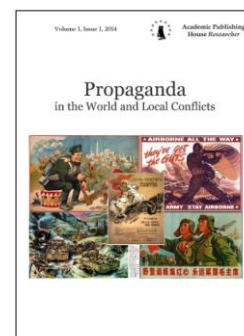


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Published in the Russian Federation
 Propaganda in the World and Local Conflicts
 Has been issued since 2014.
 ISSN 2500-1078, E-ISSN 2500-3712
 Vol. 5, Is. 1, pp. 44-48, 2015

DOI: 10.13187/pwlc.2016.5.44
www.ejournal47.com



Letters to the editorial office

Documents reveal: German war propaganda and the Vlasov Campaign during World War II

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Abstract

The paper considers first propaganda efforts by the German intelligence services to carry out activities as part of the General Vlasov Campaign in the occupied territories and at the front. It cites a German document from the archives of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs – "Development and Status of War Propaganda in the East since Autumn 1942 (Vlasov Campaign)". The English version of the document is published for the first time. The paper specifically looks at the international consequences that followed from this campaign.

Keywords: German documents, war propaganda, Third Reich, Vlasov Campaign, General Vlasov, collaboration.

Since the late 1980s, the role of Soviet citizens in the World War II on the side of the Third Reich has been extensively covered both in the Russian and foreign historiography. People who assisted Germany were made use of in diverse ways – at the front, in the occupied territories and in the Soviet rear. It is important to understand that, despite the opinion of the German intelligence (the Abwehr) that it was appropriate to use the "Eastern Card" in the war (Beevor, 1999: 199), leaders of the Third Reich adopted a very cautious approach to the use of Soviet citizens at the front. As a result, it turned out to be one of the fatal mistakes made by the Third Reich, and the "Eastern Card" was never fully played out. Leaders of the Third Reich took a position of progressing "in small steps". First, it published a directive on payment to volunteer assistants – "Hiwis"; its second success was a permit to staff divisions in the East with up to 15% of Russians and Ukrainians... The position led the outcome that the an independent Russian government – Committee for the Liberation of the Peoples of Russia and its armed forces – was created only in November 1944, when the right time was completely missed, and the fate of the war foredoomed (Strik-Strikfeldt, 1993: 117-118, 354). The cautious approach by the leaders of the Third Reich is clearly visible in the document cited below. In May 1943, the General Staff of Germany prepared an official memorandum entitled "Development and Status of War Propaganda in the East since Autumn 1942 (Vlasov Campaign)." This document was published in Russian in the journal *Novaya i noveishaya istoriya* 20 years ago in 1996 (1996. No. 4). The papers analyzes the practice of using activities developed as part of the Vlasov Campaign for propaganda purposes, i.e. the activities

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which became the first experience of using former Soviet citizens supporting the Third Reich in the war. The document was stored in the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the 1941–1945 period. Aus dem Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts. Serie E: 1941–1945, Bd VI, Dok. 85. p. 145–149. (Vishlev, 1996: 130–146). The document gives a good overview of the results that the activities produced as part of this campaign, and, in our opinion, needs no comment.

Document

I. Development and status of war propaganda in the east since autumn 1942 (Vlasov Campaign)

1. The purpose of the German war propaganda directed against the enemy is to demoralize enemy forces, undermine their capacity to resist enemy soldiers, motivate them to go over to our side on a massive scale, and thereby save the German blood. The same goals are also pursued with respect to bandits in the occupied territories, i.e. to deprive the enemy banditry of fertile soil, stimulate bandits to go over to our side and through this also save the German blood and prevent the diversion of German troops.

II. Development of war propaganda since autumn 1942

1) Background

In summer 1942, a Russian army commander, General-Lieutenant Vlasov (Fig. 2), was taken prisoner in the "Volkhov pocket" fighting. Once captured, he offered himself for the cause of combating Bolshevism.

Vlasov's first leaflet was published in September 1942 and was so successful that the headquarters of the OKW's operational command, as approved by the Chief of the OKW, decided to include a larger campaign, "Russians against Russians," in the plan of propaganda activities for the winter 1942/43.

2) Progress and results of the Vlasov Campaign to date.

A) Progress of the Campaign.

The campaign was based on the appeal written by Vlasov, in which the "Russian Committee" called for a struggle against Bolshevism on the side of Germany.

