – the capture of Berlin.
Stalin's first reaction to the Vasilevsky–Zhukov plan is sharply negative. He is afraid of provoking Germany and losing the initiative. Then Stalin changes his mind. It is precisely in accordance with this pre-emptive plan that all the redeployment of Soviet forces takes place at the beginning of the summer of 1941. Supply depots with fuel, ammunition and weapons are moved close up to the border. Airfields are deployed along the frontier. On 22 June, the first blow of the Luftwaffe will fall exactly on these airfields. The brand-new MiGs will not even have time to get into the air. In the first eight hours of the war, 1,200 aircraft will be lost, 900 of them on the ground. Stalin had planned his war for 1942. In 1941, Stalin is not ready either for the offensive or for the defence. In

1941, Hitler takes Stalin on the bend.
With the outbreak of war, it is the communications system that breaks down first. There is not a single underground communications hub. Stalin and Zhukov talk to the fronts via the central telegraph office on Gorky Street. A single bombing raid could have deprived Stalin of any information at all.
On 23 June, Simonov is assigned to an army newspaper. That evening he is at the People's Commissariat of Defence. He receives his papers and uniform. In his diary Simonov writes: "The

greatcoat fitted well, the belts creaked, and it seemed to me that I would always be like this. I don't know about others, but in those first two days of the real war I was as naïve as a schoolboy."
The already well-known poet, playwright and journalist Konstantin Simonov is twenty-five years old in 1941.
Simonov keeps a diary for all the years of the war. This is not a common thing. Diaries at the front, especially in the first half of the war, are forbidden.
Simonov knows this; he keeps the diary in the safe of the editor-in-chief of the newspaper "Red Star", his friend David Ortenberg.
In 1943, the secretary of the Moscow Party Committee, Shcherbakov, commissions Simonov to write a film script about Moscow in 1941. Simonov wants the film to be directed by Pudovkin. He gives Pudovkin his diary of 1941 to read. Pudovkin says that no special plot is needed, he will make the film based on Simonov's diary. They write the script together and call it "On the Old Smolensk Road". The script is killed at the highest level.
At the beginning of the 1960s, Simonov will write commentaries to his diary entries which will compose the book "One Hundred Days of War". These commentaries add additional information and reflect his later views. The diary text he leaves unchanged – emotional, cinematic. The first days and months of the great war, from the first hands.
On 24 June, Simonov leaves Moscow for Minsk. That evening Moscow is absolutely dark. Somewhere on the station, blue lamps are burning. Simonov writes: "The first signs of confusion and disorder. A blacked-out station, crowds of people, it is unclear when, where and what train is going. Some grilles through which one is not allowed to pass. For some unknown reason, the carriages on the Minsk train are summer 'dacha' carriages."
He continues: "In the carriage there were mainly commanders returning from leave. It seemed that half of the Western District was on leave. I could not understand how this could have happened. In truth, I still don't understand it."
On 26 June, Simonov gets off the train in the town of Borisov. Beyond that, towards Minsk, trains are no longer running.
Simonov writes:
"For three hours we rushed back and forth around the town, looking for some authority. After a long search, we and an artillery captain caught a five-ton truck and drove along the Minsk highway to look for some command.
Planes were circling above the town. The heat and dust were terrible. Near the hospital I saw the first dead. They lay on stretchers and without stretchers.
Along the road some troops and vehicles were moving. Some in one direction, others in the opposite. You could not make sense of anything. We turned back to the town. German planes were chasing the vehicles. I dropped into the dust, into the ditch by the roadside. There was already panic in the town. People were walking and running through the town, nobody knew where. Outside the town, along the dusty road to the east, vehicles were going. People were moving on foot. Now everyone was going only in one direction – to the east.
From the west to the east, along the road, women, children, old people, girls with small bundles were walking. And towards them, from the east to the west, went civilians, young men. They were walking to their call-up stations, mobilized men who did not want to be considered deserters and yet knew nothing, understood nothing about where they were going. They were driven forward by a sense of duty and disbelief that the Germans could be here, so close.
In front of the bridge stood a completely dishevelled man with two Nagans in his hands. He stopped people and vehicles and, threatening to shoot, shouted hysterically that he was Political Commissar Petrov, that he had to stop the army here, that he would stop it and kill all those who tried to retreat. People drove and walked past him indifferently.
In the nearby forest it was swarming with people. Mostly these were commanders and Red Army soldiers returning from leave to their units. The men were being divided into companies and battalions and sent to take up defensive positions along the banks of the Berezina. The Germans soon discovered this concentration of men from the air and began to strafe the forest with

machine-gun fire. We lay down, pressing our heads against the thin trees. It was convenient to shoot us down. Several people beside me were wounded – all in the legs. As they lay in a row, the machine-gun burst simply cut across them.
This shooting went on until late at night. It no longer mattered. Everything left was a total incomprehension of what was happening all around. And it still seemed that all this was an accident, some breach, that in front and behind there were troops that would come and put everything right. At night there was another air attack. And from the ground, everyone was firing into the sky with whatever they had, "into God's light as into a penny".
Later, when we got back onto the road, we ran into a group of four men who were demanding documents from a civilian. He answered that he had none. They demanded again, and then he shouted: 'Documents, you want? Go catch Hitler! You won't catch him anyway!' The soldier silently took out his Nagan and shot. The civilian doubled over and fell. I don't know, maybe he really was an agent, a saboteur, but more likely he was some mobilized man driven to despair by three days of wandering in search of his call-up station. Thousands of people from halted and bombed trains were fighting their way to call-up stations in those days."
No sooner had the man who was shot fallen than a bomb exploded nearby. A second later, Simonov saw that beside him lay the shot civilian and, almost on top of him, a soldier killed by a fragment. There was no one else; everyone had scattered.
In the morning, not far away, trenches and slit trenches were being dug. Simonov was told, as the senior, to report to Corps Commissar Susaykov. He was a young, unshaven man in a pilotka cap pulled down over his eyes, in a Red Army greatcoat, a shovel in his hands. Simonov asked where the newspaper's editorial office was, because he was a writer and assigned to an army newspaper. Susaykov looked at Simonov with a blank gaze and said indifferently: "Can't you see what's going on? What newspaper?" Simonov said that he had to report to the front headquarters. Susaykov did not know where the front headquarters was. In general, he knew absolutely nothing, no more than all those who were with him in that forest.

It is 28 June. Minsk has been abandoned by the troops of the Western Front. Simonov, a correspondent of "Izvestia", has been assigned to an army newspaper of the 3rd Army of the Western Front. But this 3rd, like the 4th and 10th Armies, is already encircled south-west of Minsk. The commander of a partisan detachment, the Belarusian writer Alexei Karpyuk, who in June 1941 lived in a village on the Bialystok–Volkovysk–Slonim highway, recalls: "On the highway Soviet tanks remained – intact, freshly painted, with engines, machine-guns and guns in working order. The Germans carefully painted numbers on their sides. At the border the tank bore the number 1, ninety kilometres further on there was a tank with the number 500." The tank crews, without their tanks, retreat together with the infantry. Communications in the troops are gone. Command is lost. Masses of people are on the roads. This is the first great cauldron: 330,000 Soviet soldiers and officers taken prisoner.
From the diary of the commander of Army Group Centre, General von Bock: "23.06.41. Reports are coming in of numerous cases of suicide among Russian officers, who thus try to avoid captivity." At that time in Moscow, at the Belorussian station, from which troop trains leave for the front, the song "The Sacred War" is already sounding. Reports on combat operations appear in the brief communiqués of Sovinformburo, created on 24 June.
Simonov comments in his diary: "The Sovinformburo communiqués in that period lagged far behind the lightning-like development of events." The most characteristic phrase is: "Fighting is going on in such-and-such a direction." For example, in the Minsk or Bobruisk direction. The term "direction" is blurred. It gives only a general geographic idea of the depth of the blow dealt to us. Back then, in late June 1941, the word "direction" was pronounced at the front with biting irony, masking despair.

After the war, Simonov will write: “If at that time a different terminology had been chosen, then all our communiqués on any given day would have consisted of a despairing list of dozens of lost towns and thousands of localities.”
On 3 July a remark slips into the Sovinformburo communiqué: “The enemy cannot stand the bayonet attacks of our troops.” In fact, that is the real information. In a few words – the true picture of desperate battles in which there remains nothing but to go in with the bayonet.
Simonov has already spent a week searching for the headquarters of the Western Front. He moves on passing trucks.
Bomb craters lie off to the side of the road, beyond the telegraph poles. Refugees have been making their way along the shoulders, and the Germans, having adapted to that, bomb and strafe precisely the sides of the road. So the corpses lie along the road. The road itself the Germans do not damage: they intend to advance along it quickly and without hindrance.
Everywhere there are Jewish refugees from around Bialystok, from around Lida, from hundreds of Jewish shtetls. Simonov writes: “Old men such as I had never seen were walking, with peyos and beards, in old-fashioned caps. Tired, prematurely aged Jewish women were walking. And children, children, children. Little ones without end.”
The headquarters of the Western Front at that moment is near Mogilev, in a forest, in tents. Some services of the headquarters are quartered right on the lorries. Here Simonov sees Marshals Voroshilov and Shaposhnikov. They arrive in the forest in a long black Packard. Voroshilov personally interrogates the captured German pilot.
Simonov writes: “He was the first German I saw in the war. That first German was an event. Everyone crowded round him.” He had been shot down near Mogilev. He had a compass. And he set off walking east. From his explanations it became clear that on the sixth day of the war the Germans were supposed to have taken Smolensk. And this feldwebel, firmly believing in that plan, was walking to Smolensk.
Simonov goes on: “The mood was desperate. Everything remained incomprehensible. The radio reported the surrender of small frontier towns – Minsk was not mentioned. They talked about the fall of Kovno and Bialystok. Meanwhile in Mogilev it was said that battles were already going on near Bobruisk. There was a feeling that our armies were fighting out west, and between them and the rest of our troops were the Germans.”
That was indeed the case, with only one difference: our armies in the west were encircled and were breaking out in fragments. After the terrible defeats on the borders in the first two days of the war it was decided not to support everyone who remained, not to help the encircled units, not to throw fresh divisions into the slaughter. Simonov writes: “They decided to leave all those who were there in front to their fate, to fight and die, and from everything that was in the rear to organise a new line of defence along the Dnieper and the Berezina. Had this not been done, the Germans really would have reached Moscow in six weeks.”

Around Mogilev everyone is digging. The whole of the Mogilev and Smolensk regions are riddled with trenches and ditches. The Germans will later pass through them calmly.
Simonov works for the newspaper in Mogilev. Often he distributes the paper himself to the units he can find. On country roads he runs into one or two dirty, ragged men who have completely lost military bearing. They are encircled stragglers. On a dirt road a policeman appears from nowhere and stops Simonov. He asks what he should do with these solitary men trudging along: “Send them somewhere or gather them round me?” Simonov tells him to gather them until some commander appears. The policeman stays on the road. On the roadside verge two men rescued from encirclement sit nearby.
That same evening, in the political department of the front headquarters, Simonov reads a speech by Stalin taken down from the radio operators’ notes. It is Stalin’s address to the people of 3 July, beginning with the famous words: “Comrades! Citizens! Brothers and sisters! Fighters of our army and navy! I address you, my friends!”

In his diary Simonov comments on Stalin's speech. Firstly, the speech made it clear that an enormous territory had been captured by the Germans and that the danger was extreme. The Sovinformburo communiqués did not say this. "Now," writes Simonov, "it became easier from the fact that it was said aloud. Secondly, we understood that our hopes that somewhere a mighty blow was being prepared, that the Germans would be driven back, if not today then tomorrow – we understood that this was nothing but the product of fantasy. And we had to forget that for too long we had been preparing for something quite different – for a victorious beginning of the war."
Simonov writes in his diary of 1941: "The words 'my friends' in Stalin's speech, I remember, then moved us to tears." In that July address Stalin says: "The enemy aims to restore the power of the landlords, to restore tsarism." Stalin still lives in the era of the 1920s and 30s, when the clichés of class struggle worked successfully. But people already live in the era of the Patriotic War. And their whole previous life from now on will simply and succinctly be called "before the war". Stalin does not yet feel this; he is lagging behind the people, on whom for the first time his personal fate depends and to whom, for that reason, he for the first time appeals as "my friends".
And when he says in that address that the Soviet people must now renounce carelessness and complacency, that is superfluous. The war is already teaching Soviet people, and more precisely those of them who did not die in those first days and weeks, even without Stalin.
Twenty years later, in his commentaries on the 1941 diary, Simonov will return to the theme "Stalin and the beginning of the war". For all the years that had passed, he was tormented by the question – why did Stalin refuse to believe that the war would begin in the summer of 1941? "I allow," writes Simonov, "that Stalin thought that Hitler would not dare to do to him, a historical figure of such a scale, what he had dared to do earlier with others."

In Stalin's case, the corrupting influence of unlimited power on personality made itself felt. He imagined himself capable of planning history.
"Another question," says Simonov, "is that even in the most complicated circumstances there still exists the responsibility of society when it hands power into the hands of one man. We must not forget our responsibility for the situation that this man came to occupy."
Exactly this commentary of Simonov's is the main reason why publication of his 1941 diaries under the title "One Hundred Days of War" was forbidden. They were to have appeared in the journal Novy Mir in 1966. "One Hundred Days of War" would not be printed.
From a secret memo by the head of Glavlit, Okhotnikov, to the Central Committee of the CPSU: "In the course of checking the September and October issues of the journal Novy Mir, attention was drawn to the content of K. Simonov's notes and the author's commentaries on them." The essence of Simonov's anti-Stalin commentaries is then set out clearly in the form of a denunciation. The memo ends: "the work has been removed from the issue". And this in spite of the fact that at that time Simonov had one of the most prominent names in Soviet literature. His poems were known not only from books. Throughout the war they had been printed in newspapers. That is an incredible fame. In 1966, in connection with his book "One Hundred Days of War", which he considered his best, Simonov risked appealing to the highest party instance. He received not only no support, but no answer at all.
A year earlier, in 1965, for the twentieth anniversary of victory, Simonov made a report at a plenary meeting of the Moscow writers' organisation. The year 1965, the first year after Khrushchev, is the beginning of re-Stalinisation, the quiet return of Stalin to positions which had been taken away from him by the 20th Party Congress. That year Simonov spoke from the podium about Stalin's repressions in the army, from the point of view of their direct impact on the country's unreadiness for war.
Simonov said: "No, one cannot reduce everything to the names of several shot commanders. After them there perished thousands upon thousands who composed the flower of the army. And they did not just perish – in the consciousness of the majority they left bearing the stigma of traitors to the Motherland. But the point is not only those who left. We must remember what was going on in the souls of the people who remained to serve in the army."