Units consisting of natives of Russia were combined for propaganda purposes. This was supposed to encourage patriotic, but at the same anti-Bolshevist forces to switch sides and start cooperation with Germany. At the same time it aimed to undermine the morale of Russians by instilling an idea into them that the place of Russian patriots on the side of Germany.

It was not until mid-January 1943, after a moment, suitable for the campaign, was in fact lost, that it was approved by the Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories and was further developed. Nevertheless, it achieved a major success.

To avoid any doubts in the reliability of the German propaganda from the first steps, it had to be bolstered with practical measures. This gave birth to the idea of creating a committee which was to be given certain advisory functions in the economic and social spheres. Along with strengthening trust to the German propaganda, such committee was intended to weaken the Russian propaganda in areas abound with bandits, and thus address the issue of bandits in a way beneficial for us.

B) Results of the Campaign.

A detailed picture of the impact produced by the German war propaganda is provided by the attached reports from the troops and statements of prisoners of war.

Their summary suggests the following description of the impact:

A) Impact on the Russian army.

A large number of reports, received from all sections of the front, indicate that Vlasov's appeal makes a deep impression on Russian soldiers. A conclusion can be that Vlasov's appeal actively contributed to the disorganization of Russian resistance, undermined the enemy's strength and amplified the desire to go over to the side of Germany.

Countermeasures taken by the opposition confirm this impression.

Recently, however, more and more voices have been heard, which are questioning the honesty of the German propaganda by referring to the failure of the German side to comply with its earlier promises. We unanimously believe that the German side should officially declare its position at the moment – the declaration may come in the form of the Fuehrer Directive – and thus

dispel the existing doubts and ensure the campaign's success which can be decisive for the course of the war.

B) Impact on the occupied eastern areas.

Vlasov's appeal has also spread among civilian population of the occupied eastern territories in the shortest term, although its announcement in these areas has not yet been officially authorized. It has soothed concerns everywhere, which, in turn, has positively affected the situation with banditry and again has given the population hope for honest cooperation with Germany.

The ban on distributing the appeal in the occupied territories, of which the enemy is aware of, has negative consequences and is generally viewed by Russians as evidence that the whole campaign is just a propaganda trick.

c) Impact on units formed from natives of Russia.

Units, formed from natives of Russia, have been particularly impressed by Vlasov's appeal. Russians combating on our side see it as the first attempt of the German side to tell them not only against whom they should fight but for what they should fight as well.

Any doubts regarding the reliability of the German propaganda or any deviation from the promises will affect them even more severely.

d) Impact on prisoners of war.

In prisoner of war camps, Vlasov's appeal has led to a split of the single anti-German front which existed there. We are receiving an increasing number of applications for admission into units of natives. There have been repeated reports on the growing labor enthusiasm among prisoners of war serving in working teams (Considering the success, at the request of the air forces and the Todt Organization, the propaganda campaign is now also extended to air force support units formed from natives of Russia, and prisoners of war used by the Todt Organization).

e) Impact on foreign countries.

The Vlasov Campaign caused a great sensation among our allies, neutral or hostile states in April and May [1943]. It was massively suggested that the campaign could lead to a decisive turn in the war in Germany's favor if the German side ensured its right and skillful continuation.

Opportunities, which will be created for the enemy propaganda if the Vlasov Campaign fails, are boundless. Similarly, we should not underestimate the loss of confidence in German leaders, which neutral countries and our allies may sustain in this case.

III. Current status of the Campaign

The Campaign, which ran very intensively from the very beginning, has further intensified since mid-May (1943) following the connection of the propaganda operation Silberstreif (Silver Lining).

However, the enemy's increasing doubts in the German propaganda are hindering further progress of the Campaign with each passing day. We have no slogans or mottos which we could make use of to gain time until Fuehrer makes decision and are unable at the same time still to make the enemy feel the impact of the German campaign and hide the ambiguity of German goals.

We should not expect that we will manage to further successfully gain time.

IV. Summarized description of urgent measures and consequences of their possible rejection

1) The Vlasov Campaign, which was initially devised as a propaganda trick, has given start to a movement that, from the enemy's point of view, is dangerous and poses a threat of civil war.

The current situation requires strict control and support for the movement not to discredit the German war propaganda.

General Vlasov is particularly suitable for the role of the movement representative, as his position regarding national policies and his attitude to emigration coincide with Germany's vision.