The system of suspicions, accusations, arrests and shootings continued right up to the very eve of the war. Such was the atmosphere on the eve of the war with fascist Germany.
Simonov said: “Stalin remained faithful to that maniacal suspicion towards his own people which in the end turned into a loss of vigilance towards the enemy. His main guilt before the country lies in the fact that he created a fatal atmosphere in which dozens of competent people had no possibility of convincing the head of state of the scale of the danger. Only the atmosphere of monstrous terror and its after-effects lasting for years can explain the absurd pre-war orders.”
Even before this report, in February 1965, in Barvikha near Moscow, Simonov spoke on the same subject with one of the chief heroes of the war, Marshal Konev. After this conversation Simonov wrote: “It is beyond doubt that if 1937–1938 had not happened, not only in the army but in the country as a whole, we would have been incomparably stronger in 1941 than we were. All of them, those who had fallen, would have been fighting. And then, from among all of us, the war would have chosen and raised up the best.”

In June and July 1941, Simonov at the front met men who had returned to the army from the camps shortly before the war. Among them was Corps Commander Petrovsky, whose corps was standing in those days on the bank of the Dnieper. After the war Simonov would read Petrovsky’s orders from July. They testify to sober assessments of the situation, calmness and independence in those hardest days. In 1941, Corps Commander Petrovsky fully matches an officer’s appraisal he had received back in 1925: “Possesses a strong will, decisiveness. Knows the military art and loves it.”
In the same place where Simonov met Corps Commander Petrovsky, there will later, in Simonov’s novel “The Living and the Dead”, be waiting for battle Fyodor Fyodorovich Serpilin, arrested in 1937, sentenced to ten years in the camps and then unexpectedly released. Before dawn, lying on a heap of hay, Serpilin thinks: “You have to ask: who needed, on the eve of war, to deprive the army of people like him, Serpilin? What was the sense of that?” In Serpilin’s mind, the time of imprisonment was, above all, time wasted for nothing. “Recalling now, in wartime, those four wasted years, he clenched his teeth in vexation.”
Serpilin is the most vivid hero of Simonov’s main war novel. But Simonov met other men who arrived at the front after the camps, and he wrote about them too. These others were personally fearless in the face of the enemy. But after arrest and imprisonment they were helpless and defenceless in the face of their superiors. In command posts they were incapable of making decisions, and thus they destroyed soldiers’ lives over and over again. There were many of them, crippled by the camps. In his story “Panteleyev”, Simonov lets such a man put a bullet through his own head. In real life in 1941 his prototype went before a tribunal. For this story Simonov was criticised, with hints that the author himself was politically unreliable.
A team from “Izvestia” arrives to see Simonov in Mogilev. The poet Surkov and the photo-correspondent Troshkin are part of it. They are newcomers to the front. At this time Simonov already clearly formulates his impressions of the first two weeks of war: “I had the feeling that I would never see anything more terrible in my life. And it still seems to me that this is so.”
He wrote about those two weeks in a letter home. When the letter was placed together with his journalistic material to be sent to Moscow, he suddenly changed his mind. He did not send the letter and tore it up.
One of the trips of the “Izvestia” team was to Smolensk.
“On the way, tired and dusty,” Simonov writes, “we drove into some little village and went into an izba. The izba was papered with old newspapers. In little frames there were pictures from magazines. In the corner – the holy corner with icons. On a wide bench sat an old man dressed all in white – a white shirt and white trousers, with a grey beard.
The old woman sat us down on the bench next to the old man and began to give us milk. A neighbour came in. The old woman asked her:
‘Is Dunya still crying?’
‘Crying,’ the neighbour answered.
‘Her lad was killed,’ the old woman explained.

All at once the door opened, and from the yard next door we heard a woman's piercing cry. The old woman said:
'All ours are at the war. All the sons are at the war and all the grandsons are at the war. And the Germans will soon come here, won't they?'
'We don't know,' we said, although we felt that yes, soon.
And the old man still sat and was silent. And it seemed to me that if he could, he would die right now, looking at us, men in Red Army uniform, and not wait for the Germans to come to his izba. And that they would come here – from his face I felt that he was sure of it. He shook his centenarian head as if he were repeating: 'Yes, yes, they'll come, they'll come.'"
Simonov notes in his diary: "Later I wrote a poem about this and dedicated it to Alyosha Surkov: 'Do you remember, Alyosha, the izba near Borisov,/ The girl's cry over the dead,/ The grey-haired old woman in a plush cloak,/ The old man all in white, as if dressed for death.'
On the roads women gave us milk, made the sign of the cross over us and, ceasing all at once to be embarrassed that we were soldiers and party members, said to us: 'God save you', 'May God help you' – and for a long time watched us go."
This is the diary, and these are the poems:
"Do you remember, Alyosha, the roads of Smolensk,
How endless, evil rains poured,
How tired women brought us earthenware jugs,
Holding them to their breasts like children from the rain."

The 172nd Division, which was defending Mogilev, stood on the western bank of the Dnieper. The divisional commissar told Simonov that the best-fighting regiment in the division was Kutepov's regiment. They spoke of this at night. That same night, Simonov and the photo-correspondent Troshkin set out to see Kutepov. It was the night of 14 July.
Two days earlier – on 12 and 13 July – Kutepov's regiment had been in battle. On the 12th, the tanks of General Model attacked Kutepov's positions. Tanks with open hatches, German officers sticking out from them up to the waist. Behind the tanks the infantry, sleeves rolled up. The tanks were moving through rye fields.
Kutepov's men would destroy thirty-nine tanks. It was the fiercest and most successful action in the defence of Mogilev. The next day, the 13th, the Germans undertook a "psychological attack". Their infantry moved forward in formed ranks with unfurled flags. Few would survive from those ranks.
In the night, after repelling the "psychological attack", forty-five-year-old Kutepov tells Simonov of what happened with boyish enthusiasm: "They talk about tanks, tanks. But we knock them out. If the infantry has decided not to retreat, then no tanks can do anything to it, you can believe me. There's their tank, standing over there. That's how far it got, and still they achieved nothing."
On 14 July, the "Izvestia" photo-correspondent Troshkin takes pictures of the knocked-out German tanks under the very eyes of the Germans. He pulls a German flag out of a tank, makes Red Army men climb up on the tank, photographs them on the tank, beside the tank, with the flag and without the flag. Simonov writes: "He had simply lost all sense of danger." Then Troshkin photographs a battalion commander, Captain Gavryushin, about thirty years old, unshaven for three days, his hair matted under his cap. On Gavryushin's face there is a strange expression – a readiness to fight on for another twenty-four hours, and at the same time a readiness to fall asleep any second. War is very hard work. On 12 July the battle had lasted fourteen hours, on the 13th – ten hours. But the waiting before a battle is harder than the battle itself, many cannot endure it. They run. They are caught. Court martial. Execution.
Before photographing Gavryushin, Troshkin makes him throw a sub-machine-gun over his shoulder, and instead of his cap put on a helmet. "This equipment suited the captain remarkably badly, as usually it does not suit people who really sit in the forward positions," Simonov notes. The "Izvestia" photo-correspondent Troshkin will be killed in 1944.
In 1941, Troshkin also photographs Company Commander Khorchev, so young that it is strange to think that the day before he had fought to the last cartridge and lost half his company.

On 14 July, here, in the Buyanichi field, there is silence. A German burial team is at work. Kutepov's men do not disturb them. A large area of several hectares in no man's land is covered with birch crosses over German graves. In the night from the 12th to the 13th, during a lull between battles, our and German burial details worked together.
On 14 July, Colonel Kutepov tells Simonov: "We have decided among ourselves that whatever happens around us, whoever retreats, we stand here at Mogilev and will stand as long as we are alive."

After the war, in his commentaries on the 1941 diaries, Simonov will think long about what would have been more appropriate – to stand to the death or to retreat, withdrawing troops to avoid encirclement. But we were catastrophically unprepared even for a planned, organised retreat. Simonov writes: "Our lack of preparedness for war was so great that in recalling those days we cannot rid our vocabulary of such a heavy word as 'flight', or, using the soldiers' term of the time, 'skedaddle'."
Even now, in the most sober assessment of what happened, we must take off our caps to the memory of those who stood to the end in hard defences and fought to the death in encirclement, making possible the detachment from the Germans, the breakout from sacks and cauldrons of other units and formations and the huge mass of people who, in groups or alone, were cutting their way through the Germans to their own lines.
The heroism of those who stood to the death is beyond doubt. If the country had been prepared honestly and competently for a real war, this heroism would have produced incomparably greater results.
Among the Mogilev militia, one rifle is shared by three men. An axe, pitchfork, shovel are also counted as weapons.
On 19 November 1966, the head of the Main Political Administration of the Soviet Army, Epishev, writes about Simonov's book "One Hundred Days of War": "The new book by K. Simonov is deeply mistaken, unworthy of a Soviet writer; it can cause serious harm to the patriotic education of our youth, giving a distorted picture of our people's feat in defending the gains of October."
Simonov, before his death, wills that his ashes be scattered over that field where in July 1941 Colonel Kutepov had stood to the death.
Kutepov, Gavryushin and Khorchev will all die in encirclement. The Germans will move on Smolensk and take it at the very end of July. At that time Simonov will spend several days in Moscow. He moves from "Izvestia" to "Red Star". In that short pause he is asked to write a few poems for the paper. Simonov writes "Wait for Me". In his diary he notes: "The first reader of 'Wait for Me' was the writer Lev Kassil. He told me that the poem was, on the whole, good, although it was somewhat like an incantation."
But such an incantation is entirely justified for a fighting man in the terrible year 1941.
In Smolensk, in a lone house which has not been bombed, the telephone still works. Konstantin Simonov asks to be connected to Moscow. The operator answers, "Just a moment." He waits for about fifteen minutes. At last he hears: "Moscow. Moscow! Smolensk calling. Give me 3-6-0-8-4." Then a long ring – and a familiar voice says, "Hello", then a crash and the operator's voice: "I've disconnected you. There is an air raid in Smolensk." Simonov had called Valentina Serova in Moscow. His best war poems will go into the cycle "With You and Without You", dedicated to her. Among them is the poem which begins: "Your voice I caught in Smolensk,/ But as always luck was not with me./ Of all those thousand woman's words/ I heard only: 'Hello!'"
Simonov is in Smolensk in the first days of July. The city is already being bombed. On 15 July there is a mass exodus of the population.
Leonid Andreev, the future professor and dean of the philology faculty at Moscow State University, recalls:
"The streets were filled with refugees and troops. Near a ruined house, ice cream was being sold. In the bright sky German planes were hanging. In a shop without windows or doors there was a queue for sour cream. On the bank of the river lay eight corpses of German paratroopers who had been

shot. Under the bridge explosives were being laid. On the bridge a towing tractor drove over the head of a dead teenager. Panic drove people to the station and robbed them of reason. A train with open freight platforms came in. Thousands of people rushed to them, knocking each other over, dropping bundles and suitcases, shouting, crying and swearing.
Next to the train, suddenly, a heavy anti-aircraft machine-gun started rattling. People rushed to the walls of the station, underneath the platforms. A lost girl of about four could not stop crying. A burst from the machine-gun sprayed her with fragments of plaster."
By about 20 July, in the Smolensk region, three of our armies – the 16th, 19th and 20th – are encircled. The Germans have already taken Yelnya, creating a salient thrust far to the east.
The Soviet command assumes that this is not a German breakthrough, but merely a large airborne landing. "Landing, landing, landing. In those days this word was literally ringing in our ears," writes Simonov.
After a short stay in Moscow, where he writes his famous "Wait for Me", Simonov goes to the Yelnya region.
In his diary he writes: "No one, from the commander of the 24th Army Rakutin down to the battalion commanders, knew the real situation near Yelnya. General Rakutin thinks that the Germans will be driven out of Yelnya in a day or two, three at the most."
In reality, Yelnya will be taken by the troops of the 24th Army only one and a half months later, on 7 September. The 24th Army is part of the Reserve Front under Zhukov. Yelnya is our first major successful offensive. But the Yelnya salient is a secondary sector for the Germans. At that time their main blows are being struck at the Central and South-Western Fronts. When the Wehrmacht begins its general offensive on Moscow, it will manage without the Yelnya salient.

While Zhukov attacks Yelnya, the Germans attack Kiev.
Near Kiev, five armies of the South-Western Front fall into a cauldron. The front commander, General Kirponos, is killed in action. According to the Germans, 665,000 men are taken prisoner near Kiev. According to the historian General D. Volkogonov, 453,000, including 60,000 officers. In the Mozyr–Gomel area, 78,000 men fall prisoner; in the Uman cauldron, where two armies are encircled, 103,000, including both army commanders – Lieutenant-General Muzychenko of the 6th Army and Lieutenant-General Ponedelin of the 12th Army.
A few days later, the name of General Ponedelin will appear in Stavka Order No. 270 of 16 August 1941. Order No. 270 bears a distinctly personal Stalin tone. You can hear Stalin pacing up and down and dictating:
"Not only our friends recognize, but our enemies are forced to recognize that in our liberation struggle against the German-fascist invaders the units of the Red Army, their commanders and commissars behave irreproachably, courageously and sometimes outright heroically. Even those units that have accidentally fallen into encirclement preserve their steadfastness and break out of encirclement."
There follows an indisputable list of successful breakouts.
Stalin continues: "But we cannot conceal the fact that recently there have been several shameful cases of surrender to the enemy. Individual generals have set a bad example to our troops." And Stalin names three names. The first is Lieutenant-General Ponedelin. In fact he is a major-general. Stalin dictates: "He had every possibility of breaking through to his own forces, but he lost courage and deserted to the enemy." The second is Lieutenant-General Kachalov: "He preferred to surrender," says Stalin. The third is Major-General Kirillov. "Can we tolerate in the ranks of the Red Army cowards who surrender to the enemy? No, we cannot. If these cowards and deserters are given free rein, they will ruin our Motherland. Cowards and deserters must be destroyed."
In his commentaries on the 1941 diary, Simonov writes: "I must make a bitter admission: I was a man of my time and then, in the summer of 1941, reading this Stavka order signed by Stalin, I believed, no less than others, that the people mentioned in it were indeed guilty of everything that was imputed to them."