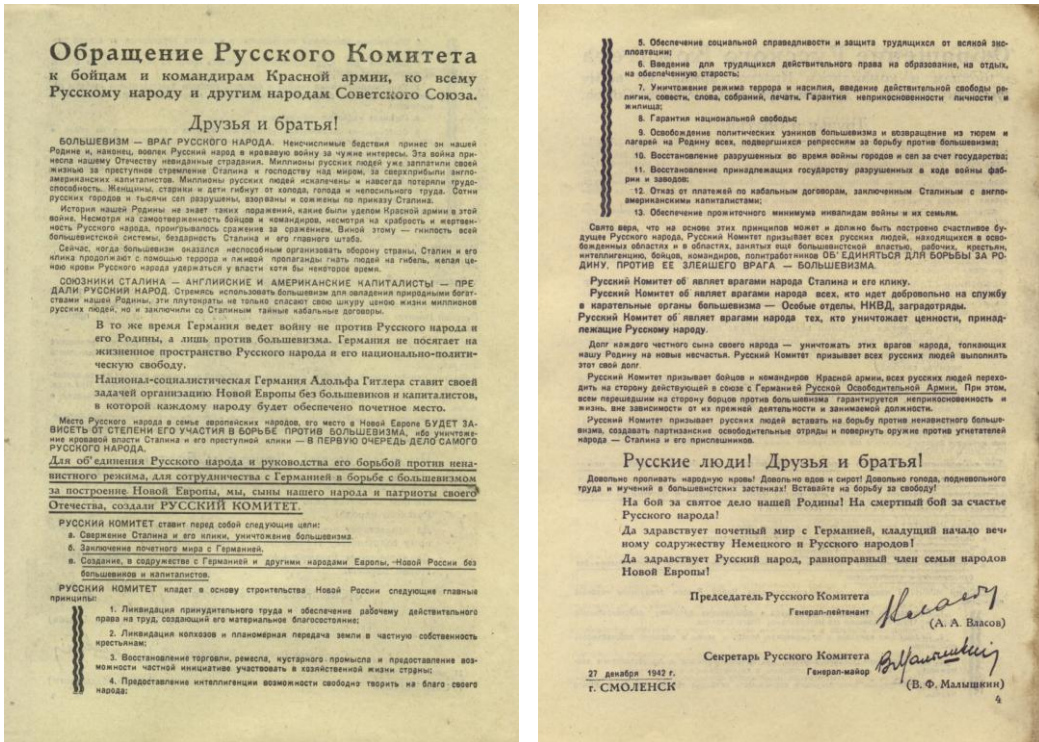


Fig. 1. Address by the Russian Committee to soldiers and commanders of the Red Army

Vlasov is convinced that only honest collaboration with Germany guarantees ultimate success. Close surveillance, that he is still under, gives grounds for concluding that he is trustworthy and knows that there is no returning to Stalin option for him any longer...



Fig. 2. General Andrey Vlasov

Peak impact of the [German] propaganda based on officially approved messages has passed. Each subsequent day that brings no Fuehrer's decision will adversely affect our propaganda efforts. We can not ignore the fact that further delays (in addressing the issue) or phasing out the Vlasov Campaign will jeopardize our military interests, given that about 800 thousand Russians are already enrolled in our Eastern troops; that the Silberstreif propaganda operation is essentially

based on Vlasov's appeal; and that the situation with bandits (in the occupied territories) largely depends on how Germany will fulfill its promises.

2) For these reasons, it is critical to urgently implement the following measures that will enable progressive run of the German war propaganda efforts:

a) Rapid actions because further procrastinations are unacceptable from the military point of view;

b) Formulating Germany's official position on the Vlasov Campaign and, if possible, publishing the Fuehrer Directive. If there is no Directive, the German position then should be outlined in a document and put into practice in the form of a committee created of Russians (the committee will initially have advisory functions in specific areas, such as, taking care of the units formed from Russians, mounting propaganda exercises among the population, etc. In the future, if appropriate, its scope of activities will be extended to include economic propaganda);

c) Vlasov should become chairman of the Russian committee. He should be provided with all possible support both through propaganda and material resources, as he is the only figure which guarantees an integral combination of German demands and Russian wishes, as well as with his authority, he is able to ensure overwhelming success of the entire Campaign...

(Aus dem Archiv des Auswartigen Amts. Serie E: 1941-1945, Bd VI, Dok. 85. S 145-149)

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