After the war, Simonov will carefully study the circumstances in which these men fell into captivity – more precisely, two of them. Lieutenant-General Kachalov was never a prisoner; he was killed in battle on 4 August, and at the moment Order No. 270 was issued he was already dead. For Ponedelin, Simonov traces the situation by the journal of combat operations of the Southern Front. On 4 August it says: “Ponedelin’s group continues fighting in a closed ring, without shells and artillery.” General Kirillov, with his corps, is constantly covering the retreat of other units.
Simonov writes: “There was no basis at all for declaring them cowards who did not wish to break through to their own. On the conscience of these two men at that moment there was only one thing – they had not physically been able, had not had time or had not dared to shoot themselves. But that is no reason to consider them traitors, as was stated in the Stavka order.”
Generals Ponedelin and Kirillov, slandered by Order No. 270, will remain prisoners until the end of the war. Then they will spend half a year in Allied-occupied territory. They will return to the Motherland. On 30 December 1945 they are arrested. The investigation will last five years. In 1950 they will be shot. In 1956 they will be rehabilitated as unjustly convicted.
Under Order No. 270, in 1941 all those who have fallen prisoner are counted as traitors to the Motherland. Under the same order, in 1945 they will go from German camps to Soviet ones. In those camps will also end up the few surviving defenders of the Brest fortress. Repression falls on the families of the prisoners. They are arrested and exiled to remote regions of the USSR. In July 1942, a decree of the State Defence Committee specifies that “the members of the family are considered to be the father, mother, wife, husband, sons, daughters, brothers and sisters if they lived together with the traitor to the Motherland at the moment the war began.”
From June to December 1941 up to 3,335,000 Soviet servicemen will fall into German captivity. By the end of January 1942, as a result of executions, epidemics and hunger, two million prisoners will have died. Stalin, speaking in the Mayakovskaya metro station on 6 November 1941, says: “In four months of war we have lost 350,000 killed and 378,000 missing, and have 1,020,000 wounded.” He does not mention Soviet soldiers who have fallen prisoner at all.

On the Western Front alone, during the Smolensk battle, up to 300,000 men are taken prisoner. Nearly 300,000 are wounded, more than 200,000 killed. The encircled troops near Smolensk and the civilian population have a single exit – a narrow ferry across the Dnieper near the village of Solovyov. Simonov has been at the Solovyov ferry. In his commentaries he quotes a fragment from a letter he received from Vasily Palazhenko, who began the war precisely near Yelnya. He writes: “From the west to the east, from a wide front, everything flowed to the Solovyov crossing. The crossing had no air cover at all. Fascist pilots, flying at low level, shot up the streams of people. A dam formed at the crossing from human bodies, carts and dead horses. Even now I see: a bleeding, dying woman, who had just managed to crawl out of the water onto the bank, and a bleeding infant crawling over her.”
Simonov writes to Serova from the front:
“To reproach you, to wound you – no, not that,
Toying with a rusty stalk of grass,
I only wanted to see and see and see
You, you, you.
No quarrels, no stupid fuss,
The sort that later we recall in shame and laughter,
And the bombs were falling unhurriedly,
As in a film shown in slow motion.”
There are 300 kilometres to Moscow. The German offensive operation against the capital receives the code name “Typhoon”. Its planning is completed by 19 September. The command of the Western Front reports to the Stavka only on 26 September that, according to intelligence, a German offensive on Moscow is possible. The next day a directive is issued on the need to adopt “firm and

stubborn defence", to create front reserves and to improve defensive works. But these documents do not reach the forward units in time.

The command post of the Western Front is then located near the station of Kasnya, on a commanding height, in a bright white manor house with columns – the estate of the Volkonsky princes. All the approaches to the house are covered with yellow sand. The communications hub is under light shelters next to the manor. There is lively movement of vehicles and military personnel. On the first day of Operation Typhoon, 2 October, 27 bombers strike at the command post of the Western Front. The building is destroyed, 73 people are killed.
The primary task of the German command is to encircle and destroy Soviet troops in the Bryansk and Vyazma regions. Solving this task opens the road to Moscow.
Orel is taken on 3 October, absolutely unexpectedly for the command of the Bryansk Front. When German tanks burst into Orel, trams are still running calmly through the city, full of people.
The commander of the Orel Military District, Lieutenant-General Tyurin, responsible for the city's defence, learns of the capture of Orel from an orderly who runs into the headquarters shouting that German tanks are in the streets. Three days later, on 6 October, Bryansk is encircled and taken. Three armies fall into a cauldron. Less than 20 per cent of their personnel will break out of the encirclement.

Simonov writes to Serova:
"When he parted with life,
The air around him was empty,
And no tender image touched
His cooling lips with its lips.
Forever I shall take with me
The sound of your words, the taste of your lips.
May they not lie. On the battlefield
Nothing will remind me of them."
Simonov writes: "In a village we met units of one of the Moscow workers' militia divisions. For the most part they were not young men – forty, fifty years old. Their uniforms were third-hand tunics, some of them strangely dyed blue. Their commanders were also men of years, reservists."
Formation of the people's militia divisions began on 4 July 1941. For the first time the idea of forming the militia is voiced the day before, on 3 July, in Stalin's address. Alongside older men, young people join the militia, often unfit for regular service. Their weapons are from the First World War. Their level of training is extremely low. But they are volunteers and show incredible steadfastness.
Simonov writes: "I remember that they made a heavy impression on me. I thought: have we really no other reserves than these militiamen, dressed somehow and almost unarmed? One rifle for two and a single machine-gun for all."
When the decision is taken to withdraw troops to the Rzhev–Vyazma line, it is they who will cover the retreat. And they will be the ones to stand under the blow of the German armies of Army Group Centre and to fall into the awful encirclement near Vyazma.
The militiaman Boris Fridman recalls: "On 1 October 1941, I was sitting with a comrade in arms, talking about this and that, and he, who regularly called at the regimental staff, tells me: 'There's talk that we're already encircled.' I answered: 'No, Alexander Nikolaevich, that can't be, you'd hear firing, and all around it's so quiet, so calm.'"
The bombardment began the next day, 2 October. Operation Typhoon starts with a massive air attack. It completely disrupts communications between Soviet troops. German armoured wedges move along huge arcs bypassing our main forces and by 7 October complete the encirclement of our units. Then, along the Moscow–Minsk highway, they slice the encircled grouping in two and begin its destruction.

Foreseeing the catastrophe of encirclement, the commander of the Western Front, Konev, reports the situation to Stalin on 4 October. Everything is decided by hours and even minutes, but Stalin on 4 October does not give permission for an organised retreat. Only on 5 October will the Stavka approve the order to withdraw. In reality it will begin only on the 6th. It is already too late.
The encircled man, military doctor Ivan Akopov, recalls: “Before our eyes the entire organisation of the retreat fell apart. All the units had become mixed together, nobody was directing the movement. We had no maps, nor did the commanders of other units. Some units turned off the main road onto side roads to speed their movement. On the road we saw abandoned trucks, and people resting here and there, in ones and twos, in groups. To our question – where are you going? – they answered that they were going wherever their eyes were looking, hoping to reach their own lines.”
The militiaman Alexander Lelyaichev recalls: “There was no way to take the wounded, no way to bury the dead. We were retreating. At the last moment two majors quarrelled. The argument was over who should command the regiment. One shot the other, and the surviving major took command to lead the unit out of encirclement.”
Those who break out of the encirclement will find themselves at the filtration point of the Western Front on Stromynka street in Moscow, in a university dormitory building. The lucky ones will be sent back to the front, the rest – to camps.

One encircled soldier recalls: “When I came to after the air raid, there was not a soul around. Only the dead. I started walking along a forest road; a military truck caught up with me. They helped me climb up. We passed one village. Not a soul on the street. We passed two more villages – everywhere silence. And this began to calm us. And then, at full speed, we drove into another village and ran into a ring of German tanks. They stopped us. German machine-gunners appeared. I was a prisoner. New groups of prisoners arrived all the next day. Then they brought us all to a transit camp for POWs in a small town. Then the column of prisoners set off on a long march. You could see neither its beginning nor its end.”
Another former prisoner recalls: “In large villages the column would stop briefly. Old peasants looked at us gloomily. I did not see any pity in their eyes. A peasant woman held half a loaf of bread in her hands and offered to swap it for a set of underwear that a prisoner had to take off his back.”
Another says: “Women threw bread and potatoes into our ranks. The Germans did not know what to do with such a quantity of prisoners.”
There was then such a trick: women, at the risk of being shot, would rush towards the guards with tears, screaming that their husbands were among the prisoners. They were no husbands at all, but they shouted: “Vanya, Petya, darling, at last we’ve found each other!” Women rescued prisoners as best they could. The Germans laughed and released someone from the column. Then the column moved on. Those who fell behind were shot.

Vyazma, two hundred kilometres from Moscow, is a hellish cauldron where everything is mixed together: encirclement, captivity, and battles of incredible ferocity, truly heroic battles of the encircled troops, which held up the German advance on Moscow for two weeks.
Military doctor Akopov recalls: “The whole crew of a gun that was still firing had been killed. Around the gun, in various poses, lay several bodies. One, right next to the wheel of the gun, with arms outstretched and eyes wide open, as if looking at the sky. The gaze of the last living gunner was full of hatred and, I would say, of excitement. He did not feel that his whole face was spattered with the blood of his fallen comrades and sensed nothing around him but the enemy.”
From the first day of the war, British Prime Minister Churchill, in his radio address, had said: “For the last twenty-five years no one has been a more persistent opponent of communism than I. I will not unsay a single word I have spoken about it. But all this fades away before the spectacle which is now unfolding. I see the Russian soldiers defending their native soil, their homes, where their mothers and wives are praying – yes, for there are times when everyone prays – for the return of their breadwinner, their champion and their protector.”

Akopov recalls: “I noticed another wounded man who was lying on his back and saying something loudly. I ran up to him and was horrified: he had a stomach wound, a long loop of intestine had come out, he was unlikely to survive; I was bandaging him, and he was looking at the planes flying over us and repeating with hatred: ‘Shoot, rattle, you fascist scum! We shall still have our fight with you!’”
Stalin, who had not given the timely order to retreat, sends on 8 October a panic-stricken radio message to the headquarters of the encircled 19th Army: “Because of the failure of the encircled troops to come to Moscow, there is no one and nothing with which to defend Moscow. I repeat: no one and nothing.” In the ring of encirclement near Vyazma there are 37 divisions of the Western and Reserve Fronts, 9 tank brigades, almost all the artillery.

On 11 October an attempt at a breakout is made.
By this date, at enormous cost in blood, a two-kilometre-wide corridor has been punched through the ring and is being held with difficulty by the militiamen. The breakout is directed by the commander of the 19th Army, Lieutenant-General Lukin. Lukin asks for air support over the sector of the main strike. There will be no such support.
Across the Bogoroditskoye field on 11 October 1941, through the autumn mud, go horse-drawn columns and endless infantry columns. No one speaks; you can hear only the monotonous noise of this mass of people, an occasional muttered curse and the clink of weapons.
Ahead the cannonade can be heard and an echo of many-voiced “Aaah”. It is the echo of the desperate “Hurrah!” of the infantry throwing itself into the assault. On 11 October the breakout chokes, the ring closes again. A second attempt at breakout, on the 13th, is also unsuccessful. General Lukin is wounded three times and taken prisoner.
The encirclement near Vyazma costs up to 600,000 prisoners and about 400,000 dead. After the war, it was impossible to plough the Bogoroditskoye field: human bones lay at the depth of a bayonet’s length.
In the 1960s Simonov proposed collecting and publishing the recollections of Muscovites who had been witnesses of the events in and around Moscow in that terrible autumn of 1941. At the highest level he was forbidden to do this.

On 16 October 1941, the morning Sovinformburo radio bulletin said: “During the past twenty-four hours the situation on the Western Front has deteriorated.” After this the radio fell silent.
Historian Georgy Mirsky recalls: “Only when I went out into Gorky Street did I begin to guess what had really happened at the front. Down the street one black Emka after another was rushing by. Inside sat officers with their families. On the roofs of the cars were tied suitcases, bundles and crates. These were staff officers of the Moscow Military District. Early in the morning the district staff had received a secret military report from which it appeared that the Germans had broken through the front and had already reached Mozhaisk, 100 kilometres from the capital. At the staff they evidently decided that the Germans might be expected in Moscow at any moment. And the staff officers bolted.”
Near Mozhaisk, indeed, the fiercest fighting is going on. It is going on right on the Borodino field. These battles hold up the German advance for a week. And the account is then going by days. There is hand-to-hand fighting at the command post of the 5th Army, in which the army commander, General Lelyushenko, is wounded. Lelyushenko recalls: “This took place on the very spot where the Raevsky battery stood in 1812.” It was exactly on 16 October.
Mirsky recalls: “On 16 October what made the strongest impression were the rubbish bins in Moscow courtyards. They were filled to the brim with red-bound books. These were the collected works of Lenin. They did not fit in the bins, and were thrown out onto the street and burnt. The whole centre of Moscow was in this smoke. On Kuznetsky Most, on Lubyanka, on Myasnitskaya, black snow was falling – the ashes of burnt documents. Papers stamped ‘Secret’ were flying along the streets.”

In the city trams are not running, the metro is not working, bakeries are closed. Daniil Granin conveys what Alexei Kosygin, at that time deputy chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, told him about 16 October: "The government was evacuating to Kuibyshev. The Sovnarkom offices were deserted. The doors were wide open. Telephones were ringing everywhere. Kosygin went from office to office, picked up the receiver and answered, just to show that the government was still functioning."
Doctor Dreiser from the ambulance service recalls: "Along the Garden Ring they were driving an innumerable quantity of pigs and cows somewhere. Shady characters were hauling pigs into alleyways, almost under the eyes of the herdsmen."
At the factories there were mass dismissals. On 16 October wages were hurriedly distributed, but not to everyone and not everywhere. People waiting for their money saw their bosses running away. The deputy director of the Molotov precision measuring instruments plant, Rygin, had loaded a truck with large quantities of food and tried to drive off the plant territory. He was stopped and beaten up by the workers.
Writer Arkady Perventsev recalls: "On 16 October the abandoned city was being looted. I saw them looting the Bolshevik factory, the road was strewn with biscuits. The Mikoyan meat-packing plant was being looted. Hundreds of thousands of workers, hundreds of thousands of workers' wives and children, in rags and poverty, had been thrown to their fate. They suddenly realized that nobody needed them. Their spontaneous indignation grew with every hour. Moscow was on the verge of an uprising."
Chief engineer of Ball Bearing Plant No. 1, Surnakin, recalls: "The people were suddenly left out in the cold. Many said: 'If they gave us weapons, we'd go and fight. But instead they pay us off and throw us out.'"
The square of the three railway stations is packed with people and belongings. From the Leningrad station there is nowhere to go. Everyone leaves from the Yaroslavl or Kazan stations.
Maria Belkina recalls: "Actors, writers, film people were leaving: Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Lyubov Orlova. Some actor was hauling a huge trunk, and then, looking at his watch, dropped it and ran to the platform with just a briefcase. Young conscripts, head shaved, with skinny kitbags, laughed at him."

The intelligentsia is evacuated from Moscow in an extremely organised way. At first glance, you might see in this a desire of the authorities to save the intellectual elite from destruction. In reality, the authorities perceive it as an unreliable "fifth column". The son of Boris Gornung, philologist and poet, writes: "At my father's Institute of World Literature, the telephone was ringing; stern voices read out lists of names and announced on behalf of the organs that if these people did not leave Moscow, it would be regarded as proof that they were waiting for the Germans."
Perventsev recalls: "We were leaving Moscow along the Enthusiasts' Highway. It was jammed with a crowd. Several people jumped onto the running boards and onto the roof of our car. They hammered with their fists on the windows. The windscreen cracked and crumbled. Dozens of hands seized the car and dragged it to the roadside. Someone raised the bonnet and began tearing out the wiring. Dozens of hands reached into the car and pulled my wife out. 'What do you want?' I shouted. In answer a hundred voices roared: 'You must be taking money out of Moscow, right? And we've been abandoned to starve. You must be a party organizer or a director, you bastard!'
I understood them. I looked at their hollow cheeks, their filthy black coats and torn shoes and suddenly saw the terrible gulf that had opened up between us, the gentry of today, and these people. I shouted that I was a Soviet writer, that I had been taken off the military register for health reasons, that the car was mine. I wrote books and had bought myself a car. They decided to let us go. Before that, they smashed our car up some more. They tore a jacket from my wife's hands and took my wolf-skin boots. And that was all. We drove on.
I saw them looting another ZIS. Dozens of cartons of cigarettes flew out of it, dozens of pairs of socks and stockings. It was the car of some state official. He was taking out a whole shop. Some bread fell from the car onto the road. A man jumped to it, grabbed it and began to eat it quickly."

At the peak of the German offensive on Moscow, anti-Semitic moods erupt in the city with unexpected force. NKVD reports say: “Fitter Tyurkin of the KES plant in the Kiev district of Moscow said: ‘Soon we will deal with all the Jews like this,’ and he drew his hand across his throat.” Many reports of this kind exist.
Perventsev recalls: “A gloomy citizen in a cap passed me and said: ‘Comrade Perventsev, we are looking for and beating kikes.’”

The government had the radio in its hands, but it was silent almost the whole day on 16 October. There was not a single calm voice that would have said to the population: “We must defend the city.” Only in the evening, some static came from the loudspeakers in the streets and then the voice of the chairman of the Moscow Soviet, Pronin. He called the population to calm and promised to restore order. Panic in the city continued for another three days.
One of these days, Stalin phoned the Western Front. After the war Simonov spoke with Konev, its commander. Konev recalled: “Stalin called, almost hysterical in tone. He spoke of himself in the third person: ‘Comrade Stalin is not a traitor, Comrade Stalin is not a turncoat, Comrade Stalin is an honest man, his only mistake is that he trusted the cavalrymen too much. Comrade Stalin will do everything in his power to correct the situation.’”
It was then that Konev felt Stalin’s extreme confusion, the lack of willpower. He sensed that Stalin did not correspond to the picture he himself had had of him. This was a man who had lost his head and was in many ways guilty.
Simonov writes: “I thought a great deal about the secret of this dramatic phone call from Stalin to Konev. And suddenly I remembered how, in July 1941, the commander of the Western Front, Pavlov, the chief of staff of the Western Front and several other generals had been shot. All of them had been declared traitors to the Motherland and shot as traitors. Under no circumstances were they in fact traitors, but Stalin could explain everything that had happened at the beginning of the war only as treason.”
This was his favourite, simplest way out of a difficult situation. Thus he deflected the blow onto others. Because he, Stalin, in these first weeks of the war, had not only lost his nerve and been frightened – he felt his responsibility. For his false assessment of the political situation, for his deafness to warnings and signals.
The second bout of Stalin’s panic came in the terrible days of October. It was then that Stalin realised that now he himself could be considered a traitor, that after all the failures, encirclements and losses, he could be declared an enemy of the people and that someone might raise a hand against him.
The realisation that the accusation which he had been turning for years against others could finally be turned against him – that is what caused the cry that the commander of the Western Front, Konev, heard in the receiver.
In his work “Stalin and the War”, Simonov quotes Konev’s words: “In this atmosphere of vacuum, of confusion, one had to make up with one’s own will for the absence of will at the top and do everything possible to save the situation.” On 16 October Stalin did not leave Moscow. The fact that Stalin remained in Moscow is the only case when the “cult of personality” played a positive role. Because the information that Stalin had not left the capital gave people hope. In the sense that those who were dying for Moscow did not feel entirely abandoned by the authorities. The Stalin effect is only a drop in the ocean of steadfastness, will and self-sacrifice shown by ordinary people in defending Moscow.

The new stage of the German offensive on Moscow begins on 15 November. By 1 December there remain no more than thirty kilometres to Moscow. On 2 December the editorial offices of Berlin newspapers are ordered to leave blank spaces in pages being typeset in order to insert the report of the capture of the Soviet capital.
In Moscow defensive preparations are under way within the city. Order No. 9 is issued to the Dzerzhinsky Division to organise a line of defence along the Garden Ring. The squares of

Mayakovsky, Vosstaniya, Smolenskaya, Oktyabrskaya and Dobryninskaya are mentioned. The squares are blocked across their entire width with obstacles and sandbags. Air raids are so frequent that there is no time to declare air alerts. Bombs fall on the Garden Ring on the Shalyapin house, on Patriarch's Ponds, on the Arbat. Along the Garden Ring, anti-aircraft guns are lined up. Columns departing for the front form up right on the Ring.
Units from the Far East, Central Asia and Siberia are arriving to defend Moscow. This becomes possible after Japan abandons the idea of entering the war against the USSR. Those very Siberian and Far Eastern units march past in the parade of 7 November. Big lads, regular troops. Our regular army, which had met the German offensive, had by that time been almost completely destroyed. And now here are these troops from the Far East – well fed, well trained.
By the end of November, twelve Moscow bridges, the city power stations, railway stations, the Central Telegraph building, the TASS building, the Bolshoi Theatre and the House of Unions are all mined and prepared for demolition.
On 2 December the Germans bring their guns into position to shell the city in the area of Kryukovo. That is only eleven kilometres from the present ring road.
Writer Arkady Perventsev at that time writes: "The time has come when the only saviour could be God, but we are atheists. All our hope is in Stalin." Perventsev was mistaken.
On 5 December 1941, from the last line in front of Moscow, our troops begin their counter-offensive. The only strategic reserve for this counter-offensive is the blood and life of the Soviet soldiers.

From a letter of a German soldier home: "In attacking, the Russians use huge numbers of men, whom the command stubbornly throws into battle, and by this achieves success. The Russians have always been famous for their contempt for death. The Communist regime has further developed this quality. An attack, once launched twice, will be launched a third and fourth time, regardless of losses. And the third and fourth attacks will be carried out with the same stubbornness and composure. The infantry attacks in close formation. It appears as if from under the ground and advances like a flood. The huge gaps our fire rips in its ranks are immediately filled. Waves of infantry roll one after another over a carpet of corpses. The repulse of such an attack depends not so much on the presence of equipment as on whether one's nerves hold."
The battle of Moscow is our first victory. For the first time, the communiqués mention by name the generals commanding the victorious armies near Moscow. Instead of "troops of Commander R." we now hear "troops under the command of Rokossovsky". Everywhere we hear the names of Konev, Govorov, Kuznetsov, Lelyushenko. Loudest of all – Zhukov. This victory costs us 926,244 irrecoverable losses. Nearly a million. The dry term "irrecoverable losses" means dead and missing. The ratio of our losses to German losses is three to one. The wounded in this gigantic battle are counted separately – 879,679 men.
"In us there is a stern freedom,/ Condemning a mother to tears,/ To buy with our own death/ The immortality of our people" (Konstantin Simonov). The victory near Moscow is the first step of the people towards immortality, towards victory in the most terrible war. The victory near Moscow is the disruption of Blitzkrieg, the collapse of the idea of a lightning defeat of Russia. Germany is compelled to move to a long war. That means the war is only beginning.
Simonov returns to Moscow from the Northern Front on the very day the counter-offensive begins, 5 December. He writes: "Having been in Moscow just an hour, I already felt that it would never be given up."

On 9 December Simonov is to read several war poems on the radio. Among them is "Wait for Me", not yet published. He is appallingly late to the radio station.
When he runs in, the announcer is already reading the third of the four poems selected for broadcast. Only "Wait for Me" is left. Simonov writes: "I signalled to the announcer that I would read it myself, pulled the sheet with the poem out of his hands, and he could only announce that 'Wait for Me' would be read by the author. I don't remember how I read it then."

In that winter of 1941 he wanted Valentina Serova to hear that he was alive, to hear his living voice. Simonov writes to Serova: “Here I do not want to share my anguish,/ You will rarely hear your name here,/ But if I am silent – it is of you that I am silent,/ And the air is filled with your faces.” Simonov to Serova: “Who have you become? Mine or another’s?/ From here my heart cannot reach you./ Forgive that I call you my wife/ By the right of those who may not return.”
During the war years Simonov is sent on assignment to both the Northern and Southern fronts. He is in Stalingrad. He sees the meeting with the Allies on the Elbe. He sees the storming of Berlin. He is present in Karlshorst at the signing of the capitulation.
He has no reason to feel shame for himself in the war. The war was a brief time when his personal faith coincided with the general faith and with the state ideology. After the war there were thirty-four years of a quite different life.
On his fiftieth birthday Simonov says: “Not everything in my life I did well. I understand that. I was not always up to the mark – up to the mark of civic duty, up to the mark of humanity. There were things in my life which I recall with discomfort, when I did not show either sufficient will or sufficient courage. And I remember that.”
In his last work, written six months before his death and called “Through the Eyes of a Man of My Generation”, Simonov says of the time of the pre-war and post-war repressions: “This is a time which, if one is to be honest, cannot be forgiven not only to Stalin, but to anyone, including oneself.”

Konstantin Simonov’s son Alexei, in the preface to his father’s last work, writes about the post-war Stalin time and about his father in that time: “He was threatened then with the complete destruction of the inner moral co-ordinates that distinguish talent from mediocrity.”
After the war, in the country that had defeated fascism, Stalin saddles an absolutely fascist theme – anti-Semitism. In the USSR this is called the struggle against cosmopolitanism. Simonov, from an old noble Russian family, had never been an anti-Semite. And he especially valued in his comrades their rejection of anti-Semitism. He noted this explicitly. Simonov writes: “Surkov organically despised and hated anti-Semitism as a phenomenon and anti-Semites as its personal bearers, he did not hide this and was more consistent and courageous in this than Fadeev or me.”
In 1949 Simonov delivers a report on “cosmopolitan writers” – that is, a report against writers who were Jews by nationality.
Alexei Simonov writes:
“The secretary of the Writers’ Union, Fadeev, was supposed to give this report, but he evaded responsibility in his habitual way – he went on a binge. At the Writers’ Union Fadeev had two deputies – Simonov and Sofronov. Sofronov was quite ready to give this report. But it was known that Sofronov, in addition to the list of cosmopolitans handed down from above, would gladly add another dozen or two names of writers he personally hated. And so Simonov agreed to give the report. And he did. Then he secretly helped some of the people mentioned in his report. They were no longer allowed near literary work.”

In 1960, in the remote Uzbek provincial town of Angren, in some club, Simonov has a literary evening. The hall is full. In his usual quiet voice he reads his war poems: “Do You Remember, Alyosha”, “Wait for Me”, “If Your Home Is Dear to You”. Then questions from the audience. The first question: “Are you a Jew?”
In 1966 Simonov signs an individual letter against the rehabilitation of Stalin. In 1973 he signs a collective letter against Solzhenitsyn. But in 1974, flying back from Spain, he sees “The Gulag Archipelago” in the hands of his interpreter. He says: “They won’t let you bring that in. Give it to me.” He brings it into the country and gives it back to her in Moscow.
Simonov was against the publication of Pasternak’s “Doctor Zhivago”. But he pushes through the publication of Bulgakov’s “The Master and Margarita”. He helps to push through productions in the Sovremennik and Taganka theatres, helps the film career of Alexei German. And all those years he

thinks and writes about Stalin and Stalin's time. It is Simonov's huge labour of overcoming his own delusions.

And above all, Simonov helps resolve day-to-day problems of former front-line soldiers: hospitals, apartments, prostheses, glasses, missing medals.

Luckily, he was never called "a major Soviet poet". He was simply Simonov. And that is a great literary good fortune. His best cycle of war lyrics, "With You and Without You", dedicated to Serova and begun in 1941, he completes in 1954:

"It's too late now to throw reproaches to the wind.
Don't fear our talking on till dawn.
I have simply ceased to love you. And that
Is what keeps me from writing you more poems."